

HOW DO FIRST-YEAR DOMINICAN STUDENTS PERCEIVE THEIR FIRST
YEAR OF COLLEGE AND HOW DO THESE PERCEPTIONS IMPACT THEIR
RETENTION

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ABSTRACT

HOW DO FIRST-YEAR DOMINICAN STUDENTS PERCEIVE THEIR FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE AND HOW DO THESE PERCEPTIONS IMPACT THEIR RETENTION

Maria C. Cano

College completion rate is a major challenge afflicting colleges and universities as well as students in the United States, particularly Hispanic students (Field, 2018). This qualitative case study investigated how Dominican students perceived their first year of college and how that perception impacted their retention in a community college in the Northeast. Participants included a purposeful sample of fourteen students (four students who enrolled during the fall of 2021, four students who did not continue for the spring of 2022, five students from a focus group, and one of the students from the focus group was interviewed for an in-depth one-on-one interview). In addition, two instructors from the SSD Course (New Student Orientation) and two staff members from the First Year Experience Committee were also interviewed to understand the topic being investigated through multiple perspectives. Students self-identified as Dominican by having at least one Dominican parent. Dominican students were described as a first-generation Dominicans (an individual who was born in the Dominican Republic) or second-generation Dominicans (an individual who was born in the United States). The researcher conducted virtual semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups. The findings from this study contributed to the gap in the literature on the retention of Dominican students.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving partner Claudia Alonso who gave me the strength, support, love, and courage to continue this dissertation journey when things looked bleak. I know the past four years have not been easy, as the stress of my studies has caused us many sleepless nights, and many other headaches. However, you remained supportive and I thank you for your incredible support throughout. You have been my rock, and I will be forever grateful.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER 1	1
Introduction	1
Background on Dominicans	4
Purpose of the Study.....	9
Designation of HSI.....	11
Theoretical Framework	12
Significance of the Study	15
Research Questions	17
Definition of Terms.....	18
CHAPTER 2	20
Introduction	20
Theoretical Framework	20
Literature Review	27
Engagement.....	28
Role Models.....	32
Mentoring.....	34
Faculty Engagement.....	37
Sources of Support	39
Learning Communities.....	39
Tutoring.....	42
New Student Orientation Program/First-Year Seminar.....	45
Financial Support.....	47
Conclusion.....	51
CHAPTER 3	54
Introduction	54
Research Design	54

Research Questions	55
Setting.....	56
Participants	57
Methods of Data Collection	60
Interviews (Individual).....	61
Focus Group.....	65
Trustworthiness	67
Ethical Considerations.....	68
Data Analysis	70
Role of the Researcher	72
CHAPTER 4	77
Introduction	77
Introduction to the Case	78
Theme 1: First-Year Pressures	79
Sub-Theme: Aspirational Circumstances (Ambitions)	80
Sub-Theme: Life Circumstances.....	84
Theme 2: Social Participation	87
Sub-Theme: Difficulty Finding Time to Participate in Social Activities	88
Sub-Theme: Engagement and Inclusion Through Clubs and the Importance of it....	91
Theme 3: Barriers.....	95
Sub-Theme: Difficulty with English.....	95
Sub-Theme: Processing and Submitting Documents and Forms.....	98
Theme 4: Academic Support.....	102
Sub-Theme: Supportive Faculty and Staff.....	102
Sub-Theme: Faculty and Staff of Similar Ethnic Backgrounds Matter to Students	106
Theme 5: The Importance of Support Systems.	108
Sub-Theme: Connections and Help from Peers.....	109
Sub-Theme: Family Emotional and Financial Support	111
Conclusion.....	115
CHAPTER 5	119
Interpretation of the Findings	121

Research Question 1	121
Theme 1: First-Year Pressures.....	121
Theme 2: Social Participation.....	122
Theme 3: Barriers	124
Research Question 2.....	127
Theme 4: Academic Support	127
Research Question 3.....	128
Theme 5: The Importance of Support Systems.....	128
Limitations of the Study	133
Recommendations for Future Practice	134
Recommendation at the College Level	134
Recommendation at the State Level	135
Recommendation for Further Study.....	138
Conclusion.....	138
APPENDIX A IRB Approval	143
APPENDIX B Letter of Consent for Focus Group.....	144
APPENDIX C Letter of Consent for Individual Interviews (Students).....	146
APPENDIX D Letter of Consent for Individual Interviews (Instructors & FYE Staff). 148	
APPENDIX E Protocol for Focus Groups.....	150
APPENDIX F Protocol for Individual Interview/Two Students from the Focus Group 152	
APPENDIX G Individual Interview Protocol (Students Who Continued).....	155
APPENDIX H Individual Interview Protocol (Students Who Did Not Continue).....	158
APPENDIX I Individual Interview Protocol (For Teachers)	160
APPENDIX J Individual Interview Protocol (For First-Year Experience Leaders).....	162
APPENDIX K Recruitment Email for Focus Group	164
APPENDIX L Recruitment Email for Individual Interviews	166
APPENDIX M Recruitment Email for Instructors	167
APPENDIX N Recruitment Email for FYE Staff.....	168
APPENDIX O Recruitment Flyer.....	169
REFERENCES	170

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Description of Participants.....	63
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Bronfenbrenner's Theory & Sense of Belonging.....	21
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Although Hispanic undergraduate enrollment has more than doubled, Hispanic students lag behind in degree attainment and retention rate compared to other ethnic groups (Field, 2018; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Nationally, during 2017-2018, 46% of white students earned an associate degree or higher, while only 24% of Hispanic students could do the same (Excelencia in Education, 2020). A report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021), indicated that there was a large retention rate gap by race in the 2019 fall cohort of students. This report showed a 17.5% gap between Asians (79.5%) and Hispanic students (62.0%). The report also demonstrated a retention gap (8%) between white (69.6%) and Hispanic students (p. 3).

Furthermore, according to the United States Department of Education, Hispanics comprise the largest minority group on college campuses (United States Department of Education, 2014). Although they comprise the largest minority group on college campuses, the research on Hispanics at community colleges indicated that few are completing their associate's degrees (Guzman, 2016). A study by Shapiro et al. (2017) revealed that 48% of white students from a 2010 cohort were able to remain continuously enrolled throughout their six-year stay in college, and only 36% of Hispanic students were able to do the same (p.10).

While college enrollment rates for Latinos have steadily increased since the 1970s, college completion rates have remained stagnant (Guzman, 2016). The National

Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020) defined completion rate as any student who entered undergraduate school for the first time and enrolled full-time or part-time at two-year or four-year institutions and obtained their degree at any U.S. granting institution. A report by Shapiro et al. (2017) indicated that only 10.8% of Latino students earn a bachelor's degree within 6-years. Furthermore, at two-year institutions, only 16% of full-time, first-time degree, and certificate-seeking Latino students graduate within three years (Valle, 2016). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2021) defined retention as continued enrollment or degree completion within the same institution for the fall semester of a student's first and second year. Persistence is when a student continues their degree even when obstacles arise; even if it means transferring to another institution (Tinto, 2017).

The National Student Clearinghouse (2021) posited that there was a notable decline in the first-year persistence rate in fall of 2020 after remaining stable for the past four years. The report demonstrated that the overall persistence rate dropped 2% (76% to 74%). However, community colleges showed the steepest persistent rate decline (3.5%) of all institution sectors. The overall persistence rate of first-year students fell the most (3.2%) among Hispanic students. Moreover, this report indicated that retention rates declined the most at community colleges (2.1%). It is clear that retention and persistence are key areas of concern for Hispanic students and for community colleges.

The Hispanic population in the U.S. reached 62.1 million people accounting for 18.7 % of the nation's total population, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Making this group the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Hallet (2012) indicated that "cultural value heavily influencing employment rates of the Hispanic

population is work ethic” (p.3). This has resulted in a relatively high employment rate within the Hispanic community, such that their demographic accounts for 16% of the U.S. workforce while also accounting for 17.8% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Despite the high employment rate, poverty remains a significant issue for the Hispanic community, as work has not translated into wealth for this group. As per the Pew Research Center (2017), 19% of U.S. Hispanics lived in poverty. Also, while 19% of U.S. Hispanics lived in poverty, that percentage was 22% for Dominicans (Pew Research Center, 2017). In 2017, the average median income in the United States was \$56,00 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Nevertheless, the average median income for Hispanics in the United States was \$34,000. While Dominicans earned \$32,000 (Pew Research Center, 2017).

The U.S. Census Bureau defined Hispanic and Latino as “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, np). I used the word interchangeably throughout this paper. Dominican students comprise a subgroup of the Latino population and, therefore, mimics the same challenges faced by the rest of the Hispanic students when it comes to educational attainment and retention barriers. However, due to the limited studies on the retention of Dominican students in higher education, most of the literature in this chapter relates to Hispanics/Latinas/os as opposed to Dominican students.

Background on Dominicans

A focus on Dominican college students is justified, based on their growing number in the United States, particularly in New York City. The 1960s led to a huge influx of Dominican immigrants into the United States due to governmental and legal changes that were taking place between the United States and the Dominican Republic during that time (Torres-Saillant & Hernandez, 1998). The first wave of Dominicans arrived in the United States in the early 1960s and settled in Washington Heights, in northern Manhattan (Torres-Saillant & Hernandez, 1998). However, by 2019 47% of all Dominicans in the City lived in the Bronx compared with 24 % who lived in Manhattan. The Bronx is currently home to the largest Dominican population in the United States. (Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies, 2021). The events that lead to this migration of Dominicans to the U.S. were the assassination of the dictator, Leonidas Trujillo, in 1961 & Post- U.S. military invasion era of 1965 (Aparicio, 2007). Dominicans are now the largest Latino national subgroup in New York City (Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies, 2021) and the fifth largest nationwide; accounting for 4% of the U.S. Hispanic population in 2017 (Pew Research Center, 2019). From 2000 -2017, the Dominican population in the U.S. increased from 797,000 to 2.1. million over that period (Pew Research Center, 2019) with New York State holding the largest share of the population: forty-two percent of which 1 million are located in New York-Newark, Jersey City, PA, metropolitan area (Pew Research, 2019).

It is important to mention the condition of the educational systems in the Dominican Republic and how that contributes to the educational gap of the students arriving to the United States. The Dominican Republic is plagued by a system of major

inequalities in primary and secondary education, often caused by socio-economic disparities (Garrido, 2021). These inequalities affirmed Garrido (2021), results in high repetition rates at the secondary level and high drop-out rates in the post-secondary level among underprepared students. Around 51.5% of the income generated in the Dominican Republic is held by the richest 20% of its population (Romero, 2021). Private schools have a much higher quality of education, and wealthier people can afford to send their children to private schools. However, based on the data above, the majority of Dominicans cannot afford to send their children to private schools. Thus, students from low-income household are deprived of proper schooling. Therefore, when those students migrate to the United States, they arrive in the United States with educational gaps, and when they enrolled in post-secondary education in the United States, they are placed in basic writing and reading in their native language (Parmegiani & Utakis, 2015). This, in turn, can cause students to stay longer in ESL courses since they don't have the command of their native language, which makes it more difficult for those students to acquire a second language.

Dominican students face unique challenges while pursuing their education in the U.S. One of them is that they attend New York City public schools that are overcrowded and are located in “low-income, high crime areas, that are often staffed with poorly qualified teachers, with high turnover” (Zahka, 2006, np). In addition, these schools are “under-resourced and underperforming schools” (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011, p. 46). These types of schools are emblematic to what Anyon (1997) referred to as “ghetto schooling” – a mediocre education provided to racially stigmatized low-income individuals. These types of high schools and education oftentimes, determine the academic preparation that

Dominican students obtain and perhaps why so many of them end up in community colleges.

Another challenge that was mentioned in the literature (Gray, 2001) faced by Dominicans while pursuing their education was high student failure attributed to their resistance to integration and their inability to speak English. Gray (2001) stated that “most first-generation Dominicans, arrive with the belief that their life in the States is temporary; and that as soon as they become financially stable, as soon as their children finish school, they will return to the island” (p.182). However, what this author calls resistance to integration, is what other authors (Duany, 2008; Hernandez & Sezgin, 2010; Louie, 2006) call transnationalism: strong ties to their country of origin.

Transnationalism has important implications for schooling, especially regarding language and literacy. According to Valenzuela (1999), students, must not be put in a subtractive schooling situation, where academic success is achieved at the expense of giving up their culture, like their native language, and another aspect of their identity. Instead, she stated, that effective schooling must allow them to retain their proficiency in Spanish and the ways of thinking that shape linguistic exchanges (Valenzuela, 1999). This approach was supported by Parmegiani and Utakis (2015), who successfully integrated this approach in one of their ESL classes in Bronx Community college in NYC.

Duany (2008) defined the term transnationalism as a lifestyle “characterized by a constant flow of people in both directions, a dual sense of identity, ambivalent attachment to two nations, a far-flung network of kinship and friendship across state frontiers “ (p. 24). Dominican- Americans have been identified as a transnational community

(Hernandez & Sezgin, 2010; Louie, 2006). First-generation Dominicans maintained their roots in the homeland while setting down new ones in the United States. They brought their children (1.5 and second generation) with them during their multiple trips back and forth from the U.S. and D.R. and vice versa, exposing them to develop close ties to the D.R., its culture, and language. The Pew Research Center (2013) described first-generation as immigrants who live in the U.S. but were born outside the U.S. Meanwhile, 1.5 generations are young children who arrived in the U.S. between the ages of 6-12 (Berestein Rojas, 2012). The term 1.5 is hardly used in the literature when referring to Dominicans. It is mainly used among the Asian population and literature (Berestein Rojas, 2012). The second-generation population are U.S. born children who have at least one immigrant parent, (Pew Research Center, 2013)

Dominican transnationalism has had social, cultural, economic, and political implications for DR and the U.S. and has affected family organization, class positioning, and cultural identity (Hernandez & Rivera-Batiz, 2003). It has created a subgroup or classification called “dominicanyorks”. Dominicanyorks are migrants (second-generation) that when they return to D.R., do not fit easily into the Dominican society (Guarnizo, 1994).

Second-generation Dominicans have surpassed (54%), first-generation Dominican (33%) in the U.S. Among Dominicans ages 25 and older, U.S. born or second-generation, are more likely than the foreign-born to have a bachelor’s degree or higher (28% vs. 15%). Poverty for U.S.-born Dominicans was about 23% compared to 21% of foreign-born Dominicans. Furthermore, homeownership for U.S. born was 32%, and for foreign-born was 26% (Pew Research Center, 2019, np)

Regarding parental involvement, Dominican parents cannot be as involved as other parents. A study by Garcia Coll et al. (2002) found that language barriers, lack of parental education, unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system and the need to work long hours and the mobility between the Dominican Republic and the United States, and among various U.S. cities, demonstrate these as deterrents for parental involvement. Another study suggested that the parental involvement of Dominican parents is affected by mistrust and misunderstanding between the school and parents. Dominican parents felt a sense of alienation and marginalization by the administration. They also felt rejected, inadequate, frustrated and that their voices were not being heard (Crespo-Jimenez, 2010).

Dominicans, like many other recent immigrant groups from Spanish-speaking countries, tend to come from lower social and economic classes (Hernandez, 2002). However, low socio-economic status is especially common for Dominicans, given that they have been documented as the most impoverished ethnic group in New York City since 2003 (Hernandez & Rivera-Batiz, 2003) and are still considered the Hispanic origin group with the highest material hardship and the lowest median household net worth in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Perhaps it must be this need or this “hunger” to not be impoverished that have made many Dominican students attend college, particularly, CUNY as a way to obtain an education that would in turn allow them to increase their social mobility for them and their family and no matter the obstacles they try to persist to achieve academic success. In a study conducted by Reynoso (2008) the participants interviewed were determined to achieve academic success despite confronting a series of obstacles while attending a two-year institution at CUNY as English Language Learners. The level of college attainment for this population is

important because, for the most part, Dominicans come to the U.S. for a better future for themselves and their family.

The educational attainment of the Dominican population is lower than that of the overall population in the U.S. In the year 2000, there were U.S.-born born Dominicans with a college degree in New York City (52.6%) than many other U.S.-born Latinos (53.1%) (Hernandez et al., 2022). In addition, among Hispanic students who have graduated from New York City public schools, more students of Dominican ancestry than from any other Hispanic groups select CUNY to pursue their undergraduate education (Hernandez & Stevens-Acevedo, 2004). As a result, it is not surprising that in 2017 Dominican students represented the largest ethnic group in the City University of New York, according to a report from the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment from CUNY Central (2017). This report showed community colleges with a 19% enrollment and senior colleges displaying a 10%. The enrollment rates of U.S.-born Dominicans surpass the U.S. population in terms of enrollment rates. For instance, among women 71.1% were enrolled in college or university while the equivalent for the overall U.S. was 69.6% and among Hispanics it was 63.8%

Purpose of the Study

There is a gap in the literature of Dominican students in higher education, particularly with respect to retention. Most of the articles on retention focused on the general Hispanic population and did not disaggregate by ethnic groups; treating the Hispanic population as a monolithic group (Guzman, 2016; Morales, 2010). Grouping Hispanic as a monolithic group gives the appearance that all Hispanics are the same, when in fact, there are key differences in the experience and education levels of

Hispanics in the United States (Logan & Turner, 2013). The reality is that various Hispanic groups possess distinct cultures and, experiences and, thus, face unique challenges; Dominicans, is one of such groups. It has been established that this relatively new recent immigrant group has distinctive needs that are not been addressed by public schools (Dicker, 2001).

Furthermore, there was an abundance of articles on retention from students of Mexican American descent, particularly from California (Guzman, 2016). Furthermore, the literature also reflected that most of the articles focused on four-year institutions, while most Hispanics attend two-year institutions (Guzman, 2016). This research contributed to the gaps mentioned above. In addition, it contributed to the missing literature on the retention of Dominican students in community colleges.

This research shed light on the perception of first-year Dominican and the themes and findings that emerged can inform stakeholders to bring about interventions, initiatives, and policies that can contribute to the retention and graduation of this group of students. Furthermore, this research also provided a voice to the experiences of Dominican students in community colleges, including the barriers that prevented this population from being retained beyond their first year in college.

This study focused on Hispanic- Serving Institutions (HSI) and how Dominican students are performing with respect to retention at these institutions. This study focused on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) because they were designated by the United States Department of Education with the purpose of increasing the educational attainment of the Hispanic population (Vela & Gutierrez, 2017). However, despite efforts aimed at improving retention, the Hispanic population continues to suffer from low educational

attainment at all levels when compared to other ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Designation of HSI

Unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal colleges, HSI's designation is based on enrollment, not institutional characteristics or mission-oriented toward serving Latino students. The Higher Education Act defined Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) as an eligible institution with at least 25% of Hispanic students at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Since their creation and designation by the federal government, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) have grown in number and importance in providing access to Hispanic students nationwide attending colleges and universities (Excelencia in Education, 2019a). Institutions must be designated as eligible institutions higher education in to apply for Title V program and must meet the program-specific requirements to be defined as an HSI (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Garcia (2019) posited that HSIs provide a place where Latino students feel culturally, linguistically and racially connected to their peers, and faculty; suggesting that these connections led to positive outcomes such as sense of belonging, persistence and graduation.

In her book, *Becoming Hispanic Serving Institutions: Opportunities for colleges & universities*, Garcia (2019) presented the reader with the notion that it is generally accepted that if postsecondary institutions have high persistence and graduation rates, they are effective institutions; and if they don't, they aren't (p.47). However, she also argued that we rarely question these as white normative measures, "determined within a

backdrop of whiteness, under exclusionary conditions, and without consideration for the input variables of students of color” (p.47), Some disagreement on the literature on HSI institutions (Carderon Galdeano et al., 2012; Contreras et al., 2008) that HSI are “Hispanic-enrolling” rather than Hispanic-serving institutions. By this term, the authors argued that HSI institutions are merely enrolling Hispanics/Latino students into their institutions, but are not providing the services that they need to succeed. Santiago (2009) stated that enrollment is about access, while serving students is about retention and completion. To this end, Garcia (2019) suggested that institutions of higher learning should think of HSI through a cultural lens and she demanded that institutions ask questions about who they are and how they can create a positive learning environment where Hispanic/Latino students can thrive. In addition, she added that institutions should build on what works in serving Latino students to better serve other students as well.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological System and Sense of Belonging as the theoretical lenses to examine the experiences and factors that impacted Dominican students, perceptions of their first year of college and how those perceptions impacted their retention. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory asserted that the systems or environments that individuals grow up in, affects every facet of their life. This theory emphasized the importance of studying individuals in multiple environments, known as ecological systems, to understand their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model organizes contexts of development into five nested levels of external influence: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner conceived this ecological environment as a “set of nested

structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (1979, p. 3) and human development as a "progressive, mutual accommodation" (p. 21) between the individual and the dynamic settings surrounding them. Conceiving the ecological environment in this way enabled the researcher to examine the relationships between the individual and their multiple surrounding settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The ecological systems ranged from the most intimate to the individual (family and friends) to the broadest (political and economic condition). The microsystem is the most immediate environment to the child. This system is composed of individuals and environments that have direct contact with the developing person, such as parents, family, peers, the home, school, and the workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem is the second most influential system. It encompasses the interactions or linkages within the individual's microsystems such as the learner's parents, teachers, peer group, family, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model pertains to the linkages between two or more settings that may indirectly affect the developing child. These linkages may include the parents' workplaces, extended family members, and the neighborhood.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's findings, people and places that children may not directly interact with may still have an impact on their lives. The macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is the largest and most distant collection of people and places to the child that still significantly influences them. This system is composed of the children's cultural patterns and values, beliefs, ideas, political and economic systems. Finally, the chronosystem encompasses the child's changes over time, such as family structure, parents' address, and societal changes. Bronfenbrenner's theory has been widely

used to study various social phenomena (in academia, health, business), and its meaningful insight into social problems have been documented in the United States and internationally. Using the ecological systems theory provided a lens that analyze how Dominican students interacted with their environments, dealt with their challenges, coping strategies, and made us see students' negative and positive experiences throughout their academic journey.

An additional framework that was used to complement Bronfenbrenner's theory and helped guide this study to better understand how Dominican students interacted with their environment was Sense of Belonging. Belonging has been a topic of interest by many scholars (Castleman & Meyer, 2017, Kahu et al., 2022; Maslow, 1968) Maslow's (1968) in his hierarchy of needs noted the importance of belonging to an individual's wellbeing. Sense of belonging permeated the different environments that students were exposed to in and outside of school. Sense of belonging was an important framework to use because it has been considered to be a significant factor in student persistence in higher education (Castleman & Meyer, 2017). In addition, Kahu et al. (2022) affirmed that belonging matters to students (interpersonal belonging, the students' connection with people, academic belonging, and fit with the discipline and courses). Furthermore, and most importantly, as Dominican students learn to navigate their various and sometimes complex environments (Microsystem, Mesosystem, Ecosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem), having a sense of belonging may help them develop a sense of community and ease their integration into their college environment, which may lead to their persistence.

Significance of the Study

Why focus on Dominicans? Based on the scant literature on Dominicans, few leaders, policymakers, researchers, and faculty know the barriers, challenges, and needs of Dominican students in higher education and what can be done to increase their retention. By interviewing first-year Dominican students, staff of First-Year Experience Program and instructors of First-Year-Orientation Course, this study shed light on how first-year Dominican students experienced their first year of college and this information contributed to the scant literature on Dominicans. In addition, Dominicans are the fifth largest Hispanic/Latino nationwide and the largest in New York City (Pew Research Center, 2019) but unfortunately, educational achievement among Dominicans in the United States is lower than the overall population in the U.S. For instance, the proportion of Dominicans 25 years of age or older who had not completed high school education in 2019 was 22.6% compared to 9.6% in the overall population. In terms of college completion, person with a college degree (or more) accounted for 19.6% of the Dominican population, relative to 33.3% in the overall U.S (Hernandez et al., 2022).

This study has significance for research, policy, and practice in higher education as well as for the future and current economy of the United States. Dominicans as a subgroup are plagued with the same challenges impacting the retention of their Hispanic counterparts. By understanding what first-year Dominicans perceive as challenges or barriers to completion, can provide educational institutions with an understanding of some of the resources needed to assist not only Dominican students, but also other Hispanic sub-groups and even other race such as African Americans since they also experience retention problems. Furthermore, improving the retention and persistence rate

of Dominican students is crucial not only for the individual students and their families - since education will lead to their social mobility - but also for their communities and our nation as a whole, since having more educated individuals will contribute to a stronger economy.

The combination of the rapidly growing Hispanic population and low graduation rates presents an economic challenge for the United States (Maceli & Box, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As the need for technology continues to increase, particularly after COVID 19, so does the demand for a highly technologically skilled workforce. Therefore, more Hispanic students need to complete college to upgrade their skill-set and be able to join the skilled or highly skilled workforce. This will also allow them to be more marketable and have higher social- mobility for higher- paying job. Increasing the number and retention of Hispanic, first-year, post-secondary students is crucial for the economic success of the U.S. (Garcia, 2012). A report by the Georgetown University Center of Education and Workforce (CEW) that the U.S. will experience a shortage of college-educated workers by the end of this decade (Valle, 2016). According to the CEW's projections, the U.S. will fall short of workers with at least an associate's degree by three million individuals. Therefore, stakeholders such as officials at all levels of government, academic leaders, and philanthropic foundations need to create initiatives to improve education attainment, particularly in our community colleges. Not implementing systemic changes will only amplify existing gaps and leave our workforce, and our nation, shorthanded. Consequently, ensuring that Dominican students, which are a fast-growing group of students, complete their college degrees, will contribute to a stronger workforce and economy.

There are very few studies that focus on the experiences of Dominican students in higher education, and none focused on retention. This qualitative case study contributed to the scant literature on Dominican in higher education in shed light on the issues that impacted the retention of Dominican students as perceived by students attending a Hispanic Serving Community College, instructors and staff. This qualitative study used numerous data sources to discover how Dominican students perceived their first year of college and how their perception impacted their retention. Knowing why Dominican students are not being retained beyond their first semester or first year of school is very important to all stakeholders. Listening to the focus groups, and individual interviews of the different voices represented in this research shed light on what Dominican students perceived as the challenges that contributed their attrition or involuntary lack of engagement to the college. Furthermore, it identified gaps or lack of support at the institution. Such information is an opportunity for stakeholders and policymakers to enact policy or create initiatives to support this group of students.

Research Questions

Maxwell (2013) stated that your research questions will guide the researcher to what they specifically want to understand about their research. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do first-year Dominicans describe their first-year experience?
2. What institutional supports, including academic supports, do Dominican students describe as influencing their decision to remain or leave during their first year?

3. What external supports, including family, community and peer relationships impact Dominican students' perceptions of retention?

Definition of Terms

Completion Rate:

Students who enter undergraduate school for the first time each year, and enroll full-time or part-time at two-year or four-year institutions and obtain their degree at any U.S. granting institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

Dominican:

This definition consists of both immigrants and United States natives who can trace their heritage to the Dominican Republic (The Migration Policy Institute, 2004)

Hispanic and Latino:

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines Hispanic and Latino as “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, np).

HSI:

Title V of the Higher Education Act defines Hispanic/Latino Serving Institutions as having a full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment of at least 25% Hispanic/Latino at the end of the award year immediately preceding the year of the application (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Persistence:

The ability that allows a student to continue their degree even when challenges arise, even if it means transferring to another institution (Tinto, 2017).

Retention:

The continued enrollment or degree completion within the same institution for the fall semester of a student's first and second year (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

First-generation Dominican

The Pew Research Center (2013) described first-generation as immigrant who live in the U.S. but were born outside the U.S. The

1.5 generation

are individuals who arrived in the U.S. between the ages of 6-12 (Berestein Rosas, 2012).

Second-generation population

U.S. born who have at least one immigrant parent (Pew Research Center, 2013)

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the current research findings on retention and what colleges are doing to support their students to ensure that they are retained and ultimately graduate. The research reviewed in this section comes from peer-reviewed journals, database articles, and reports. This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that will be used for the study. Then, the researcher will discuss how both frameworks are appropriate lenses to analyze Dominican students' lived experiences in community colleges. The section continues with the review of the research and concludes with a discussion of the gaps in the research.

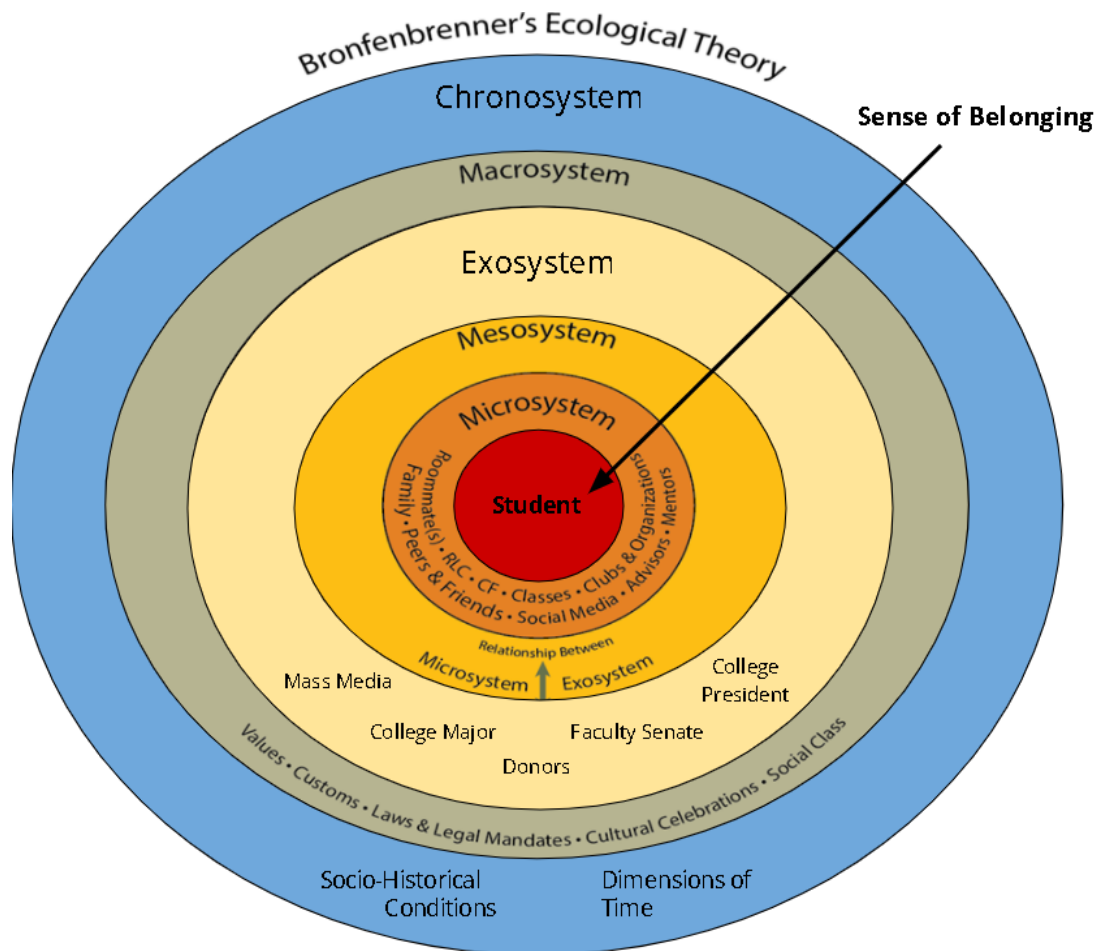
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens that guided this study was Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. Uri Bronfenbrenner affirmed that human beings should be understood as multiple nested systems and that their development is the result of complex interactions between individuals and various systemic components that influence each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory asserts that the systems or environments that individuals grow up in, affects every facet of their lives. This theory emphasizes the importance of studying individuals in multiple environments, known as ecological systems, to understand their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model organizes contexts of development into five nested levels of external influence: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Ecosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner conceived of this ecological environment as a "set of

nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (1979, p. 3) and human development as a “progressive, mutual accommodation” (p. 21) between the individual and the dynamic settings surrounding them. Conceiving the ecological environment in this way enables the researcher to examine the relationships between the individual and multiple surrounding settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

FIGURE 1

Bronfenbrenner’s Theory & Sense of Belonging



Adapted from: Renn K.A., & Arnold. K. D. (2003). Reconceptualizing Research on college student peer culture. *Journal of Higher Education*, 74 (3). p.268

The ecological systems ranges from the most intimate to the individual (family and friends) to the broadest (political and economic condition). The microsystem is the most immediate environment to the child. This system is composed of individuals and environments that have direct contact with the developing person as parents, family, peers, the home, school, and the workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem is the second most influential system. It encompasses the interactions or linkages between the individual's microsystems such as the learner's parents and teachers, or between school and home, between peer group and family, and between family and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model pertains to the linkages between two or more settings that may indirectly affect the developing children. These linkages and people may include the parents' workplaces, extended family members, and the neighborhood. Based on Bronfenbrenner's findings, people and places that children may not directly interact with may still have an impact on their lives.

The macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is the largest and most distant collection of people and places to the children that still significantly influence them. This system is composed of the children's cultural patterns and values, beliefs, ideas, political and economic systems. Finally, the chronosystem encompasses the child's changes over time, such as family structure, parents' address, and societal changes. Bronfenbrenner's theory has been widely used to study various social phenomena (in academia, health, business), and its meaningful insight into social problems has been adequately documented in the United States and internationally. For instance, Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2016) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to understand factors of academic persistence for non-traditional Hispanic students enrolled at two

Hispanic Serving Institutions. This study is very relevant to the present study on Dominican students and it captures the interaction, and the importance of family context, and campus environment which are also important Ecological environments in Bronfenbrenner's theory. Furthermore, Mabhoiyi and Seroto (2019) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to investigate the socioeconomic conditions of at-risk students in two selected Chitungwiza secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Bronfenbrenner's framework was appropriate in this study as socio-economic conditions affected the different ecological environments in which these students in Zimbabwe interacted. The students in both studies and of the current study, navigated and developed within a complex system of relationships, which is something unique to Bronfenbrenner's theory.

Bronfenbrenner's theory posited that these social systems are embedded in the lives of the individual through the diverse relationships in which they engage on an ongoing basis. Likewise, in educational systems, the connections and interactions that affect student success include their families, teachers, school, community, culture, and engagement with those systems and those interactions can affect student persistence. For instance, faculty-student interaction has been well-established as an essential aspect of success for students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). In addition, interacting with tutors and seeking the academic support of peers can also affect a student's persistence. Research indicated that tutoring has a positive impact on grade-point averages and strengthening soft skills, especially with high-risk students (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Tinto, 2012). Every interaction that the student is engaged in across and between systems such as family obligations, employment, religious participation, academic advising, clubs, and sports, has the potential to affect academic persistence.

Any changes or conflict in any one of the layers will ripple throughout other layers (Paquette and Ryan, 2009).

Using ecological systems theory provided a lens to analyze how students interacted with their environments to deal with their challenges, coping strategies, support, and students' negative and positive experiences throughout their academic journey. Being a Dominican student is affected by many different systems (First-generation, socioeconomic, at-risk, immigrant, culture, norms, work and home responsibilities, nontraditional, and parent), and the ecological model provides a framework for exploring these interactions. Furthermore, the social environments that students interacted with affect their development and retention, and persistence in higher education. Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory provided a valuable framework to understand the effects of multiple levels of influence (individual, family, peer, community, school, and social system) affecting Dominican students' retention. In addition, this theory has been widely used to study various social phenomena, and its meaningful insight into social problems has been adequately documented in the United States and internationally (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; & Mabhoji & Seroto, 2019;). Therefore, this was a practical theory to study Dominican students to analyze how they made sense of their social environments and how those systems impacted their attrition and retention.

An additional framework that was used to extend Bronfenbrenner's theory and to help understand how Dominican students interacted with their environment, was sense of belonging. Belonging is defined as a need of frequent and personal interactions with another person. Ideally those interactions would be positive or pleasant and free from

conflict and negative affect (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In addition, Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that a sense of belonging is pervasive and compelling and is something that we continually seek to find and maintain. Allen (2021) stated that sometimes sense of belonging can drive individuals to relocate to the other side of the world or to uproot themselves and return “home” after a period away and I think this describes the Dominican immigrant community. Dominicans uprooted themselves to the United States, becoming a transnational community with the hope of returning to the Dominican Republic in the future.

Sense of belonging is an important framework to study for students because it permeates the different environments that students are exposed to in and outside of school. Sense of belonging is important to use as a framework because it is considered to be a significant factor in student persistence in higher education (Castleman & Meyer, 2017). Furthermore, and most importantly, as Dominican students learn to navigate their various and sometimes complex environments (Microsystem, Mesosystem, Ecosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem) having a sense of belonging may help them develop a sense of community and ease their integration into their college environment, which may lead to their persistence.

With regards to sense of belonging, the literature revealed (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Castleman & Meyer, 2017; & Luis et al., 2020) that faculty-student interactions positively impacted students' sense of belonging and persistence and contributed to their overall academic achievement. Therefore, it is important to understand how Dominican students negotiated and made sense of their ecological environments in order to increase their sense of belonging that as stated above, the

literature confirmed impacted students' persistence. Dominican students present many characteristics and intersectionalities (different culture, language, first-generation, low-socio-economic status, at-risk, immigrant), and all these make them feel that they do not belong. Thus, making adjusting to college difficult. Therefore, sense of belonging framework was an important and appropriate lens to use to explore how Dominican students made sense of their "belongness" in college.

In terms of students navigating their environments, professors need to ensure that they contribute to students' sense of belonging. Faculty members need to ensure that they do not make students feel that they don't belong or make them feel invisible (Moore, 2020). Another reason why sense of belonging is a valuable tool to guide this framework and extend Bronfenbrenner's theory, is because culture and norms are interwoven in an individual's mesosystem. At the same time, culture and norms are also interwoven in how a student adapts to an environment, sees themselves in it, and develops a sense of community and all that can have an effect on sense of belonging (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016). Research showed that having a sense of belonging contributed to overall achievement in college (Luis et al., 2020), increased students' social and academic integration (Yeager et al., 2016), and was a high predictor of retention (Davis et al., 2019).

Furthermore, sense of belonging has been effectively used for first-year students by a number of researchers. Yeager et al. (2016) used sense of belonging theory to determine the persistence of first-year disadvantaged students. The results of this study showed that students who received a social belonging intervention sought out more academic support, were more engaged in school activities, and remained enrolled in

school full-time by the end of the semester. Similarly, Davis et al. (2019) used sense of belonging theory to measure students' sense of belonging at crucial transition points during the first-year in college and the results determined that "social belonging is a better predictor for retention" (Davis et al., 2019, p. 125). In addition, Luis et al. (2020) used sense belonging to examine the experiences of male Latino students at community colleges and universities which have contributed to their persistence and academic success.

These two frameworks provided appropriate lenses to study Dominican students to analyze how they made sense of their social environments and how their sense of belonging affected their adjustment to college. Feeling part of a group, being accepted, feeling a sense of belonging is natural and often a vital human desire. Through a sense of belonging, individuals acquire a sense of identity, often giving them a sense of gratification (Strayhorn, 2015). This sense of identity and sense of gratification can be essential for Dominican students while navigating through the different ecological environments. In addition, since sense of belonging has proven to be effective for Latino males (Luis et al., 2020) within that same vein, imparting a sense of belonging to Dominican male students and Dominican students in general, may also contribute to their persistence, transition, retention, and academic success.

Literature Review

This section provided theoretical and research-based insights on practices found to support the retention and persistence of undergraduate students, including Hispanic/Latino students attending community colleges. It is important to mention that although the focus of this study was to examine how Dominican student perceive their

first-year of college and how these perceptions affect their retention, due to the dearth of literature on the experiences of Dominican students in higher education (Hernandez & Stevens-Acevedo, 2004; Louie, 2006; Morales, 2000) the literature review was drawn from the literature on retention of undergraduate students in general including the experiences of African American, international students and Hispanics/Latinos students.

The AERA, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ResearchGate, GoogleScholar, and DeepDyve databases were utilized to review the literature, and key terms were identified for the search. Those key terms were as follows: Retention of Hispanic students in community colleges, retention of Latino students in community colleges, the persistence of Hispanic students in community college, the persistence of Latino students in community colleges, attrition of Hispanic students, attrition of Latino students, factors that impact/affect retention of Latino students, factors that impact /affect retention of Latino students, retention strategies for Hispanic and or Latino students and finally, searches were performed on specific topics (e.g., tutoring, role models, and mentors). The researcher included peer review articles, database articles, reports, book chapters, and white papers in this study. Materials were reviewed for themes that contributed to the retention and or persistence of Hispanic/Latino students. The following themes emerged from the literature review: Engagement (faculty, role models, peer/social (cohort), curriculum-engaging) and Sources of Support (mentoring, academic support (tutoring), orientation/first-year experience/learning communities, financial).

Engagement

The research revealed that Latina/o student's interactions with institutional agents (e.g., faculty, advisors, mentors, and peers) who provided supportive

services to students contributed in meaningful ways to their grade point average and persistence decisions (Brooms, 2018; Soria & Taylor, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017). In addition, when students engaged in strengths-based conversations with faculty, advisors, and peers, it showed to improved their graduation and retention (Soria & Taylor, 2016). In their study, Soria and Taylor (2016) examined the connection between first-year students' strengths-based interactions in the dormitories and their engagement and retention. The strength-based approach saw students as having the potential and resources to be successful in their lives (Soria & Taylor, 2016). In this study, before their first year, students and Community Advisors (usually refer as resident advisors) take the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment to determine their top five strengths (Soria & Taylor, 2016). In addition, Community Advisors are trained as strength educators and create engagement and workshop opportunities to teach students their five strengths (Soria & Taylor, 2016). Students were also engaged in strength-based conversation with resident directors and were encouraged to post their five strengths on their doors. The study results revealed that students who participated in strengths-based activities in their dormitories/housing had higher engagement and retention than their peers who did not participate in strength-based activities.

Another example that demonstrated that when students are engaged in meaningful ways with institutional agents, it contributes to their success in college is the study by Strayhorn (2017). In his research, Strayhorn (2017) examined the data from the IPEDS database system and conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with Black men attending urban public universities to

identify the factors that influence their persistence and success. The students interviewed in the study overwhelmingly responded that faculty and staff played a vital role in their success in college. For example, one of the participants in the study described phrases such as "go[ing] beyond the call of duty] or "going out of their way" (Strayhorn, 2017, p. 117) to describe the extent to which faculty and staff supported them. Beyond supportive faculty, peers were also identified as significant support in this study. In particular, African American male students indicated that having peers of the same race to discuss similar lived experiences to intervene against overt racism contributed to their persistence (Strayhorn, 2017). This study was supported by findings from Gasman et al.'s (2017) study which posited that having a supportive peer group was helpful since peer groups can provide useful suggestions and solutions to common problems.

Another interesting finding from this study was that the participants described having close connections to the university's local community. Strayhorn (2017) stated that "close connections and clear commitments to the local black community seemed to shape Black male participants' reasons for choosing to attend the urban, public University in which they were enrolled" (Strayhorn, 2017, p.119). Some students selected the local college because they aspired to public service offices, community leadership roles, or employment that required an investment of time in the local community's needs (Strayhorn, 2017). Strayhorn posited that "participants held deep in the "place," "neighborhood" in which they were born...taking pride in their community or neighborhood of origin kept some participants "bound to the [major city in which their school was

located] because it was close to [their] parents or family" (Strayhorn, 2017, p. 119).

Similarly, Brooms (2018) conducted a study on the effectiveness of Black Male Initiative Programs offered at the white institutions they attended. Brooms (2018) administered 40 open-ended semi-structured interviews to Black males, of which 36 came from urban schools. The Black Male Initiative Programs included The Brothers and Scholars Program and the Minority Men Mentoring Program, which were created to augment student retention and student engagement with faculty and other school agents (Brooms, 2018). One of the benefits of these programs was for students to speak with other Black male students regarding lived experiences in an open and safe space (Brooms, 2018). The interviewees also reported a sense of widened access to resources and human capital through interaction with mentors and institutional agents. Students also reported being more academically motivated due to the exposure to opportunities outside of the classroom and the academic support provided by the program.

As these studies show, that when students engage in meaningful ways with institutional agents who provide supportive services to students, it contributed to their grade point average and persistence decisions. Participants in these studies indicated that the support of faculty, staff, and peers were vital to their success in college. In addition, when students engaged in strengths-based conversations with faculty, advisors, and peers, it improved their graduation and retention rate. In addition, African American male students indicated that having peers of the same race in their classroom was beneficial to discuss and validate

similar lived experiences. Furthermore, as the literature indicated, being connected to their "neighborhood" was essential to African American male students. Thus, institutions should provide opportunities for students to contribute in a meaningful way to their neighborhood through experiential learning, service learning, or some mutually rewarding activity for the community and the student.

Role Models

Research revealed (Preuss et al., 2020) that students perceived family members, faculty, and staff as their main role models and that having a positive role model, (Luis et al., 2020) greatly influenced their decision to attend college. Another study revealed (Herrmann et al., 2016) that women are more likely to leave STEM-related fields than men because of the lack of female role models. However, regardless of gender, underrepresented minority professors are necessary in STEM majors in order to inspire a diverse student population to join the STEM majors (Basile & Murray, 2015). Thus, diversity in faculty is critical to inspiring young African American and Latino students to become STEM professionals (Basile & Murray, 2015). These assertions were also similar to those found in Kachchaf et al.'s (2015) study which expressed the necessity of like-minded mentors and role models in their area of interest.

Preuss et al. (2020) defined role models as "individuals whose lives, character, or actions a person admires and may wish to emulate" (p. 58). The authors investigated the attributes that Hispanic students look for and found the most important role models in their research. This study was a mixed-method study consisting of focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and surveys. This

study revealed that family members, faculty, and staff are the main individuals that students identify as role models. The study also showed that the most critical attributes that students look for in a role model are providing helpful information, being accessible, and proactively reaching out to the students. The authors found that role models impacted their persistence in college and that the importance of having a mentor increases as students advanced along their academic journey.

Luis et al. (2020) examined the experiences of male Latino students at community colleges and universities, contributing to their persistence and academic success. The participants in the study ($N=6$) cited two main factors as contributing to their overall achievement in college. The first was a sense of belonging at their institution, and the second was having role models to guide them during their academic careers (Luis et al., 2020). In particular, the students interviewed indicated that having a positive role model greatly influenced their decision to attend college and was also viewed as a source of support in transitioning from high school to college.

In looking at the impact of role models, Herrmann et al. (2016) examined the effect of an online intervention aimed at women in the STEM fields due to the lack of similar role models. In this study, the authors examined a scalable online intervention that consisted of a letter from a female role model who normalized concerns about belonging and served as an example of overcoming challenges on academic performance and persistence and discussed the benefits of a college degree. The intervention was performed in two classes: an introduction to psychology ($n=258$) course and a General Chemistry course ($n=68$). The results of

the intervention revealed that providing a role model who normalized poor initial performance and feelings of not belonging and stressing the value of a college degree improved academic performance. These students had (higher course grades) had lower D, F, and W grades than those in the control condition and thus role models are essential for students as it greatly influences their decision to persist in college (Herrmann, 2016).

As the literature suggested, role models are essential for students as it greatly influences their decision to persist, supports transition from high school to college, contributes to student retention, and a sense of belonging. Therefore, stakeholders should have role models that students could look up to; Role models that represent their ethnic background, race, and gender as that have proven to be a positive characteristic that students seek in role models.

Most of the time, we use the word mentors and role models interchangeably, although there is a distinct difference between the two words. Japhet (2021) defined mentorship as a long-term relationship focused on supporting the growth and development of the mentee. On the other hand, a role model is a person that people look up to in order to help determine appropriate behaviors. Role models can be positive or negative (Japhet, 2021).

Mentoring

Research revealed that mentors are perceived as social capital (Moschetti et al., 2017). In addition, students with mentors of the same ethnic background viewed their mentors to be significantly more supportive in improving their personal and career development (Santos & Reigadas, 2016) and were viewed

(Baier et al., 2016) as one of the most important intentions to persist for first-time students.

In their study, Alconcer and Martinez (2017) found that "mentoring is an effective academic tool which impacted students' adjustment, retention, and achievement and argued that the development of peer mentoring programs as a resource for support during students' academic path in postsecondary education" (p.393). Regarding mentoring, Moschetti et al. (2017) conducted a study on a peer mentoring program for Latina/o students piloted in two freshmen orientation classes (first-year seminar). The goal of the pilot program was to increase retention and graduation rates of Latina/o in classes by way of peer mentors. Peer mentors received a variety of training that prepared them to better support their mentees. In addition, mentors were trained to identify warning signs when a mentee was struggling in class (e.g., frequent lateness or absenteeism). Data were collected for three years from 458 Latinas/os students with mentors and 86 Latinas/os without mentors. The results of this quantitative research demonstrated that mentees perceived mentors as social capital (Moschetti et al., 2017). Stanton-Salazar (2001) defined social capital as the relationship provided by another person that provides support and assistance. In terms of support and assistance, one of the mentees in the study stated, "they (peer mentors) introduced us to university faculty and staff. Also told us we should network and get involved." (Moschetti et al., 2017, p. 386).

Santos and Reigadas (2016) performed research to better understand the student-faculty mentoring process and how mentoring supports Latina/o students

in their college transition. In this quantitative study, the Faculty Mentoring Program (FMP) assigned faculty mentors to students who were defined by the institution as at-risk (i.e., ethnic minority students and older adults) (Santos & Reigadas, 2016). The purpose of the FMP was to increase student academic progress, retention, and graduation by encouraging faculty-student engagement through a mentoring relationship. A total of 65 students responded to the survey, but only the data about Latina/o (n=32) was used in the report (Santos & Reigadas, 2016). In terms of mentors, Latina/o students were matched to Latino faculty.

The findings of this study revealed that students with same-ethnic mentors reported much higher program satisfaction and viewed their mentors to be significantly more supportive in improving their personal and career development than non-matched students. In addition, mentors aided Latino students' personal and social adjustment to college by giving emotional support and access to resources and knowledge. Furthermore, students perceived an increased college self-efficacy and academic goals due to their participation in the FMP.

Baier et al. (2016) surveyed 237 first-time college students to examine the extent to which self-efficacy beliefs, high school GPA, ACT scores, first-semester college GPA, participating in learning communities, demographic characteristics, and perception of mentorship influence freshmen's intent to persist (Baier et al., 2016). The results of this quantitative study demonstrated that self-efficacy and perceptions of mentorship were most important for first-time students' intention to persist beyond their first semester in college.

In conclusion, mentorship in general - peer-mentoring and student-faculty mentorship have proven to be practical tools for engaging, supporting, retaining, and helping new students transition to the college environment (Moschetti et al., 2017; & Santos & Reigadas, 2016). In sum, mentoring is an effective academic tool that impacts students' adjustment, and retention (Alconcer & Martinez, 2017).

Faculty Engagement

The literature review (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020) demonstrated that faculty engagement contributes to the academic success and retention of students. In addition, the literature also revealed (Leslie, 2020) faculty engagement, improved student engagement, satisfaction, learning, and achievement. Write (2017) defined faculty engagement as an emotional state where staff members feel passionate, energetic, and committed.

Regarding faculty engagement, Alcantar and Hernandez (2020) interviewed nine Latinas/os to examine their interactions with faculty in a two-year Hispanic-serving institution. The research aimed to answer the question: How, if at all, do faculty interactions affect the college experiences of Latina/o students at a Hispanic-Serving community college? The study revealed that faculty play a critical role as validating agents in Latina/o students. Furthermore, it demonstrated that validating faculty interactions with Latina/o students can contribute to their sense of belonging, persistence, confidence, and academic success (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020).

Similarly, in researching Latino men in community colleges, Rodriguez, Massey, and Saez (2016) conducted a study to research the interactions of Latino male students with their faculty members. This study examined how Latino men made meaning of their interactions with faculty and how they influenced their success at community colleges. This qualitative research performed 23 focus groups with 130 Latino students enrolled at seven community colleges in Texas. This study found that Latino students made meaning of their experiences based on "(a) the accessibility and approachability of the faculty member; (b) their own hesitancy to seek help from a faculty member; (c) the level of investment or authentic care exhibited by the faculty member" (Rodriguez, Massey, & Saenz, 2016, p. 28).

A study was conducted by Leslie (2020) to analyze how faculty engagement affects students. The researcher examined online faculty development that used three forms of engagement, an online faculty development called Trifecta of Engagement: (1) engagement with their courses, (2) engagement with their peers, (3) and engagement with their instructors (Leslie, 2020). This online course was piloted with eight faculty members in different disciplines. After the faculty applied all three types of engagements, the instructors saw improvements in student engagement, satisfaction, learning, and achievement. One professor saw average grades increase by 11%. Another professor saw grades improve by 8% and that student assessment of learning increased by 0.57% (Leslie, 2020).

In terms of engagement, Henkel and Haley (2020) administered the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale questionnaire to adjunct professors to determine their engagement with their work and how the questionnaire results could be used to increase engagement with their students. As indicated by the authors, adjunct faculty frequently teach in several colleges and may have no time outside of the classroom for student-faculty interactions. As a result, this can lead to low student retention and graduation rates (Henkel & Haley, 2020). However, based on the results of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that most adjunct faculty are engaged with their work (Henkel & Haley, 2020).

Research demonstrated that when adjunct faculty members are fully engaged in delivering courses and, more importantly, assisting students in reaching their educational goals, the educational process is greatly improved (Ridge & Ritt, 2017). Therefore, a university's leadership must provide its adjunct faculty with the institutional support needed to be engaged to carry out its mission of maximizing student learning (Shulman, 2019).

Sources of Support

Learning Communities

The literature suggested that Learning communities (LC) increases retention (Virtue et al., 2019) and can help students acclimate not only to increased academic rigor but also to the institution itself (Van Ora, 2019 & Virtue et al., 2019). Laverick (2018) defined learning communities as “a group of students who have common academic goals, share interest, or common background” (p.1256). In terms of students sharing a common background and

interest, Laverick (2018) conducted a study to explore how international students acclimate to campus life and the rigor of classes through the support of LC. In this study, an intervention program was created in LC for first-year international students struggling in their English Language Learners (ELL) writing and reading class. Students were also assigned to a First-Year Seminar (FYS) class to help them with study skills, time management and introduced them to campus life and culture. Students were divided into LC within this course. At the end of the semester, students were administered a survey to ask them questions about the value of the FYS course. The students indicated that they found value in the LC/FYS course. The students stated that they made new friends, and all sixteen students agreed that their English language improved by taking the FYS course. One student stated, "I like this class because this class helped me to interact with friends and develop my writing skills" (Laverick, 2018, p. 1260). Laverick (2018) affirmed that a learning community that includes mentoring and a first-year seminar can provide students with additional institutional knowledge, access to institutional resources, and a small group of peers to turn to should issues like feeling homesick should arise. As a result, learning communities can create deeper connections to the institution in the form of mentors and peers sharing similar experiences, all of which can lead to higher retention.

Virtue et al. (2019) conducted a study to examine the lasting effects of learning communities. In their qualitative study, participants were recruited based on their participation in a LC. The question for the interview was: What, if any, are the lasting impacts of learning community enrollment after the students' first

year? The study's findings suggested that learning communities provided positive outcomes for first-year students as well as long-term effects.

Similarly, Van Ora (2019) cited retention and higher-grade point averages, and completion of student developmental courses as a result of participating in learning communities. In this qualitative study, Van Ora (2019) studied the benefits of learning communities first-year students who attributed their retention and success to their meaningful social connections, self-efficacy, and active learning that was provided by the learning community (Van Ora, 2019). In this study, Van Ora (2019) explored the impact of a first-semester Learning Community (LC) program on the experience of developmental students in community college. Fifteen students (6 women, 9 men) were enrolled in the program and were placed in the lowest level developmental English. This qualitative study provided a series of semi-structured interviews to solicit feedback on the benefits of beginning their college careers in a LC program. Some of the positive academic outcomes of this study were high retention, completion of developmental courses, and higher-grade point average.

The literature revealed (Van Ora, 2019 & Virtue et al., 2019) that learning communities have proven to increase retention, help students acclimate to college, and increase academic rigor demanded by school. In addition, LC provides positive academic outcomes and long-term effects for first-year students. Furthermore, learning communities are a great tool to transition first-year students to college since they foster connection by intentionally placing students with common background or interest together.

Tutoring

Another vital component of support programs was tutoring. Tutoring has demonstrated to be an effective retention strategy (Carr & London, 2019; Gabrielle-Millette, 2016). In addition, in order to meet the high demands of students requesting tutoring, the use of technology can be leveraged in some courses to offset the cost and demand of tutors by way of Intelligent Tutoring System/Solution-Based Intelligent Tutoring System (Hooshyar et al., 2018)

Carr and London (2019) suggested that tutoring was an effective tool in increasing undergraduate retention. The authors stated that after “controlling demographic characteristics and high school GPA, tutoring positively predicted course performance, with each additional session of tutoring relating to an increase of 0.04- grade points above the class average” (Carr & London, 2019, p.92). In their study, the researchers analyzed the data of students who attended tutoring and Modified Supplemental Instruction (MSI) at the University of California, Santa Cruz and who used their Learning Support Services (tutoring and MSI) from 2010-2014 to see the effects of tutoring and MSI in students’ educational outcomes.

The study results indicated that students who used tutoring and MSI are useful tools for addressing the achievement gap in college. Furthermore, this study did not find that MSI or tutoring contributed to increasing graduation rates. However, it found that tutoring contributed to a high retention rate. The researchers found that “only 0.4% of tutoring attendees dropped out after their freshman year” (Carr & London, 2019, p. 100). The authors attributed a high

retention rate in tutoring to selection bias. (e.g., students most motivated to stay in college utilizing tutoring more) (Carr & London, 2019). This study also found that more women (14.9%) attended tutoring as compared to men (8.9%), as well as first-generation students (16.8%) as compared to non-generation (8.4%) and African American and Latina/o students were significantly more likely to utilize tutoring and used it with more frequency than other groups (Carr & London, 2019). The researchers noted that universities with underserved groups should consider using supplemental instruction, including smaller group tutoring, to increase retention, as these programs can contribute to the academic performance of first-generation, ethnic, and low-income students.

Similar to the previous research, Gabrielle-Millette (2016) analyzed the effects of tutoring on students' academic performance who used the Student Success Center at San Bernardino Valley College (SBVC) from 2012-2015. The Student Success Center is SBVC's largest academic support facility. It offers a wide variety of tutoring support in sciences, social sciences, modern languages, modern languages, and mathematics. The findings indicated that "students who received tutoring had an overall success rate of 7% higher than students enrolled in courses that provided tutoring support but did not utilize the services" (Gabrielle-Millette, 2016, p. 2). The findings also found a slight increase in retention for students who received tutoring compared to those enrolled in courses that offered tutoring but did not utilize the services. Furthermore, on average, students across the STEMs disciplines had higher rates of success (13%)

and higher retention rates (8%) than students enrolled in courses that offered tutoring but did not attend (Gabrielle-Millette, 2016).

In their study, Hooshyar et al. (2018) explained the utilization of an Intelligent Tutoring System (ITS); using a Solution-Based Intelligent Tutoring System (SITS) in order to augment and meet the demand for tutors. In addition, the researchers stated that the SITS is also "an effective tool to improve problem-solving skills by stimulating human tutor's actions in implementing one-on-one adaptive and personalized teaching" (Hooshyar et al., 2018, p. 25). In this study, thirty-two students taking their first introductory programming courses were selected to participate. The students in the experimental group were asked to use ITS, while the control group was offered the traditional approaches.

The results of this quantitative study demonstrated that SITS can be an effective tool to improve problem-solving skills by implementing one-on-one adaptive and personalized teaching. In addition, the results showed that SITS was able to enhance students' attitudes toward the computer programming course and their learning achievements. Furthermore, students in the experimental group claimed that they experienced a higher learning interest (Hooshyar et al., 2018).

Tutoring has proven to be an effective retention tool for undergraduate students. In addition, tutoring has yielded positive results for underrepresented minorities and also for women in general, as not only do they tend to use tutoring the most, but they also use it with the highest frequency.

New Student Orientation Program/First-Year Seminar

First-year seminars are designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to overcome the demand and challenges of the first year of college (Permzadian & Grede, 2016). In addition, first-year seminars have been used as an instrument to boost student retention, persistence and academic performance (Choudhury & Runco, 2020; Frischmann & Moor, 2017; & van Herpen et al., 2020).

In a study conducted by Choudhury & Runco (2020), the researchers used observational data from a regional university in Alabama to test whether a first-year seminar improves retention rates. In their quantitative study, they examined the data of students who took first-year seminars (FYS) from 2012 – 2015 and compared it to similar students who did not take FYS. The findings of the study suggested that students who took FYS courses had a better survival rate for retention. The study also found that other variables, such as market opportunities and competition from other universities in the region may play an essential role in retention (Choudhury & Runco, 2020).

Another program that examined first-year programs was the Bengal Bridge program. In 2015, Idaho State University expanded its summer Bengal Bridge program by implementing a first-year transition program to increase the persistence of first-year students. Frischmann & Moor (2017), Studied the impact of the Bengal Bridge program on retention, and they performed a cluster analysis of 117 students actively enrolled in the program from their Bridge term through the following spring term. The analysis included the following categories: high

school GPA, standardized test score, Bridge term GPA, fall term GPA and spring term GPA and was performed in order to determine whether any similarities or differences emerged (Frischmann & Moor, 2017). Each cluster within the study exhibited lower mean fall and spring term GPAs than their mean Bridge term GPAs, indicating a decline in academic performance since completing the Bengal Bridge program. However, despite the decline in academic performance, the authors indicated that no causal relationship could be implied or inferred among the participants. Furthermore, because the cohort only had seven students still enrolled over a four-year period (2013 to 2017), a comprehensive retention study was not possible.

Despite the limitations in the authors' study, their initial research showed that first-year students that benefit from the Bridge Program are "sufficiently impeded by a lack of a culture of matriculation to higher education" (Frischmann & Moor, 2017, p.9). Further, their initial data suggests that "academically and socially, the transition into the regular semester is still very challenging" (Frischmann & Moor, 2017, p.9). In response to these challenges, Idaho State University began incorporating transition training to the fall semester "what to expect; how to adapt" (Frischmann & Moor, 2017, p.9) as well as a revised academic coaching plan for Bridge cohorts transitioning to the fall semester.

van Herpen et al. (2020), conducted a quasi-experimental to determine if participation in a pre-academic transition program impacted students' interaction, sense of belonging, and academic performance. The participants included 58 first-year students at a large state-funded law school during the 2013-2014

academic year who enrolled in the intervention program (experimental group) and 62 students who did not participate in the program (control group).

Although the results of the van Herpen et al. (2020) study did not yield a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups when it came to sense of belonging, students in the experimental group reported a higher quality of interactions with teachers and peers. Also, as it related to academic performance, a multivariate test indicated that first-year cumulative GPA differed significantly between students who participated in the intervention programs and those that did not, with participants in the experimental group achieving higher cumulative GPA scores (van Herpen et al., 2020).

Financial Support

The literature on financial support revealed that students receiving any financial support were more likely to continue their education (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Gil, 2016; & Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). The literature (Latino et al., 2017) also demonstrated that accelerated learning and financial aid was associated with positive academic outcomes for Hispanic first-generation students.

Latino et al. (2017) conducted a study to understand how accelerated learning in high school and financial aid in college affects Hispanic first-generation college students (FGCS). In this quantitative study, the researchers compared several college outcomes between Hispanic first-generation college students and Hispanic non-first-generation college students. They examined data of incoming 2012 first-year students from a Southern university who received

financial aid. The findings revealed that first generation students had lower average first-year GPAs (2.53 vs. 2.85) compared to non-first-generation students (Latino et al., 2017). In addition, FGCS were less likely to persist from their first to the second year at that institution (75% vs. 79%), and were significantly less likely to have accumulated at least 24 credits during their first year (35% vs. 53%). In addition, Hispanic students who had participated in accelerated learning while in high school had higher GPAs than Hispanic students who did not participate in accelerated learning (2.64 vs. 2.37), but not among non FGCS.

Furthermore, first-generation college students of all races and ethnicities faced barriers of misinformation and a lack of sound advice from family and peers about education costs, living expenses, and ways to gain access to financial aid (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). Similarly, to this study, Murphy and Murphy (2017) determined that Latino, students are often deterred from college entry due to their limited understanding of, and access to accurate information about the financial aid and admission processes (Murphy & Murphy, 2017). In addition, financially needy students avoid getting loans out of fear of not being able to pay them back (Eichelberger et al., 2017; Haynes & Jacobson, 2015).

Guzman's (2016) study indicated that Latino students receiving any form of financial aid to attend community college were more likely to continue their education than those who did not receive financial aid. In addition, research demonstrated (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016) that students who receive financial aid, particularly low-income students, benefit from degree completion. To this end, Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2016) conducted a randomized experiment to analyze

the effect of financial assistance (grant-based aid) on the hours that students spend working instead of studying. The study demonstrated that low-income students that were offered the grant were less likely to work, and those that worked, worked 1.69 fewer hours per week. In addition, grant-based aid allowed students to change their schedules and work fewer late nights and morning hours, allowing them to participate more in school and concentrate on classes. This contributed to improved college achievement and attainment and improved academic outcomes, including on-time bachelor's degree completion.

Goldrick-Rab et al. 's (2016) study is "the nation's first experimental analysis of need-based financial grant aid" in Wisconsin (p. 1764), which used a lottery system to assign aid to low-income students. The grant provided 3,500 dollars per year, which was renewable for up to five years. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016) indicated that "grant aid contributes to the attenuation of equality in college graduation" (p. 1801). The findings of this study showed that providing based-aid grants is effective at "helping student remain enrolled in college, earn slightly more credits, and get somewhat better grades, contributing to improved rates of on-time (four-year) bachelor's degree completion" (p. 1801)

Need-based grants have been proven to support academic and graduation outcomes, including timely graduation. Accordingly, support should continue to be provided to students. Some believe that the institutions should be doing more to support their low-income students. Gil (2016) stated that "colleges' financial responsibility to underrepresented students must go beyond initiative supported

by grant funding and should strive to be institutionalized as part of colleges' operational budgets" (p. 37).

As the literature indicated, offering financial assistance to students - in particular to low-income students - contributed to better grades, remaining enrolled in college, and timely graduation (Broton & Goldrick, 2016; Goldrick-Rad et al., 2016). Conversely, financial stress impacted students negatively, such as considering risky behavior to save or earn extra money and contributed to reduced grades (Britt et al., 2016). This study also indicated that lack of financial resources contributed to financial stress, particularly among students with little to no money and higher student loans. In this study, Britt et al. (2016) analyzed the impact of financial stress on college students at a large public university in the Midwest. The researchers indicated that stress can range from psychological distress to adverse academic outcomes (Britt et al., 2016). This quantitative study surveyed 16,675 via email, and 2,236 completed the survey. The survey results showed that increasing financial resources and providing financial knowledge to students was associated with decreased stress and better academic achievement (Britt et al., 2016).

As stated by Gil (2016), "financial responsibilities to underrepresented students must go beyond grand funding and strive to be institutionalized as part of the colleges' operational budgets" (p. 37). To add to this statement, funding should be institutionalized because "grant aid contributes to the attenuation of equality in college graduation" (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016, p. 1801), and providing a based-aid grant is effective at "helping students remain enrolled in

college, earn slightly more credits, and get somewhat better grades” (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016, p. 1801). Although, there is no one magic formula to keep students retained in college from beginning to end, the evidence is clear that financial assistance is a contributing factor to timely graduation, degree completion, obtaining better grades, and leads to higher retention particularly to low-income students. In addition, college administrators need to be intentional in educating Latino and first-generation college students regarding financial aid, loans, and the admission process. This may lead to less Latino and first-generation students deferring college and more applying and completing college.

Conclusion

This literature review explored retention practices of students, including Hispanic students attending higher education, in particular, community colleges. This research has provided sources that allow for a better understanding of how students are supported at these institutions through engagement and different kinds of supports and provides research-based initiatives that can be implemented to help students succeed. The literature revealed that “engagement and support“, as an aggregate, contributed to timely graduation, degree completion, better grades, and leads to higher retention rates. There was just one study, however, that the findings did not yield positive results (the Frischmann & Moor, 2017’s study) in retention and transition for first-year students. However, its finding propelled the researchers to create initiatives to improve the program for the following year. For instance, in response to the challenges that students were having problems transitioning from high school to college, thus causing low

matriculation and high attrition, the researchers created a transition training for the fall semester of the program that all new students were required to attend. The training was titled “What to expect: how to adapt” (Frischmann & Moor, 2017, p.9). Thus, researchers can always learn from their findings even if at first the findings don’t lead to positive outcomes.

Other, findings from the literature revealed (Herrmann et al., 2016; Luis et al., 2020; Santos & Reigadas, 2016) that having faculty and other institutional agents of the same ethnic or gender background (in the case of women in the STEM fields) contributes to student’s retention and overall academic achievements. The findings also demonstrated that the combination of engagement in the form of role models, mentorship, and faculty, as well as support in the form of learning communities, tutoring and, first-year seminar/new student orientation, have also proven to be effective strategies that contribute to the retention and academic achievement of students.

There is, however, a gap in the literature. The literature lumped all Hispanic students as a monolithic group, not taking into account that different Hispanic subgroups have their own unique educational experiences, characteristics, and challenges. In addition, the research on the experiences of students of Mexican ancestry dominated the literature. Furthermore, most of the research focused on four-year institutions and not community colleges. Moreover, and most importantly for this study, the extensive search did not find any retention journals on the experiences of Dominican students. Therefore, this research will contribute to both the missing literature on Dominican students and

will contribute to the existing but limited research on retention on community colleges.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

This chapter described the design of the research, as well as the setting, the process that were used in the selection of the participants, the instruments, participants' perspectives, opinions, perceptions, and experiences, and the various methodological assumptions that were generated during the study. In addition, the researcher discusses the study procedures, the data collection and analysis, and the assertions or conclusions about the overall meaning of the case (Stake, 1995).

Research Design

This research used a qualitative method using a case study design to investigate Dominican students' perceptions of their first year of college and how do those perceptions impacted their retention. Creswell & Poth (2018) postulated that "Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a world view, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social and human problem." (p. 42) For this study, a qualitative case study design was used to achieve a deeper understanding of the research topic. Case study design is defined as "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information." (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p .96). In a case study approach, the researcher utilizes many forms of qualitative data ranging from interviews, focus groups, observations, documents, or audiovisual materials, documents, and reports, in order to conduct an in-depth understanding of the case being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2018) mentioned three types of case studies: instrumental, collective, and intrinsic. This case study will be an instrumental case study. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that an instrumental case study may be used to understand a specific issue, problem, or concern (in the case of this study, the retention of Dominican students). Case study research is bounded by setting, time, and place (Stake, 1995). The bounded system of the case in this research consists of the retention of Dominican students, and the bounded time frame includes students who are enrolled in SSD during the academic year 2021-2022. The study is also bounded by geographic region (place) as the community college is located in the Northeast of the United States (NYC). Stake (1995) acknowledges that one principal use of case study is to obtain the description and interpretations of others. To elicit multiple perspectives, the researcher conducted individual interviews and focus groups of Dominican students from various lived experiences (continuing, and not continuing). The researcher also interviewed the two SSD instructors, and two staff from the First Year Experience Committee in order to gain multiple perspectives on retention from multiple stakeholders.

Research Questions

Maxwell (2013) posited that your research questions will guide you to what specifically you want to understand about your research. Thus, the following questions guided this study:

- 1) How do first-year Dominican students describe their first-year experience?
- 2) What university faculty and programming academic supports do Dominican students describe as influencing their decision to remain or leave during their first year?

- 3) How do immediate familial and peer relationships (parents, peers,) impact Dominican students' perceptions of retention?

Setting

The researchers used purposeful sampling and selected a Hispanic Serving community college with a high concentration of Dominican students. The community college is a public, urban, small school located in New York City, which for the rest of this paper, will go by the pseudonym of Quisqueya Community College. In the fall 2020 Quisqueya Community College served 6,326 students. The student profile was 69.9% female, 30% male, 59% Hispanic, 24% Black, 1.7% White, 3% Asian/ Pacific Islander, 0.5% American Indian/Native American, and 10.8% Other/Unknown. Since this study is looking at retention, it is important to point out that the first-time, full-time college-wide retention rate of students has remained at about 60% in the past seven years (Quisqueya Community College Self-Study Report, 2021)

This community college was ideal for this study. Since the Fall 2002, majority of its students have identified themselves as being of Dominican descent. This community college is nationally known for its bilingual approach to education, allowing Spanish-dominant students to begin courses in their native language while at the same time allowing student to learn English, where the full range of disciplines and subjects were taught in Spanish. Last but not least, this institution, was unique, in that it was created as a bilingual school, and it is still dedicated to bilingualism (Quisqueya Community College Self-Study Report, 2021). This institution makes it an ideal place for new immigrants from the Dominican Republic and from other Spanish-speaking countries, with no English skills to pursue their education here.

The students were selected from the First-Year Orientation course (SSD 100) assigned to all entering first-time students in the College Discovery (CD) Program at this community college. CD is CUNY's opportunity program at all community colleges. CD was established in 1964 as a five-year experiment, which sought to demonstrate that with the proper supportive services, students, excluded from the University because of existing admissions criteria could attain a college degree. SSD 100 is a semester-long course, designed to help first-year students transition to college by equipping them with college-readiness skills, and study techniques, such as time management, note-taking skills, and much more. This course also acts as a learning community for all incoming first-year students in the College Discovery program. Furthermore, this course connects students with social networks within the schools, such as clubs, volunteer opportunities and other resources and organizations. Two instructors teach the First-Year Orientation course. In the fall of 2021, 63 students were enrolled in the SSD 100 course. Since the researcher was not able to tell who was of Dominican origin just by looking at last names, all 63 participants were sent an email inviting them to take part in this study with the goal of identifying and interviewing at least 12 Dominican students. The email included the letters of consent (see Appendices B, & C).

Participants

In gaining access to participants, proper procedures were followed throughout the stages of the study, such as adhering to the IRB procedure from the institution the study was conducted and St. Johns' University. Twelve Dominican students were interviewed in total (one focus group: consisting of five students in the group, one in-depth individual interviews from focus group, four individual interviews of students who continued from

fall 2021 to spring 2022, four individual interviews of students who did not continue from fall 2021 to spring 2022. Interviewing these twelve students and incorporating their experiences provided saturation and a robust perspective of their lived experiences and the meaning they gave to their first-year experience. The interviews helped assess how participants' interaction with their ecological environment and sense of belonging affected their decision to stay or leave college. The two instructors who taught the Freshmen Seminar SSD 100 course and two First-Year Experience committee members were also interviewed to get their perspectives and points of view on the factors that contributed to the retention of students in this study. Interviewing the different participants allowed the researcher to "understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, and uncover their lived world" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164).

The criteria for selecting the students for this study were as follows:

- Students need to attend the college where the study is being conducted.
- They need to be at least 18 years of age
- Student who self-identify as Dominican
- The student needs to be registered in the SSD 100 course during the fall 2021 or spring 2022 semester.

Only two instructors teach SSD 100 course at Quisqueya Community College since it is only offered to a small cohort of students. Therefore, both instructors were invited to take part in the study.

Once IRB approval was granted by St. John's University and Quisqueya Community College, the researcher emailed the letters of consent to the students who agreed to be interviewed for this case study. The researcher requested a list of students who registered for the SSD 100 course during the fall 2021 semester from the Office of Institution Research & Assessment (OIRA), and the list of students who did not register for spring 2022. The list included the students' email, addresses, and phone numbers. For the instructors of the SSD 100 and the FYE staff, the researcher went to the directory and found their contact information. The researcher sent emails to all participants (both students and instructors) inviting them to participate in the study. The email indicated the nature of the study, why they were selected, the researcher's contact information, and dates and times that they could attend their interview. The participants were reminded that their identities would be anonymous, and responses collected would only be used for the purpose of this study. All sixty-three students who registered in the SSD100 course in the Fall of 2021 were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study. At first, no one responded to the email.

Therefore, the researcher called students randomly from the list and invited them to the study. When the interviewer asked the students if they had received the email inviting them to the interview they said they did but that they didn't respond because when they read that this was going to be a "research study" they became concerned that this was too important and they didn't think that they had valuable information to contribute to the study. The researcher assured them that their input and experiences were valuable for this study and that their participation would be appreciated. If the student met the criteria (please find criteria mentioned previously), they were invited to

participate in a virtual focus group or an individual interview depending on their selection or the criteria they met. It is the job of the researcher to accommodate the participants. Consequently, the participants will be provided with a variety of dates and times for the interview for them to select the most convenient date. Due to the current COVID restrictions and high positivity rate, remote option was the only safe option to conduct interviews. Although the interviews were conducted remotely, the researcher tried to make the participants feel comfortable and relaxed during the interviews. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that no matter the interview mode, “care must be taken to create an environment as comfortable as possible” (p.164).

Methods of Data Collection

The researcher used multiple data collection methods to discover how Dominican students perceived their first year of college and how that perception impacted their retention. Using a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to draw on multiple techniques to collect data from participants. These multiple techniques were in the form of in-depth one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and analytic memo writing.

Data collection for this study was gathered through focus groups as well as individual interviews with students and instructors (see Appendices E, F, G, H, I, &, J). The participants consisted of first-year Dominican students who registered and attended a First-Year Orientation course (SSD 100) during the Fall 2021 semester. The research questions were collected through responses from one focus group consisting of five students in the focus group, four students who continue from fall 2021 to spring 2022, four students who did continue from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022, two instructors who taught the SSD 100 course, and the two FYE staff members.

The researcher conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews for the focus groups and for the one-on-one interviews. Additionally, data collection was captured through analytic memos. Writing analytic memos helped the researcher organize their ideas and reflective thoughts about the data as they developed. One of the reflective memo writing that the researcher conducted was to reflect on how different Gisela's educational journey compared to mine. For example, she had children while attending college, and I didn't. She was a non-traditional student, while I was a traditional student. I was thinking how much different her life would have turned out if she didn't have children when she started school. Had she dropped from school during her first semester? This was one of many reflections I wrote while I interviewed the students. Consequently, writing analytic memo helped the researcher with the analysis and to draw conclusions. Miles et al., (2014) state, "memos are typically a rapid way of capturing thoughts that occur throughout data collecting, data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, conclusion testing, and final reporting" (p. 96). Once the students and instructors agreed to participate in the interview, the researcher emailed them the letter of consent (See appendices A, B, C). During the interview, the researcher went over the letter of consent to ensure that they understood everything and answered any questions that the participants had. After reviewing the letter of consent and ensuring that the participants had no questions, the researcher started the interview.

Interviews (Individual)

Seidman (2006) states that interviewing is a valuable tool as it provides access to "the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior." (p.10). Therefore, to make meaning of the

research topic, (what are Dominican students' perceptions of their first year of college, and how do these perceptions impact their retention?), the researcher purposely conducted twelve in-depth one-on-one interviews (nine students and four instructors). Four students who continue from fall 2021 to spring 2022, four students who did not continue from fall 2021 to spring 2022 and one student from the focus group. In addition, the researcher interviewed the two instructors who taught the SSD 100 course and two members of the First Year Committee. Stake (1995) affirms that the interview is the road to multiple realities. Therefore, listening to the different voices provided the researcher with a deep understanding of their realities, perspectives and lived experiences. Stake (1995) believes that each individual is expected to have unique experiences or special stories to tell. Therefore, interviewing sixteen individuals provided the researcher with those unique experiences or stories. The twelve students who responded consisted of three males and seven females, the instructors consisted of one male and one female and the staff consisted of two females. Below please find the description of all participants.

Table 1*Description of Participants*

Participant	Role	Generation	Data Collection	Enrollment Status
Ana	Student	1.5 Generation	Individual Interview	Continued from fall to spring
Elena	Student	1 st Generation	Individual Interview	Continued from fall to spring
Francisca	Student	1 st Generation	Individual & Focus group	Did not continue from fall to spring
Gisela	Student	2 nd Generation	Individual & Focus group	Did not continue from fall to spring
Jeff	Student	2 nd Generation	Individual Interview	Did not continue from fall to spring
Jessenia	Student	2 nd Generation	Individual Interview	Did not continue from fall to spring
John	Student	2 nd Generation	Focus group	Continued from fall to spring
Katherine	Student	2 nd Generation but raised as 1 st Generation	Focus group	Continued from fall to spring
Lucia	Student	1 st Generation	Individual Interview	Continued from fall to spring
Quilcia	Student	1 st Generation	Focus group	Continued from fall to spring
Rosa	Student	1 st Generation	Individual Interview	Continued from fall to spring
Yeremy	Student	2 nd Generation	Individual Interview	Did not continue from fall to spring
Betsy	First-Year Experience Staff	1 st Generation		
Lisa	First-Year Experience Staff	1 st Generation		
Cathy	SSD Instructor	American		
Eddy	SSD Instructor	Puerto Rican		

Stake (1995) specified that the interviewer needs to plan in advance for the interview. The researcher, therefore, created a “short list of issues-oriented questions” that served as a guide for the researcher to use (Stakes 1995). To that end, the researcher created four interview protocols (see Appendices D, E, F, & G) consisting of 10-15 interview questions and prompts, for each of the individual interviews. The interview protocols were “bounded on the front end by questions to invite the interviewee to open up and talk... and at the end adding comments thanking the participants for their time for the interview” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.164). Judging by the comments that some of the students shared, such as Francisca crying while she was interviewed during the focus group, and Jeff sharing during our one-on-one that the last time he saw his father was when he was five years old and that he missed his father, it was obvious that the participants felt comfortable with each other and with the researcher.

The interview protocol contained a script that included the purpose of the study, as well as the confidentiality and the participant’s rights. The script of the interview protocol served as a roadmap to ensure that the researcher stayed on track with the questions that were asked and kept the researcher on time and organized. The interview took approximately 45-60 minutes. At the end of the interview, the researcher requested the participant’s approval for a follow-up meeting for member check. One form of member check that the researcher conducted was to follow up with Jeff because he mentioned during the interview that he couldn’t relate to the instructors at Quisqueya Community College because they were old and “bricked-up”. The researcher contacted Jeff to ask him what he meant by “bricked up,” and he elaborated that it means that the instructors are too serious/too rigid. The researcher also conducted member check with

Jeremy to inquire if he meant that he joined a comedy club or comic book club as part of his social activity at the institution. He responded that he had joined a comic book club.

The researcher also conducted member check with seven other students to corroborate the interpretation of their information and the findings. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that the researcher bring the information back to the participants after interpretation to verify that they agree. This also adds to the validity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Focus Group

Glesne (2016) recommended using focus groups to better understand how a group debates a topic and comes up with multiple perspectives. The researcher conducted a focus group consisting of five students in the group. Morgan (1997) suggested maintaining small focus groups as they are easy to manage. He warned that if the groups are too large, they tend to break into subgroup discussions that are difficult to facilitate and record. Morgan (1997) stated that homogeneous groups, in terms of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, etc., can allow for more free-flowing, relaxed conversation. Since all the students in this study shared similar traits (they are Dominicans who attend the same college and take the same SSD 100 course), these factors contributed to good rapport and, thus, good dialogue. During the interview, Francisca shared with the group that she had to drop her classes five days after she registered because her father was diagnosed with cancer, and everyone consoled her and provided her with support during the focus group. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that the researcher manage the focus group to encourage all participants to talk and monitor individuals who may dominate the conversation. No one in the group dominated the conversation. They all took turns, and

all students were encouraged to participate during the interview. However, some students shared more information than others. For instance, Katherine and John were very limited in their responses or hardly offered any responses during the focus group.

The researcher used an interview protocol (see Appendix G) that consisted of 8-10) interview questions and prompts. The researcher also added warm-up questions to encourage the participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences. The interview protocol ended with concluding remarks thanking the participants for their participation. Since the participants had 45-60 minutes allotted for the interview, the researcher ensured that the group did not spend too much time on one question and instead kept the group moving to get through all of the questions. The interview protocols were “bounded on the front end by questions to invite the interviewee to open up and talk... and at the end adding comments thanking the participants for their time for the interview” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.164). In preparing for the interview, as Stake (1995) suggested, the researcher created a script for the interview protocol, which included: the list of interview questions, prompts, the purpose of the study, information about confidentiality and participant’s right, and remarks about ending the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The script within the interview protocol served as a roadmap to ensure that the researcher stayed on track and addressed all the important things that needed to be addressed. At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked the participants for their participation and asked them approval for a follow-up meeting for member check as was done with the individual interviews.

Trustworthiness

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), there are some strategies that a researcher can use to validate the process for assessing the accuracy of the findings as best described by the participants. One of them can be addressed by using triangulation. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data, such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and artifacts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher triangulated the data by utilizing three methods of data collection (focus groups, individual interviews, & analytic memo writing) and different sources of data from divergent stakeholder's voices (students and teachers) to confirm this study's findings.

The other strategy that the researchers employed throughout this study to confirm validity of the finding was "member checking or seeking participant feedback" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Member checking is taking the information back to your participants after interpretations to verify that they agree. According to Stake (1995) participants "should play a major role in directing as well as acting in case study" research (p.115). They should be co-creators and should be asked to examine rough drafts of the researcher's work and to provide "critical observations or interpretations" (Stake, 1995, p. 115).

In the case of this study, the researcher used "member check" by obtaining feedback from the participants for the preliminary written analysis of the interview's transcript and to elicit what may be missing. Another strategy to ensure internal validity that was used in this study as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) was collaborating with participants. This is when the researcher involves the participants in all phases of the research - from conceptualizing the study to writing up the findings. Participants should

be co-researchers in the study and as such, as part of this study, the researcher seek out the input of the participants throughout the different phases of the study. It is important for participants to review their transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their responses. Miles et al. (2014) indicate that by having participants review their transcript, the researcher is able to “connect to the participant’s feedback, understand it, and relate it to their perceptions (p.309). Throughout this study, the research checked with the participants through “member check” to corroborate information.

Another method of validating the researcher’s findings is to check for the meaning of outliers. Miles et al. (2014) explain that any findings have exceptions. They further explain that outliers cannot only help the researcher “test the generality of the finding but also protects you against self-selecting biases and may help you build a better explanation” (Miles et al., p.301). Miles et al. (2014) expressed that, in many cases, outlier analysis strengthens an original conclusion. In this research, there is one outlier. Katherine, was the only student who stated that she did not receive any emotional support from her mother. Another strategy that a researcher can use to validate their findings is to clarify their biases and engage in reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This provides an opportunity for the researcher to communicate their understanding, values, experiences, and positionality that they bring to the study so that the reader can better understand where they are coming from in determining the interpretation of their findings. The researcher did that during the analytic memo writing and throughout this study.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher ensured that all measures of ethical considerations were afforded to the participants such as respect, beneficence (do no harm), and justice as clearly stated

in the Belmont Report (Glesne, 2016). To this end, the participants were informed about the research purpose, procedure, any risks associated with the study, and how the results of the study was shared. The participants were informed that if the study was published their names will be anonymous or an alias will be used to maintain confidentiality. The recording and videotaping of each interview, focus group (if participants agree to it), and transcripts were properly locked and secured. Also, the participants (students and instructors) were provided with a letter of consent, (See appendix A, B, C). The letter of consent contained the purpose of the study, the description and relevance of the study, the estimated time needed for the study, and the potential benefits and risks associated with the study. The participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were able to withdraw at any time

In addition to the previously stated guidelines in the Belmont Report, as stated in (Glesne, 2016) the researcher needs to be vigilant of the role that they may be playing in the study as it can create ethical dilemmas. For instance, are they being the exploiter -one that exerts power and control over participants and one that uses their participants for their own benefits? The other role that researchers may play is that of the intervener or reformer. This is when the researcher acquires information while interviewing that is potentially dangerous. The ethical dilemma here is, what do you do with that information? Should you continue to protect the confidentiality of research participants? Another role that researchers may play while interviewing participants is that of an advocate. An advocate champions a cause. They decide to take a position on some issue that they become aware of through their research. However, as a researcher your role is to do your research not to become an advocate or champion a cause. Finally, researchers can

also take the role of a friend while interviewing participants. Becoming friends with your participants can create an ethical dilemma in that as a researcher you may gain access to personal information given to you in the context of friendship (Glesne, 2016). The researcher was vigilant of the roles that she played in the study to avoid any of the potential conflicts mentioned above. However, as Glesne (2016) stated, part of the researcher role means presenting yourself so that you will fit in and be welcomed. As I said in previous chapter, I believe that my participants saw me as an indigenous-insider – someone who endorses the culture, and beliefs of his or her indigenous community and is perceived by that community as a legitimate member who can speak with authority about it (Banks, 1998).

Data Analysis

For this instrumental case study, the researcher conducted interviews (individuals and a focus group,) and analyzed analytic memo writing to interpret the experiences and perceptions of participants with respect to the first-year experience of Dominican students and how these perceptions affected their retention in a community college in NYC. The researcher approached data analysis by seeking patterns and identifying themes, and relationships in the transcripts to be able to make assertions and draw conclusions (Miles et al., 2014).

The researcher conducted virtual recordings using a platform called Webex and conducted the transcription. Prior to the transcription, the researcher listened to the recording several times to get to know every detail of the conversation that took place as suggested by Creswell & Poth (2018). Then the researcher began the coding process manually. At the beginning of the process, the researcher used post-it and a huge board

because it was better to visualize what was taking place. Manual coding was ideal because the researcher became very “intimate” with the information provided by the participants. However, as the interviews increased, the researcher employed the use of an excel spreadsheet. The researcher reviewed each transcript to get an understanding of the data and ensure that the information was accurate. Then the researcher wrote notes, or memos in the margins (Greswell & Poth, 2018), and highlighted words from the transcripts that seemed important. The researcher did the same process with the analytic memo writing employed after each interview was conducted. Saldana (2016) describes a code as “a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” According to Saldana (2016), there are two major stages in coding: the first cycle and the second cycle. The first cycle consists of (a) descriptive coding, (b) in vivo coding, and (c) process coding. Once interviews were transcribed, the researcher conducted first-cycle coding. First-cycle coding methods are codes primarily assigned to the data chunks (Miles et al., 2014). As a first cycle coding in vivo coding was selected which allowed the researcher to use the participants’ words (Miles et al., 2014). During this first cycle, there were fifty-eight codes that were then condensed by eliminating words that were repetitive, and then codes were placed into clusters.

During the second cycle coding, the researcher, following Miles et al. (2014), grouped the summaries from the first cycle into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs. This information included phrases and ideas that included terms such as: my dad was very supportive, my parents would help me, willing to hear me, really

honest, understand the problems, and do not participate in class. From these keywords, phrases, and ideas, the researcher was then able to identify different thematic categories.

The organizing, interpreting, and refining process revealed common themes in the coding of participants' interviews. In interviewing the students, staff, and instructors, and utilizing relevant data, the researcher found five significant themes and sub-themes through detailed analysis that would be discussed in detail in chapter 4.

Role of the Researcher

As a woman born in the Dominican Republic and educated in the United States since the age of thirteen, I am intimately connected to this study. For example, I have experienced many of the retention challenges stated in the literature affecting Hispanic students: I am a first-generation college student (like many of the students in this study) and thus, my parents were unable to help me with anything related to academics while I was in high school. I was academically underprepared, a low-income student, and also an ELL student. Despite balancing school and work while attending high school, I managed to graduate with honors. I attended college right after high school and I graduated in four years with my bachelor's degree without taking any prior college credits in high school. All of these factors make me biased or subjective towards my participants. I bring biases to this study and the attitude of "if I did it, so should you." However, I know that because of my closeness to the study, I need to be vigilant in determining "Why do you notice what you notice?" (Glesne, 2016, p. 153). In other words, as recommended by Glesne (2016), I need to reflect upon my subjectivity and positionality within the research context.

Self-reflection and reflexive approach are both a necessary prerequisite for the researcher to identify and articulate their positionality. Reflexivity requires an explicit self-assessment by the researcher about their views and positions and how these may have directly or indirectly influenced the design, execution, and interpretation of the research data findings (May & Perry, 2017). To guard against my subjectivity and positionality I talked to peers about my interpretations of the data. I also brought my findings to the participants for member check. In addition, I enlisted other colleagues (Dominican and non-Dominican members of my Ed.D cohort) who were familiar with my research to debrief about my interpretations who felt comfortable providing perspectives different from mine. Reflective writing was embedded throughout the analytic memo writing which was part of the triangulation process. Providing open and honest disclosure of positionality should demonstrate where and how the researcher believes that they have or may have influenced their research. The reader should then be able to make a better-informed judgment as to how “truthful” the research data was (Holmes, 2020).

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that it is inevitable that the researchers’ personal views, thoughts, and interpretations will change how the study takes shape. Researchers need to be aware of their biases. Researchers need to guard against over-identifying with their subjects. Therefore, because of my personal background and experiences, I was vigilant and remained open to understanding the participants' decisions, views, and trajectories rather than juxtaposing my own story with theirs. I approached this study with the presumption that my participants saw me as an indigenous- insider. I don’t think I

was perceived by any of the participants in this study as an indigenous-outsider (Banks, 1998).

Banks described indigenous-insider as an individual who endorses the values, and beliefs of his/her indigenous community and who can speak with authority as a legitimate member of his community (Banks, 1998). Indigenous-outsider is described as an individual who was socialized within his community but has experienced a high level of assimilation as an outsider (Banks, 1998). Although I have been in the United States for forty-years, I still hold on strongly to my “Dominicaness”: the food, the music, the culture, the language, etc. I also try to instill the same values and cultural awareness to my fourteen-year-old son. I don’t think I have assimilated nor have I dissocialized from my Dominican community (perhaps this has been my own resistance to assimilate). My values, beliefs, perspectives and knowledge are similar to those of the students I interviewed.

According to Banks (1998), an indigenous-outsider is not only regarded as an outsider, but is viewed with contempt because they “sold out” to the outside community (Banks, 1998, p. 8) and that is definitely not how I see myself or the way that my students viewed me, otherwise they would not have shared so passionately, honestly and openly the things they shared. For example, one of the students stated, “Because you are Dominican and share so many things in common with me, I connected with you.”

I consider myself an indigenous-insider because, as described by Banks (1998) I can speak with authority as a legitimate member of my Dominican community. I was born in the Dominican Republic and emigrated to the United States when I was thirteen. Although I have been in the United States for almost 40 years, I keep myself relevant

with and abreast with the culture and the issues impacting the Dominican Republic both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States. Since I have been in the United States for forty years, there are things that I have adapted to and socialized to the American culture, but again, never, giving up my culture but augmenting it by adding the positive values from the American culture and adding it to my Dominican culture.

As I mentioned before, because I have experienced similar experiences as the students I interviewed (although I am in a position of authority now), they still connected with me; representation does matter. At the end of the interviews, I was convinced that the students saw me as an indigenous-insider.

The advantage of being viewed as an indigenous-insider, is that the researcher may be more trusted by the participants because the researcher is regarded as “one of us” (Sanghera & Bjorkert, 2008). At first, before I started the interviews I thought I could probably be perceived by the newly arrived Dominicans or Dominicans who have been in the United States for a short time as an outsider, however, that was not the case. Students felt that they could trust me and felt comfortable enough to provide me with a truthful, authentic “thick” description (Geertz, 1973). After conducting the interviews, it was my perception that all participants saw me as an indigenous-insider which added to them feeling comfortable to share authentically.

As stated before, a researcher should always check their biases and subjectivity as a way to understand how as a researcher, you may be constructing your reality. In addition, identifying the researcher’s bias will help you understand how close you are to your participants from a social and cultural perspective. I believe it allowed me to better understand the students’ experiences and allowed me to reflect at a deeper level since I

could connect to their experiences and ask probing questions to engage in a richer dialogue.

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

This case study examined how first-year Dominican students perceived their first year of college and how these perceptions impacted their retention at a community college in New York City by the name of Quisqueya Community College (by its pseudonym). Methods of data collection included a total of sixteen. The participants consisted of four students who did not return from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022 and four who continued from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022. All students were individually interviewed. A focus group consisting of five students was also interviewed. One of the participants from the focus group was selected for an in-depth, one-on-one interview. The students were selected from an SSD course, which functioned as a Learning Community for a freshmen orientation course and is a required course for all entering students accepted into the College Discovery Program. Two SSD instructors and two First Year Experience Committee staff members were interviewed individually.

In analyzing the data, five themes emerged within the context of the three research questions. The first theme that emerged was first-year pressures, reflecting the multiple pressures afflicting students during their first year. Under this theme, two sub-themes emerged: (a) aspirational pressure and (b) life circumstances. The second theme that developed was social participation, which was accompanied by two sub-themes: (a) difficulty finding time to participate in social activities and (b) engagement and inclusion through clubs and their importance. This theme shows the multiple challenges faced by students in trying to participate in school while navigating multiple responsibilities. The third theme was barriers. This theme illustrated students' perception of the barriers they

faced during their first year of college in this institution. The barriers that emerged are elaborated on and supported in these two sub-themes: (a) difficulty with English and (b) processing and submitting documents and forms. The fourth theme that arose was academic support. This theme had two sub-themes: (a) supportive faculty and staff and (b) faculty and staff of similar ethnic backgrounds matter to students. The final theme that emerged was the importance of support systems. This theme had two sub-themes: (a) connections and help from peers and (b) family emotional and financial support. Before delving into the themes, it is helpful to reiterate information on the case that was studied.

Introduction to the Case

This case study investigated the perception of first-year Dominican students and how their perception affected their retention. The data collected during the interviews presented numerous perceptions of students, faculty, and staff. It was evident from the findings in theme 1, that students felt enormous pressure during their first year of college caused by numerous circumstances. They also faced barriers during their first semester or year of college. Some students also described difficulty participating in social activities (as described in theme 2) during their first year due to insufficient time to participate. Their lack of time to participate in activities is supported by a presentation during the President's Stated Meeting of the College on September 21, 2021, which revealed that during the Fall of 2021, 51.1% of the student population attended school part-time, and 75% worked while they attended college. This stands to reason that if more than half of the students attend school part-time and 75% work at least part-time while attending school, they would have difficulty finding time to participate in extracurricular activities (Quisqueya Community College, President's Stated Meeting of the College, 2021).

Similarly, the fourth and fifth themes demonstrated that students find support and connections in their relationships with families, peers, faculty, and staff. Theme 1 will explain what students, staff, and faculty had to say about their perceptions regarding first-year pressures. Besides the traditional academic support offered by higher education institutions such as tutoring centers, computer labs to type papers or do research, a library to do research and find a quiet place to study, Career Services to help you build your resume and find employment, Quisqueya Community College offers English and Math placement Gateway sequence/co-curricular courses to accelerate students completing their remediation needs. What were once English and Math developmental sequences which took up to three-course levels to complete, have been replaced with Gateway course options that achieve college-level outcomes by integrating supplemental supports, saving students time and money. Furthermore, all entering students are assigned advisors who follow them until graduation. As mentioned previously, during the Fall of 2021, 51% of students matriculated part-time, which seems to be the new trend. The college also provides students with a semester-by-semester plan of degree requirements, including prerequisite courses and guidance about when gateway courses should be taken. The college also offers meta-majors in the form of dual degree programs in collaboration with senior colleges. These are some of the supports that this college offers its students to accelerate remediation, save students' money, and help them graduate.

Theme 1: First-Year Pressures

During their first-year experience, some students felt numerous pressures manifesting from different situations, such as working, being parents, lack of English fluency, running their own business, caring for a family member, needing to be role

models or stress about being the first one in the family to attend college. The following sub-themes will elaborate in detail on these pressures.

Sub-Theme: Aspirational Circumstances (Ambitions)

This first theme emerged as students candidly discussed their first-year experience in college. They opened up about important experiences that included responsibilities, challenges, excitement, sense of pride, lack of motivation, and trepidation. Some students impose these aspirational pressures on themselves because they want their parents and other family members to be proud of them. For instance, Jeff, a second-generation Dominican student majoring in digital design, said:

While I was struggling through that [coping with the transition from high school to college and dealing with identity issues] and deciding what I wanted to study and what I wanted to focus on, there was always a pressure being kind of like I'm the first-born son, and I'm the example, and then you know, like I have to set the example for my brothers. Jeff depicts the responsibility of being the first in the family to go to college. He is the role model for his two little brothers, and that causes pressure. Similarly, Lucia, a first-generation Dominican student majoring in accounting, mentioned that she "feels pressure because of her lack of English, but she wants to graduate to be the first one in the family with a degree from a college in the United States." Another first-generation Dominican student named Quilcia felt the pressure to push herself to finish college as soon as possible to get a job to help her family in the Dominican Republic. Quilcia is majoring in Business Administration to learn to manage her home-based business. Quilcia started college in the Fall of 2021 and has registered for two summer classes every semester since she started. In addition, she has taken 15 and 18 credits while caring

for her son, who has been diagnosed with Autism. Despite starting in low ESL, Quilcia will be graduating in Spring 2023. Quilcia shared the following:

I don't know if I mentioned this before, but I have a little business in my house. I do nails and facial, and body treatments. I have like a home-based business. So, I'm trying to open my business. Now I'm trying to prepare economically and academically, too. So that's why I decided to study this career [Business Administration] to be able to, you know, manage my business the correct way.

However, there was one outlier in this category. There was one student who felt a lack of motivation to attend college. She wanted to take a gap year to work or do something else but decided to attend college because she felt peer pressured and forced to complete higher education by her mother. This student was a second-generation Dominican named Jessenia. Although she is a second-generation Dominican, she was very proud of her heritage and was fluent in Spanish. Jessenia stated:

Because I didn't have a lot of motivation to continue because that semester was a big transition for me from high school and college, and I had a lot of family situations that took place during that time. I felt like I was forced to go to college. I didn't really want to go to college.

Though this student left college at the end of her first semester (Fall 2021) and returned in Fall 2022, she mentioned that she was ready now because she came to school for her and not to please anyone else. She felt that because she came to school on her own accord this time, she was more serious and committed to her classes and school.

Elena, a first-generation Dominican student, was very determined and dedicated. Elena was twenty years old and was an ESL student. She found college challenging due to her lack of English fluency. However, her grades during her first semester were A's and B's. During the interview, she shared that she worked full-time. When asked how she managed to find time to study for five classes and achieve A's and B's while working full-time, she responded, "I study from 8 pm-12 am. I try to do all I can during any free time I have." Regarding the teacher's perceptions of first-year pressures, Cathy depicted some of those pressures that Dominican students face using the experiences taking place in her classroom. Cathy is one of the SSD instructors who has been teaching SSD since 2018, and, similar to the other SSD instructor, she is also an advisor and a licensed social worker. She mentioned that,

Dominican students sometimes are torn between being separated from the family who are still there [D.R.] and the family in the United States. They either come with their father or their mother, but in most cases, not with both of them, and most of their immediate family are still in D.R. They are also the largest number of students that I have seen that have gone to high school in their country of origin. Thus, in my opinion, they should have difficulty integrating into the U.S. culture and college. However, I don't see that happening to Dominican students.

Cathy's quote speaks to Dominican students' struggle when they come to the United States. Some have to leave family members behind to start their new life in America. They have to adapt to their new environment and situation. They have to adapt. Cathy's quotes compare to Ana's comments when she stated, "I think Dominicans adjust to anything. Although we have problems at first when we arrive in the United States

learning the language, we adjust. Even I had a problem learning English, and look at me now, I am fluent.” Ana speaks to the Dominican’s ability to adjust when they arrive in the United States. She also mentioned how now, she is fluent in English.

However, Ana, unlike the other first-generation Dominican students in this study, arrived in the United States at the age of eight years old. Therefore, she would have more fluency in her English skills than the other first-generation Dominican students interviewed in this study as they arrived much older. Most of them arrived when they were in high school or just before getting into high school. However, not being fluent in English did not deter these students from pursuing their dream of an education. They forged ahead and graduated from high school and enrolled in college. They had dreams and aspirations to fulfill. The theme of aspirational circumstances was evident even in the students who did not continue from one semester to the next. Apart from one student (e.g., Jessenia), all other students (e.g., Jeff, Gisela, Lucia) came to school because they wanted to attend. Jessica felt forced or pressured by her mother and her peers. She felt they expected her to attend college because that was the normal thing to do right after high school. The other students were both happy and scared to be in college. It was evident from the interviews that their early departure from college was caused by their multiple responsibilities taking them away from their studies, which contributed to low performance. Cathy, the SSD instructor, speaks of both the resiliency and adaptability of Dominican students in this study. She states that many of her students are separated from their nuclear and extended family and complete high school in the Dominican Republic (D.R.). Despite all these, they adapt to their new surroundings (culture, climate, education, language, etc).

Overall, it was evident from the interviews that all the students, including those who stopped out and returned the following semester, had ambitious expectations to do well. They either wanted to be role models for their siblings or make their families proud. Some registered for more than fifteen credits each semester and took summer classes to graduate earlier. Some even came to college to learn how to manage their home business and become entrepreneurs. While others struggled with English but tried to study and received A's and B's in their classes.

Sub-Theme: Life Circumstances

This theme captured the pressures that students experienced due to situations outside of their control or due to their environment based on the circumstances they were facing at the moment. The findings demonstrated that most students faced life circumstances that affected their performance in school. Some of these life circumstances were students becoming caregivers for parents or other family members. Three students mentioned that they were single mothers and struggled to take and bring their children to and from school. Some reported the necessity to have to work while attending school, etc.

To illustrate this point, one of the SSD instructors who has been teaching the SSD Orientation Course since 2018, Cathy, mentioned. "It is one thing for students to focus on a job, but how can they focus on school, especially when they have to divide their focus between work and school?" To further support this point, while interviewing one of the students, a first-generation Dominican student named Francisca, explained that she had to attend school in the evening to take care of her father in the morning because he had been diagnosed with cancer, and she became his care provider.

Francisca was an enthusiastic 19-year-old who was excited and scared to be starting college. Francisca had to withdraw abruptly from classes five days after classes began. Francisca is a first-generation Dominican who, like many of the first generations of Dominicans interviewed, struggled with her English. Francisca noted, "I only attended five days of classes my first semester, and then I withdrew because that is when they told me that he needed to start chemo (chemotherapy)." Some students experienced other pressures dealing with their day-to-day situation and managing school. For instance, another first-generation Dominican student named Quilcia, had a special-needs child that required lots of attention and time. Quilcia not only needed to take care of her responsibilities but also needed to ensure that the needs of her child were also met. She stated:

I don't remember if I mentioned to you that I have a special needs child and that it is very difficult caring for him while also attending college. It takes a lot of my time because my child needs a lot of support. I need to make sure that he attends all his appointments.

In reference to this sub-theme, Eddy, the senior instructor of the SSD Orientation Course commented on how Dominican students must navigate not only the learning of a new language and culture when they come to this country but also they must separate from their extended family and, oftentimes, their nuclear family for a life in America. Eddy stated,

But that's the insecurity with the experience, right? and I think there's a certain gravity to being the person that's shipped out for education because you got to

deliver, right? You are the family investment. And now there is this anxiety around not wanting to mess it up.

Some Dominican students tried their best to continue college even while navigating difficult situations. However, their life circumstance derails them from their studies temporarily. This is the story of a second-generation Dominican student named Gisela who had to stop out temporarily because of life circumstances. Still, she returned as soon as she had the chance. Gisela was excited to start school because, as many of the students interviewed, she wanted to be the first one in her family with a college degree. However, she wasn't counting on the difficulty of managing her children's schedules as well as her own. She said, "Obviously, trying to work full-time, and trying to be a parent was very difficult. I had a newborn at home and a four-year-old, and then going to school full-time. So that was too much." Students sometimes take on too much and sometimes they cannot handle all the responsibilities that they have to juggle. Sometimes life just happens. One of the First-Year Experience (FYE) staff, Betsy, elucidates that:

Some students who stop out is because of family circumstances, such as their family relocating to another state looking for better employment opportunities. Sometimes it's because they have to return to the Dominican Republic because their Visa is about to expire. Some students quit school to get a job to support their family".

Betsy has been working at this institution since 2006. Betsy is also a first-generation Dominican who has been in the United States for over 30 years. As demonstrated by the interview, first-year Dominican students intend to attend college and continue their degrees. However, life circumstances get in their way, and some of them must stop out.

Regarding life circumstances, Eddy, the senior instructor of the SSD course, mentioned that the concept of “first-generation immigrants” is different for Dominican students because a large portion of their family network still resides in D.R and Dominicans would always feel close to D.R. He mentioned:

Students are sent here with a parent or a family member rather than a family unit. They are negotiating things like language and experiences because they are not only learning a new language and meeting new people, but they are also learning a new system. Some of them are coming in their high school years, or sometimes younger - in their formidable developmental years. While they are still trying to figure out who they are as a person. and yet, they still have to operate autonomously in many different ways. This sounds like a lot when I say it, so I can imagine what it feels like in their experience. Sometimes we see this manifest in their confidence level. For example, I have a student that speaks perfect English and tells me that she needs to take a class that would teach her to speak English.

Theme 2: Social Participation

The second theme emerged when the participants discussed the importance of social participation. The participants of this study were able to provide much information about their experiences and perceptions of the importance of social participation, and two subthemes emerged due to the information that they provided: (a) difficulty finding time to participate in social activities and (b) engagement and inclusion through clubs and the importance of it.

Sub-Theme: Difficulty Finding Time to Participate in Social Activities

Most participants reported that they found it difficult in finding time to participate in social activities. This was especially the case for Jeremy, a 1.5-generation Dominican, majoring in Computer Animation who was able to discuss the difficulties he experienced in participating in social activities due to his academic workload. Jeremy stated, “I took five classes during my first semester, and I was not active in any activity. Then during my second semester, I joined the comic book club.” Jeremy discussed that during his second semester, he felt that he was able to join the comic book club because he had settled into his new routines of studying and was able to find the time to begin participating in social activities more. Jeremy mentioned that the comic book club “gave him an opportunity to meet new people, socialize and distress after a long day of classes.” However, he also mentioned that it was difficult for him finding time to participate in social activities as he always had some other personal commitments. Much like Jeremy, Elena discussed that alongside meeting the responsibilities of working full-time and studying, she found it impossible to make time for social activities. Elena worked full-time during her first-year student. When asked during the interview, “How do you find time to study for five classes and get A’s and B’s while working full-time? She responded, “I study from 8 pm-12 pm. I tried to do all I could do during any free time.” Katherine also mentioned that she did not join social activities during her first semester but for completely different reasons than the ones provided by the other students. Katherine did not join social activities during her first semester because her mother wanted her to go home right after classes. Katherine stated, “My mother is too overprotective. She wants me to go straight home right after I finish my classes. She wants to make sure I am not hanging out with a

boy or something like that. Sometimes Dominican mothers can be too overprotective with their daughters.” Katherine depicts some of the cultural aspects of Dominican mothers. She explained that Dominican mothers could be overprotective of their daughters. I asked her if she had a brother, and she said she did. I asked her if her mother treated him the same, and she said she didn’t.

Gisela discussed the many obstacles she experienced that stopped her from participating in social activities. Gisela stated:

Obviously, trying to work full-time, trying to be a parent. At that time, I had a newborn at home, a 4-year-old, and then working full time, so that was too much. So, it was a lot, and then, not feeling like I had enough support. It felt like it was too much, so I ended up dropping two classes, and then getting grades for only those two classes.

Per Gisela, she had reported that having children at home while navigating the difficulties and challenges of parenthood made it extremely difficult to participate in social activities, so much so that she reported that she did not have enough support. Gisela acknowledged that this lack of support increased her likelihood of dropping some classes so that she could concentrate on her family responsibilities.

Other participants, such as Francisca, reported that she did not participate in social activities due to other reasons. For example, Francisca discussed that she did not attend college long enough to participate in social activities and experienced difficulties because she registered for classes in the evening and was taking care of her father in the afternoon.

I didn't take advantage of anything because being under pandemic made everything weird. All the people there are very helpful. Since I was only there five days before I left, I did not seek out any help. I wasn't there long enough to know the type of help I needed.

Francisca discussed other challenges when it came to finding time to participate in social activities such as experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. She reported that due to social distancing measures, quarantining, and the canceling of events made it difficult for her to connect to social activities or groups at the college. Francisca left the college after five days and reported that because of the short length of time she was at the college, she did not know the type of help she needed, especially regarding socialization.

In summary, this theme highlighted how the participants reported that it was difficult to find the time to participate in social activities. Elena, Jeremy, and Gisela reported multiple obstacles when it came to finding time to socialize, such as their academic workloads, their full-time job responsibilities, and family responsibilities. These participants reported that their time was stretched thin, and finding time to socialize or participate in activities was nearly impossible. Interestingly, Jeremy stated that he found time during the second year to join a comic book club, as he was able to discuss how he had settled into his new academic life and was able to find more time to participate in social activities. Jeremy shared that being able to be part of the comic book club connected him to other individuals. He felt part of the college. He no longer went from classes straight to his home. He developed a sense of belonging. A connection to the college and to friends. Finally, Francisca reported that although she was not at the college long enough to truly know the type of support she needed. She stated that when it came to

participating in social activities, the COVID-19 pandemic was a barrier. Francisca reported that social distancing, quarantining, and having events canceled made social participation weird. Yet other students made the best of the virtual events or joined in-person functions immediately after the college opened the doors to students, as we will see below.

Sub-Theme: Engagement and Inclusion Through Clubs and the Importance of it

The second sub-theme that emerged under the theme of social participation was that the participants viewed it as important to be included in and engage with clubs affiliated with the college. Most participants discussed how being connected with a club was important, such was the case of Rosa. She had only been in the United States a year before she registered for college and took a language immersion development course in the summer to prepare her for English fluency. Rosa reported:

In my second semester, I remember I did join just a few clubs. I joined the College Discovery Club, and I think I also joined other clubs that I don't remember the name of it right now. I did get the college socialization you're supposed to get, and I think that's what helped me feel more comfortable my first year talking to other people, even though I thought that maybe they weren't going to understand me.

As seen by her statement, Rosa highlighted many benefits of joining a club and participating in social activities. The different benefits included increasing her comfort and talking to more people, which she reported helped her practice her English speaking skills. Like Rosa, Katherine also joined a club during her second semester. Katherine was

introduced to the mathematics club by her professor during her second semester.

Katherine's mom didn't want her to be part of any after-school activities, but Katherine told her that her professor wanted her to be part of this club. Therefore, her mom could not argue with that. Regarding the math club, she said, "When I first joined my current school, I did not think I would like college mathematics, but my professor proved me wrong. Now I really like math, and it was fun because I made new friends too." By joining a club, Katherine was able to have fun and expand her social network. John joined the Leadership Academy at the end of his first semester. The Leadership Academy provided John with flexible volunteer opportunities. John liked participating in the Leadership Academy because it offered him plenty of opportunities and a flexible schedule for him to contribute his time.

Jessenia discussed her affiliation with a club during her first year. She stated:

I participated in an extracurricular activity, the Explorer Program part of the Police Academy for Youth During that time, I had a lot going on, taking four to five classes, working, and attending my after-school program. It was a lot. If I could go back, I would have done things completely differently. But I have learned a lot now, such as not to do too much in your first semester. School should always be the priority. But when you have too many other things, it's gonna catch up to you.

Although Jessenia was able to discuss the benefits of joining a club, she was also able to discuss how she would not join a club and participate in her extra-curricular activity again in her first semester. Jessenia purported that school needs to remain the priority, and joining clubs and extra-curricular activities in the first semester of college or

university, takes the focus away from the importance of studying. Therefore, Jessenia recommended students not be involved in too much during the first semester, as it is important to get your “feet wet” slowly and join other clubs in the second semester or later in college life.

Jessenia’s quote was substantiated by Jeremy, who stated, “I was taking 5 classes during my first semester, and I was not active in any activity. Then during my second semester, I joined the comic book club.” He stated that he joined the club because some of his classmates were talking about it, and he was curious about a comic book club. He joined, and he said that it changed his social life in college. He said that because of the club he met interesting people with similar hobbies. He also said that the club gave him leadership skills because he became the club’s treasurer. Jeremy also intimated that there is a lot going on in the first semester, so it is wise to be exposed to and get comfortable with the academic workload before joining and participating in clubs. Despite these two participants discussing how they would rather wait to join clubs after their first semester, they could still highlight the benefits of joining a club and participating in social activities. Other participants reported that they did not join clubs because they wanted the focus to remain solely on their academic journeys. For example, Ana stated:

During my first year, I was not active. I did not participate in any clubs. When I started school I was working, though. I was a dental assistant in a dental office. But my supervisor told me to put school first and concentrate on school. He also told me that if I wanted to return back that he would allow me to come back. I didn’t join any clubs because I wanted to take my education seriously.

Per Ashely, she reported that working was enough responsibility to add to the mix of her educational endeavors. Working as a dental assistant and completing schoolwork was enough for her and, although she did mention that joining a club can offer different benefits, she wanted to take her education seriously. Eddy, an SSD instructor, was also able to highlight the benefits of joining a club on campus. Eddy stated:

I think that one of the things that is problematic for commuter colleges, in general is the engagement of the institution. We know through studies, research, and subjective experience, that the students who are more engaged with the campus tend to be more engaged with resources on campus, and subsequently tend to do better and last longer, and you know that's by design. I don't think that this happens by chance. Therefore, by having the students feel like they not only belong to the community but that they are deserving of the opportunity

Eddy highlighted the benefits and importance of students engaging with the institution, especially through clubs that offer social activities. Eddy mentioned that subjective experience and research have shown that the more students are engaged with the university, the more likely they are to do better academically and utilize the resources and supports offered to them. However, Eddy acknowledged other participants' thoughts on the difficulties of joining clubs, especially with barriers that are experienced that include academic workloads, the responsibility of employment, family responsibilities, and parental requirements.

In summary, the participants reported that there are many benefits of joining a club on campus, as it can promote a more robust college experience. For example, Rosa and Jessenia stated that it could help increase comfort within the institution, while also

allowing the practice of speaking English to their peers. However, although other participants acknowledged the benefits of joining clubs, they also reported that they would wait until after their first semester as they need to get used to their new environment. In addition, other participants, such as Ana reported that she did not want to join a club at all because she wanted the focus to remain solely on her academic journey.

Theme 3: Barriers

The third theme that emerged from the dataset highlighted how the participants reported experiencing barriers within their educational journeys. Within this theme, two sub-themes emerged from the dataset that were acknowledged as the main barriers experienced on campus: (a) difficulty with English and (b) the processing and submitting of documents and forms.

Sub-Theme: Difficulty with English

The first sub-theme that emerged under the theme of barriers was that most participants reported having difficulty with English, which was infused into other areas of their academic journeys. For example, Rosa reported that in her first year, she had only been in the United States for a year, so her English was not that strong. She stated that her lack of English skills did not give her the confidence to participate in class; therefore, she would tend to keep to herself. Rosa stated:

I remember I had only a year in the United States, so I wasn't very good at speaking the language; I'm still struggling. Attending classes, I've always been a little bit of an introvert, so when it was time to participate, I would just keep to myself as it was hard for me to raise my hand and ask questions in classes.

Similarly, Lucia reported:

During my first semester, it was difficult. I remember I took four classes and did all my homework, and I understood what my professors said to me, but my challenge was speaking. I had to first translate everything into Spanish and then say it in English. Sometimes, when you try to translate a word into English, the translation is not quite the same.

Lucia reported having similar experiences as Rosa and stated that although she would understand what her professors were saying to her, she found it hard to respond. Lucia stated that when she had to translate everything from Spanish into English when communicating with others, it would not always translate properly, which would create some confusion when communicating with others, especially the professor. Another participant, Elena, also reported that her difficulty with English scared her, especially in her first semester. Elena stated, “at first, I was scared the first semester because my English is not that good, and I have grammar problems. But I passed all my classes with A’s and B’s.” Elena was able to demonstrate that although she was scared of her ability to communicate in English, she still was able to persevere and receive good grades (A’s and B’s).

Jeremy stated:

Many students do not participate in class because they have accents and if they don’t participate, they will not get credit in class and will not learn the language. If they don’t try, they will never try and will stay stagnant.

Based upon Jeremy's quote, he stated that if a student is worried or scared of their lack of ability to speak English or the level of their accent, they can experience a plethora of other barriers that include not learning the language over time, staying stagnant in their academic endeavors, and not having the ability to build a strong social support network on campus. Betsy, one of the FYE staff mentioned why Dominican students experience difficulties in English:

I can tell you as far as a Dominican is concern as part as my role with my other program, I can tell you that Dominican students some of them come academically prepared but when it comes to the English language, they don't come prepared. They struggle a lot with the writing skill and oral presentation skills. They also carry the impostor syndrome where they doubt their skills because of the language not because of their intellectual skills.

Cathy, one of the SSD instructors explained how languages are experienced within the university system:

...Many students who are English Language Learners, and maybe not large number but a fair number I guess less maybe a quarter or maybe more than that, those are two, no less than half Spanish dominant students. First language is Spanish and then among that group, fairly diverse, but large numbers of Dominicans and Puerto Rican students, but then students from other parts of Spanish-speaking worlds from Latin America and then a large number among black students of African students and first-generation immigrants and a large number of first-generation immigrants across ethnic and cultural groups.

Betsy's quote highlights that the college experiences multiple English as a Second Language Learners on campus, highlighting the importance of ensuring that these students are provided with appropriate support. From these experiences of the participants, the teachers, and college representatives, it is important that Dominican students are provided support for their English language skills just as much as their academic endeavors as the two appear strongly related based on the collected data.

In summary, this theme highlighted how the participants perceived having difficulties in English. Betsy, one of the FYE staff, reported that many Dominican students arrive on campus with a strong educational background; however, lack strong English skills to experience all the benefits of the classroom. Betsy's report of Dominican students' difficulties in English was substantiated by many participants, including Rosa, Lucia, Elena, and Jeremy, who all reported experiencing barriers in the classroom because of the difficulties that they experience in English.

Sub-Theme: Processing and Submitting Documents and Forms

The second sub-theme that emerged under the theme of barriers was that the participants perceived difficulties in processing and submitting necessary documents and forms to the university. The participants reported that submitting documents and forms was difficult regarding appealing academic decisions, applying for financial aid, and record keeping. For example, Jeremy reported that he struggled when submitting and processing forms that had to do with academic appeals. Jeremy stated:

The academic appeals process was the most challenging. Because it took a few steps to do. As I had to go a few times to the office and the process was not done, and they still asked me to submit more documents. I had to go a few times for the

same thing. He said this was the first time he had endured so many challenges taking care of an issue.

Per Jeremy, he reported that the process was not smooth; whenever he encountered problems, he had to continuously go to the office, where they would ask him to submit even more documents, making the appeal process quite timely and difficult. In addition, Jeff reported having problems with documents and forms when applying for financial aid. Jeff stated:

The first time I had to do the financial aid process, I had help from my counselor in high school. Uploading the documents was a bit difficult because the system (Filenet) was difficult to use, but then you sent me a video, which made it a little bit easier.

Jeff reported that it was a different experience than when he was in high school, as he stated that he had help from his counselor in high school. However, Jeff was able to report that within the institution, many of the forms are uploaded online, which is where he encountered many issues and problems. However, Jeff reported that they helped him by sending him a step-by-step video that explained the process, which did end up making it a little easier. Johnathan echoed the same thing that Jeff mentioned. She said that his high school counselor completed his TAP and PELL, and in college, he had to do it himself. He mentioned that he followed the instructions to upload the information using Filenet, but it was difficult to follow. He said,

I found the instruction difficult to follow. It wasn't user-friendly. It should have included a screenshot to make it easier for the reader. Also, once you uploaded the

documents, it buffered for a long time, and you never knew if the documents were sent because you never received a message indicating so.

Jessenia discussed how submitting forms was also difficult, no matter what form you are attempting to submit. She stated:

The process [submitting documents] depends on what type of process. It's a long process. It's not something that happens immediately. It takes time. It takes energy to actually come in and double-check that everything is okay. But when it comes to submitting the academic appeal and everything else that's like that's out of your hands.” When asked what type of documents are necessary to be submitted for an academic appeal Jessenia responded:

Well, you have to write a letter. Explain the problem, like why, your GPA is the way it is. If there's any drastic situation that happened, you would have to provide proof. For example, if a family member passed away and you had to leave the country, then you would have to provide the death certificate to give that as proof.

Jessenia depicted the process of submitting forms as difficult and long. She said “It is important to check everything to ensure that everything is included.” Additionally, Jessenia also mentioned that some students might not know that they are required to submit supplemental forms such as the writing of a letter or providing a death certificate if a family member has passed away. Having all the information clearly before filling out the forms will help students be more successful in submitting and processing forms.

Eddy, one of the SSD instructors, shed light on how students can experience difficulties submitting and processing documents and forms. He stated:

In terms of the record-keeping platforms that the institution utilizes, they have not operated as smoothly. As a result, sometimes what happens is, the student thinks they've completed a process that they haven't. Sometimes communication is high, which on one end, we might argue is great because we're keeping people informed but ignore that we might be bombarding students with so much information that they're missing out on the critical stuff which is specific to them, like financial aid.

Eddy was able to support many of the students' barriers when it came to submitting and processing forms by discussing how there can be a breakdown in communication or the fact that there is too much information and critical components of the submission process are missing. This is perhaps why Jeff reported that it was a little easier when the college sent him a video explaining the steps of submitting the form, as he was able to ensure that he submitted it properly.

In summary, this sub-theme highlighted how the participants perceived the submitting and processing of forms as a barrier. Many of the participants reported that there are multiple steps, unclear directions, and multiple forms that must be filled out. For example, Jeff stated that when he had difficulties filling out and submitting the forms online, he was provided a video that helped explain the process, which he reported made it a little easier. In addition, staff members of the college also report that some of the processes can be challenging, such as Eddy, who reported that there could be unclear

processes, communication breakdowns, or too much information for students to navigate to be truly successful.

Theme 4: Academic Support

The fourth theme that emerged from the dataset included the participants reporting the importance of academic support. Within this theme, two sub-themes emerged from the dataset: (a) supportive faculty and staff and (b) faculty and staff of similar ethnic backgrounds matter for students.

Sub-Theme: Supportive Faculty and Staff

The first sub-theme highlighted how the participants viewed the faculty and staff of the institution as being supportive. All the participants were able to discuss this sub-theme. For example, John reported that he experienced the staff and faculty being supportive and respectful. He spoke very highly about the faculty. He stated:

They [instructors] will explain what they are teaching if you don't understand.

They also have a unique way of embracing us. They like to tell you that they are here for you and also that if you have a question to join them during office hours.

Jonathan emphasized the willingness of the faculty members to help students and the "unique way of embracing students." He also mentioned that the faculty members encouraged students to go to office hours if they had any questions. This type of attitude and encouragement on the part of the faculty could encourage better communication and relationship between students and instructors. This is particularly important for Hispanic and black males as they tend not to seek help.

Rosa reported that she also found the faculty to be supportive and commented that it could be based upon the diversity of the employees. Rosa reported:

I really like [the university's] faculty. I feel like I could talk to them whenever I need help. I could go to their office hours as if I were their friend. The staff is very diverse, too. So, you know, I feel like they could understand the problems that I was going through. I don't have anything bad to say about them.

Rosa felt that she could connect with the university's faculty because of their diversity. She reported that she found that they could understand any barriers that she was experiencing, more than likely due to the diversity among faculty. This allowed Rosa to develop strong relationships with the faculty members to the point where she felt like a friend.

In addition, Lucia agreed with the other participants and stated that "I think that the professors at this institution are very nice and treat everyone the same." Similarly, Jeff reported that due to the supportive staff and faculty members, he found that they created safe spaces for him to study in. Jeff reported:

When I first got to [the university], I said, I love the faculty. I felt welcome. I felt comfortable walking in. I didn't feel, judged. I didn't feel uncomfortable. This is the office spot. Another place where I can feel safe if I needed to just come and do any little random assignments. I knew I had a spot there that I could use any time, you know, like that I felt good at all the time.

Elena appeared to agree with Jeff as she also reported that the faculty and staff are supportive because they do not appear to discriminate. Elena stated:

They are very helpful. And when you need help, they are there to help you. I don't know how to explain it, but they understand that my first language is not English, and they are very understanding. They don't discriminate against me because I have problems with my grammar and my writing. They work with you because they know that your first language is not English, so they work with you. They help you in that sense.

Some participants were asked how they felt their race or ethnic background played a role when interacting with faculty members and staff. These participants also reported that the staff continued to be respectful and supportive. For example, Ana stated:

I would say that I find this school to be very accepting to the Dominican culture, I would say I find a Dominican person everywhere in the hallway or in the classroom and I like to be surrounded by my community of course, and it is a pleasure to have a school where they accept all kinds of culture and background and all types of people from all over the world with different languages so it is just incredible.

Ana's quote aligns with other participants who discussed the diversity of the faculty and staff members, such as Rosa. Feeling respected in their culture, their ethnic and racial background, and their situations as students helps to create solid relationships with the faculty and staff. Eddy, who currently works as a teacher at the college, was able to discuss reasons why faculty and staff are supportive of their students. Eddy reported:

Something that instructors do well, some do well because I want to remove myself from this, because that's not my primary function. So I kind of want to

speak to people who serve as that primarily the professors that care about the student experience and are willing to sit down with the student and get to know the student and understand a little bit more about what is contributing to their experience, engagement, lack of engagement, whatever tends to create an atmosphere for students that makes them more compelled or willing to reengage upon disengagement. It's like when I have students who haven't gone to a class for weeks, and they're like, I have to drop everything, and my life is over, and I tell them to email professors, and then they have, Professor, that responds with empathy and curiosity and a desire to offer support and you know a way to kind of rectify Well, the student now recognizes that the institution as a whole, this willing to support their experience.

However, Betsy, one of the FYE instructors, reported that there are some problems with faculty members and staff within the college's systems because there is no specific support geared toward Dominican students or any other ethnic group. Betsy reported that all students are offered the same type of support from faculty and staff members, as it comes down to either office hour offered by the instructors or supplemental instruction in the form of tutors. Betsy stated, "instructors offer office hours. Some courses have supplemental instruction in the form of tutors. But there no special support for Dominican students or for any other ethnic group." Before, I continue, let me explain what I mean by SI. Some courses offer supplemental instruction. This means that the course has a built-in tutoring/ peer mentor who supports the students in the class throughout the semester. Classes that are identified to have SI are those classes that developmental but now they are taught as co-curricular. Therefore, the developmental course and the credit-

bearing course are both embedded as one. The peer mentor assists the student in understanding any class material that the student needs help with. Students also receive traditional tutoring from the Tutoring Center. However, there is no special tutoring, for instance, offered exclusively to first-year students or Dominican students. Since a large portion of students attending Quisqueya College are Dominicans, the researcher wanted to know if the college offered any tutoring specific to these two particular populations.

In summary, this sub-theme highlighted how all the participants reported that the faculty and staff they interacted with were always supportive. Some participants, such as John, stated that all faculty members were supportive and respectful; others, such as Lucia, Jeff, and Elena, reported that they treat everyone the same, are helpful and are welcoming. However, Betsy, who works at the institution, says that although the faculty and staff are supportive and welcoming to students, Dominican students experience the same supportive services of the faculty and staff, like any other students. For example, Betsy reported that instructor office hours and supplemental tutoring are offered to all students, highlighting that there are no supportive services geared directly to Dominican students.

Sub-Theme: Faculty and Staff of Similar Ethnic Backgrounds Matter to Students

The second sub-theme from the fourth theme of this study was that the participants reported that faculty and staff of similar ethnic backgrounds matter. For example, Jessenia was able to discuss how having a Dominican instructor, or professor can explain things to you in a way that you would understand simply by sharing a Dominican background. Jessenia stated:

I had an A in his class. Because when you have a professor that understands you, they will explain it to you the way that you would understand. Okay, let's just say 3 times 4 what is that you say you have 4 apples, and you want to multiply that. And then, you know they'll make it simple for you so you can understand it in your way of understanding.

Jessenia further reported that when sharing a Dominican background with a faculty member, there were times when they could speak Spanish to each other:

So being Dominican, it really just matters of like knowing who you are in your culture and how you connect with others. There will even be times when we would speak Spanish. Cause me being bilingual, sometimes I manage Spanish better than English, or vice versa. So whichever language I feel comfortable speaking or they are willing to hear me and understand me, I would speak.

Gisela also agreed with Jessenia and stated that when working with a Dominican faculty member, it was easier to connect with them while creating a sense of community. Gisela stated:

I know that oftentimes when I came across a Dominican faculty member, they were very warm, very friendly, very helpful. Ready to make connections for me, if necessary, and navigate and help me navigate. They were definitely more understanding. It was more sense of community.

Although Ana agreed with both Gisela and Jessenia, she was able to explain why having a Dominican faculty member mattered. Ana reported:

I feel that because you are Dominican and I am Dominican, we kind of connected because we are from the same place. We just accept people in a different way; kind of like family. We treat each other with respect, and if we need to talk, we are open, and that is what I like about us Dominicans.

Per Ana, when working with Dominican faculty members, they can make stronger connections, act like family, and treat each other with a higher level of respect. It is also important to note that other participants in this study could not comment on how having a faculty member with similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds mattered because they reported that they did not encounter these instructors or professors at the college.

In summary, under this theme, the participants reported that having a faculty member of a similar ethnic background mattered. The participants that contributed to this theme included Jessenia, Gisela, and Ana, whereas the other participants reported that they had never worked with a faculty member that identified as being Dominican. However, the three participants that contributed to this sub-theme highlighted that when working with a faculty member with a similar ethnic background, there is more room for increased trust, openness, understanding, and connections.

Theme 5: The Importance of Support Systems.

This theme emerged when the participants were asked about the support they received from family members and peers. This theme has two sub-themes: (a) connections and help from peers and (b) family emotional and financial support.

Sub-Theme: Connections and Help from Peers

All the students interviewed, even the ones that mentioned that they were introverted, affirmed that connections and peer support were important. This was the case with Rosa. When asked to speak about the connection she made with her peers and the support she received from them, she stated:

My peers, I think, were pretty influential because there are many Dominicans at this institution, and we are all going through the same thing. Even if they are not Dominicans, they are going through a similar situation that I am going through, and they can give me advice for a class, or they can help me with something that I didn't understand in class, or they can help me study for a class.

Rosa explicated the different kinds of support a student received from peers. The support ranged from social support, emotional support (e.g., “going through similar thing that I am going through.”), giving advice, and academic support (e.g., “help me study for a class.”).

Similarly, Jessenia, when the interviewer asked her whether her peers were supportive, she responded, “yes, we were always supportive of each other. We would meet in Zoom to do homework and do group work or just “hang-out.” Gisela, had a similar experience as Jessenia. When asked the same question regarding the importance of the support of peers during the first-year experience, Gisela, stated:

There was a sense of community among my peers, and everyone had a story to tell. So, we used our stories to kind of navigate what to do and not to do. As we met other students in similar situations, we could have those conversations. Also,

if a student didn't have a textbook, students were more than happy to allow others to make copies.

Katherine, a second-generation Dominican student who shares more of the characteristics of a first-generation Dominican student because she was sent to the Dominican Republic when she was four and returned to the United States when she was 16, in relation to this topic, explained that:

The students that I have met are very supportive. I compare the people that I have met here with the friends that I met in the Dominican Republic, and I find them to be different. I find them to be more mature. They are always there for me. I feel very comfortable with the people I have met.

When asked one of the first-year staff about her perception of the importance of peer connection and support during the first-year experience, Lisa, who has been working with FYE since 2018 and has been working with the institution and with first-year students since 2012 stated:

Peer support is very important. Having a friend, creating a cohort, or building engagement of students by taking the same classes, students can talk about their previous experiences because they may experience similar things and thus can create a sense of belonging with each other.

Additionally, Eddy, who has been working in the institution since 2014 and is also an academic advisor and a certified social worker, stated, "it is the type of peer support that is important. I don't think being present is simply enough". When asked to elaborate further, he explained:

The type of peer and family support which has been most effective with the students that I've worked with directly has come after the student has struggled with something, and the support system has been supportive, empathetic, and engaged. Not rigid in response to the student at that moment. That's when I think family and peer support has had the biggest impact.

Overall, students, staff, and instructors perceived that peer support is important for first-year students. Some students said that sharing similar stories, backgrounds, or experiences created a sense of community and sense of belonging.

Sub-Theme: Family Emotional and Financial Support

In general, it was evident from the students interviewed that they perceived that family support was important and that they felt supported by their family. For instance, one parent's support influenced one of the students to return to school after taking two gap years and not wanting to return after graduating from high school because she was terrified to start college due to her lack of English fluency. This was the case with Elena. She said that her father told her not to be embarrassed about her inability to speak English. He encouraged her to start college to learn and perfect her English skills. He told her:

Don't pay attention to what other people say about your English. You need to be proud that you know two languages; not everyone is bilingual. He also said that I would have more opportunities to be bilingual.

Similarly, Francisca also mentioned that her family was very supportive. She received the most support from her father, who died of cancer during her first semester of college. Her

father was also very influential in her life. She said, referring to her father, who told her, “You will always have my unconditional support.” In terms of family support, Gisela mentioned that she received the biggest support from her mother. However, she also noted that she received help from other family members as well. She said,

My biggest fan is my mom in terms of support. But everyone has been there for me emotionally and physically when it comes to taking care of me when I was ill, or they have been there to take care of my children.

Likewise, Jonathan, a second-generation Dominican, spoke highly about his mother by stating, “my mom is the best.” He added, “she encourages me to attend college. She has seen my mistakes, my trials, and errors, and she has been with me throughout the entire journey, and she is still proud of me.” Regarding the importance of family support, one of the SSD instructors, Kathy, stated,

It is super important, even just to have a sibling. I have a number of students where at least one sibling is either in college or has attended college, and that’s been really helpful for our students. That sibling oftentimes helps the student register, gives advice about professors, or helps the student navigate college.

The staff of the First Year Experience, Betsy, also expressed that family support is important in the first-year experience of Dominican students. She declared, “I think that having the support of your family is important, whatever the concept of family is for that student. Having a family member that would emotionally support you and encourage you to aim high is very important.” Only one of the students interviewed did not feel

supported by her parent. For example, Katherine felt she did not receive emotional support from her mother. She stated:

My mom does not understand that I am not the same person I was in high school. That I have changed. That I am not a little girl anymore. She is too overprotective, and when I stay late in school to study because I get less distracted there, she starts to fight with me and insults me.

Another student named Jeff felt that the support that he was receiving from his mother was not enough. He said, “I don’t think I received that much emotional support from my mom.” He once again expressed the little support that he received from his mom in another sentence. He mentioned, “I didn’t receive help from most of my family, but for those that did help, like my two brothers and my mom here and there, the little support felt super huge.” While Jeff states the insufficient support he received from his mom, he gave a shout-out to his two little brothers for their emotional and physical support. He said the following about his brothers:

On those stressful days when I couldn’t get the materials [understand assignments], my little brothers were definitely, like the two superheroes to save the day. They always had a joke, or they always had something lined up to make me laugh.

Regarding financial support, few students mentioned that they received financial support from their families. Most of the students interviewed worked at least part-time. Only three students did not work (e.g., Francisca, John, and Katherine). Rosa was the only student who mentioned that she received financial assistance from her parents, who

support her from the Dominican Republic. Rosa lives with her aunt in Brooklyn, and her parents live in the Dominican Republic. Therefore, her parents sent her money to support herself in the United States. All the other students interviewed worked at least part-time while attending school, and some of them helped their parents financially. Thus, they cannot expect financial assistance from them. Gisela illustrated this point when she said:

My family provides me with lots of physical and emotional support. But we all have financial obstacles. I am the main breadwinner of the family. Therefore, they helped me with my children so I could go to school and work and could help them financially.

Francisca also mentioned that her father provided her with unconditional emotional and physical support but could not help her financially. She said, “mi padre me dijo que ya que él no podía dejarme dinero, la única herencia que él me podía dejar era una buena educación.” Loosely translated, her father told her that “since he could not provide her with money, the only inheritance that he could leave her with was a good education.” Likewise, Ana also mentioned her family’s inability to help her financially during her first-year experience. She commented:

I felt like my parents gave me emotional comfort, but they didn’t really help me out financially. They could only give me “el apoyo,” “the support.” Such as if I needed money for the train, lunch, or the best non-monetary support they could because they were not able to help me financially. Like Ana, Katherine also mentioned that she did not receive financial support from her mother during her first year of college. She said her mother was not financially able to help her. She disclosed, “I applied for College

Discovery because it would provide me with additional financial assistance every semester, and I could use the extra financial help that the program offered.”

Overall, the students interviewed perceived that family emotional support was important during their first-year experience and received support from their families. Only one student claimed she did not receive emotional support from her family. Another student felt that the support that he received from his mother was not enough. The emotional or physical support received from family ranged from encouraging students to return to college after taking two gap years after completing high school to helping take care of students’ children to encouraging students to be proud of themselves and not be ashamed of their accent or lack of English skills or showing the students that they were proud of them.

Regarding financial support, only two of the students interviewed stated that they received financial support from their parents. Rosa receives financial support from her parents from the Dominican Republic, and Jeff mentioned that he had received some financial support from his family during his first year. The other students mentioned they did not receive financial support from their parents.

Conclusion

The data in this case study told a story of the perceptions of first-year Dominican students in a community college in NYC. Methods of data collection included sixteen participants. The participants consisted of four students who did not return from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022 and four who continued from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022. All students were individually interviewed. In addition, two instructors who taught the SSD 100

course and two staff members from the First Year Experience were also individually interviewed. Finally, a focus group consisting of five students were also interviewed.

The findings, based on the themes that emerged and the corresponding subthemes, revealed that Dominican students face numerous pressures during their first-year experience caused by aspirational and life circumstances. In addition, they have difficulty finding time to participate in social activities, and at the same time, they find that participation in clubs and social activities is important. However, some students commented that social activities should be done cautiously; when the student has the time to do them. Otherwise, it can affect the student's performance in school. Furthermore, this study found that Dominican students faced barriers in the form of language and processing and submitting forms. Moreover, academic support in the form of supportive faculty and staff was important to students. They also found that faculty and staff of similar ethnic backgrounds matter to students. Lastly, this study found that support systems in the form of peers and family and financial support and important.

The findings of this case study responded to the three research questions proposed in this study. The first research question investigated how first-year Dominican students described their first-year experience, and themes 1, 2, and 3 with their corresponding subthemes responded to this question.

In theme 1: First Year Pressures, the data demonstrated that during their first-year experience, some students felt numerous pressures manifesting from different situations, such as working, being parents, lack of English fluency, running their own business, caring for a family member, needing to be role models or having pressure being the first one in the family to attend college. In the corresponding subtheme, a) aspirational

pressures, students discussed some of their experiences during their first year of college. Those experiences included personal responsibilities or responsibilities with their children or other family members, challenges, excitement, a sense of pride, lack of motivation, and trepidation. Some students impose these aspirational pressures on themselves because they want their parents and other family members to be proud of them. Subtheme b) life circumstances, captured the pressures that students experienced due to situations outside of their control or due to their environment based on the circumstances they were facing at that moment. The findings demonstrated that most students faced life circumstances that affected their performance in school.

In theme 2: Social Participation, the participants discussed the importance of social participation. They provided information about their experiences and perceptions of the importance of social participation, and two subthemes emerged due to the information that they provided: a) difficulty finding time to participate in social activities. In this subtheme, most participants reported that they found it difficult to participate in social activities. However, they also found that participating in clubs and other types of social activities was also important, which led to the emergence of subtheme: b) engagement and inclusion through clubs and the importance of it.

The second research question in this study investigated what institutional supports, including academic support, Dominican students described as influencing their decision to remain or leave during their first year and theme 4: faculty and staff and its two corresponding subthemes: a) supportive faculty and staff, and b) faculty and staff of similar background matter to students responded to this question. Under the subtheme, a) supportive faculty and staff, the participants viewed the faculty and staff of the institution

as being supportive. Some of them mentioned that instructors encouraged them to go to office hours if something was not clear or if they needed to talk to them. The last subtheme in this section supports the literature that having b) faculty and staff of similar background mattered to students (Basile & Murray, 2015; Herrmann et al., 2016; Santos & Reigadas, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017; & Brooms, 2018). The students interviewed in this study indicated that having a Dominican faculty member made them feel a sense of belonging. One of them explained that the instructor was able to explain classes in a way that the student was able to understand. Another student said that the teacher made her feel like “family”.

The last research question investigated in this study was, what external supports, including family, community, and peer relationships, impact Dominican students’ perceptions of retention? And theme 5: The importance of support systems and its corresponding subthemes: a) connections and help from peers, and b) family emotional and financial support, responded to this question. All the students interviewed, even the ones that mentioned that they were introverted, affirmed that connections and peer support were important. With respect to family emotional support, all students except one of them felt supported by their families. Regarding financial support, only two students mentioned that their families could help them financially. Only one student mentioned that her parents provided her with financial assistance. Another student mentioned that he had received some financial assistance from family members during his first year of college. In general, students did not receive financial support from their families.

CHAPTER 5

This qualitative study was designed to discover how first-year Dominican students perceived their first year of college and how these perceptions impacted their retention at a community college in New York City. This chapter will provide a discussion based on the three research questions that guided this study:

1. How do first-year Dominicans describe their first-year experience?
2. What institutional supports, including academic supports, do Dominican students describe as influencing their decision to remain or leave during their first year?
3. What external supports, including family, community, and peer relationships, impact Dominican students' perceptions of retention?

To obtain an understanding from different stakeholders (students, faculty, and staff) the researcher utilized a case study methodology. Several authors in the literature supported the involvement of faculty and staff in aiding student retention (Strayhorn, 2017; Brooms, 2018; Luis et al., 2020).

Methods of data collection included a total of sixteen participants. The participants consisted of four students who returned from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022 and four students who did not continue from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022. All students were individually interviewed. In addition, the researcher conducted a focus group consisting of five students. One of the participants from the focus group was interviewed for an in-depth, one-on-one interview. The students were selected from a freshmen SSD 100 course, which acted as a learning community for freshmen orientation and was a required course for all entering students accepted into the College Discovery Program. Two SSD

instructors and two First Year Experience Committee staff members were also individually interviewed.

In analyzing the data, five themes emerged within the context of the research questions. The first theme that emerged was first-year pressures, reflecting the multiple pressures afflicting students during their first year. Under this theme, two sub-themes emerged: (a) aspirational pressure and (b) life circumstances. The second theme that developed was social participation, which was accompanied by two sub-themes: (a) difficulty finding time to participate in social activities and (b) engagement and inclusion through clubs and their importance of it. This theme showed the multiple challenges faced by students in trying to participate in school while navigating multiple responsibilities. The third theme was barriers. This theme illustrated students' perceptions of the barriers they faced during their first year of college within this institution. The barriers that emerged were elaborated on and supported in these two sub-themes: (a) difficulty with English and (b) processing and submitting documents and forms. The fourth theme that arose was academic support. This theme had two sub-themes: (a) supportive faculty and staff and (b) faculty and staff of similar ethnic backgrounds matter for students. The final theme that emerged was the importance of support systems. This theme has two sub-themes: (a) connections and help from peers (b) family and emotional and financial support.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research Question 1

Theme 1: First-Year Pressures

Subtheme: Aspirational Pressures. The first research question in this case study examined how Dominican students described their first-year experience in a community college in New York City. The analysis of the data of the 12 students interviewed demonstrated that students felt numerous pressures manifesting from different situations, such as working, being parents, lack of English fluency, running their own business, caring for a family member, needing to be role models, or experiencing stress from being the first person in their family to attend college. The two sub-themes that emerged on the topic of pressures, expanded on what Dominican students experienced during their first year: (a) aspirational circumstances and (b) life circumstances.

It was evident from the data on aspirational pressures, that Dominican students wanted to succeed or accomplish their degree. They appeared ambitious and driven, they wanted to be the first person in their family with a degree, they wanted to be role models to their siblings, they wanted to be entrepreneurs and have the business knowledge to do so, and they wanted to graduate from community college and didn't want to waste time. However, they reported that *life circumstances* happened

There was nothing in the literature that spoke to the topic of aspirational pressures. Even after the researcher conducted several searches using search engines and some professional publications. I believe that this is research has contributed to a new topic in the literature of Dominicans that needs to explored further.

Subtheme: Life Circumstances. The theme of life circumstances captured the pressures the students experienced due to situations outside of their control or due to their environment based on the circumstances they were facing at the moment. The findings demonstrated that most students faced life circumstances that affected their performance in school. Some of these life circumstances included students becoming caregivers for parents or other family members (e.g., autistic children), and the need to take care of their children. Their life circumstances made it difficult for them to be socially active in school. Many of the participants provided information about their experiences and perceptions of the importance of social participation, and two subthemes emerged due to the information that they provided: (a) difficulty finding time to participate in social activities and (b) engagement and inclusion through clubs and the importance of it. Life circumstances align with Bronfenbrenner's theory which emphasizes the importance of studying individuals in multiple environments known as the ecological systems, to understand their development. For example, taking the case of the student with the autistic child, that child is in the mother's microsystem. However, what is happening in her microsystem (taking care of her son) is affecting her mesosystem (school). The ecological system is the interaction between the individual and the dynamic setting surrounding them (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Life circumstances in the form of financial stress and having to attend work while in school is also supported by the literature (Britt et al., 2016).

Theme 2: Social Participation

Subtheme: Difficulty Finding Time to Participate in Social Activities. Under this theme, most participants reported that it was challenging finding the time to participate in

social activities. The reasons varied from one student to the next. For example, one student reported taking five classes and wanted to acclimate to his surroundings and the academic rigor before taking any extra-curricular activities. In essence, he wanted to see how he would perform academically before taking on additional responsibilities.

Similarly, other students worked while attending school and could not participate in social activities. Some students even reported working full-time jobs. The finding that Hispanic students - particularly male students- find it challenging to participate in social activities in college, aligns with Luis et al., (2020). He stated that family structure and economic conditions often pull them toward working to help out the family. Another student reported that there was a combination of reasons that kept her from joining social activities during her first-year experience. Some of those reasons included being a parent and working to support herself and her family. Another student mentioned that she had to take care of her father, who was diagnosed with cancer. She reported that she attended classes in the evening so that she could care for her father in the morning. Then her mother could take care of her father in the evening while she was in school.

Although none of the authors spoke directly about the stress caused by that having to work, it is assumed that there is an inherent level of stress in having to work while going to school or while doing so many responsibilities. However, they all agreed that financial assistance contributes to graduation.

Subtheme: Engagement and Inclusions Through Clubs and the Importance of it. In the subtheme engagement and inclusion through clubs and the importance of it, students realized the importance of being included and engaged with clubs affiliated with the college. They discussed how being connected to a club was important. However, some

students were cautious about joining clubs in their first semester as they wanted to see how they would perform academically before participating in any extra-curricular activities; therefore, they reported that they would join during their second semester. In general, the participants reported many benefits to joining a club on campus, as it could promote a more robust college experience.

This finding aligns, with Van Ora's (2019) findings which confirmed that a study on first-year community college students concluded that the rise in student retention and success could be attributed to the exposure of a social and intellectual community. Therefore, joining a social club could contribute to student retention. Attending tutoring is another form of social interaction and contributes to retention. However, due to lack of time, students were not able to join academic support such as tutoring that have proven to contribute to retention. This is supported by a study conducted by Carr and London (2019) which supported that tutoring contributed to retention. Similarly, a study by Gabrielle-Millet (2016) arrived at the same conclusion.

Theme 3: Barriers

Subtheme: Difficulty with English. First-year Dominican students described having barriers during their first-year experience. Some of those barriers manifested as (a) difficulty with English and (b) processing and submitting documents and forms. Since many of the students attending the institution selected for this study were first-generation Dominican students who had been in the country less than ten years, needed help with English. Many participants reported having difficulty with English, which in turn, affected other areas of their academic journey and class performance. For example, some

students reported that they were shy when it came to their language abilities and that may have prevented them from participating in classes.

Laverick (2018) supports that freshman experience some kind of roadblock in their first semester of study that can hinder their academic performance. She expressed that for international students those roadblocks are heightened because of their inability to Speak English or write papers, take notes during classes, etc. Processing and Submitting Documents and Forms.

The other barrier that students discussed was the processing and submitting documents and forms. The participants reported that submitting documents and forms took more work when it came to appealing academic decisions, applying for financial aid, and record keeping. One student stated that the academic appeals process could have been smoother. The student reported that the process took many steps to be completed. One student cited that completing the academic appeal process took a lot of time and energy. The student mentioned that they had to write a letter indicating what they would do differently in the upcoming semester to improve their grade point average (GPA). The student also mentioned that they had to write what happened that caused their GPA to decrease and also provide proof of any medical or personal situation that they claimed occurred that contributed to their low academic performance. They have to rehash everything that happened that contributed to their low performance all over again. The counselors who are certified social workers stated during the interview that this could lead to trauma. Other students stated that Filenet (the software used to upload documents such as financial aid.) could have been more user-friendly. They alleged that it was difficult to use.

There was nothing in the literature that supported this finding. However, this topic can be supported by Laverick's (2018) statement that first-year students experience some sort of roadblock in their first semester of study.

Perhaps, this finding is unique to this institution because of the lack of investment in software that can effectively upload students' information. Maybe it happens in other institutions, but the problem has not been captured, and this finding is contributing a new topic to the literature. In summary, for question number one, first-year Dominican students perceived their first year of college as having pressures due to aspirational and life circumstances. They also cited the importance of social participation and the difficulty of finding time to participate in social activities. Some reasons for their lack of participation were their multiple responsibilities and the demand for their time. However, students also noticed the importance of participating in social activities. Some of them were cautious about participating during their first semester, as they wanted to focus on their academic performance during their first semester before joining any extra-curricular activities.

Other students cited barriers such as difficulty with English and processing and submitting documents. Some students indicated that not having English skills did not provide them with the confidence to participate in class, which in some classes, affected their grades. Processing and submitting documents was another issue that Dominican students perceived as a barrier during their first year of college. The participants reported that submitting documents and forms was difficult regarding appealing academic decisions, applying for financial aid, and record keeping. Some of the reasons cited were

that the software used to upload the documents (Filenet) could have been more user-friendly. They also reported that the process was not smooth and took numerous steps.

Research Question 2

Theme 4: Academic Support

Subtheme: Supportive Faculty and Staff. The second research question in this case study examined the institutional supports that Dominican students described as influencing their decision to remain or leave during their first year. The findings demonstrated that the participants needed to know of any academic support specific to new or Dominican students. The only services that the students were aware of were those offered by College Discovery, which is the program that offered the SSD 100 course. One student mentioned that she was aware of the college's tutoring center, but I reminded her that those services were not exclusive to first-year students. Further findings revealed that students viewed the institution's faculty as supportive and respectful. One of the students interviewed, mentioned that instructors had a unique way of embracing students, and they encouraged students to attend office hours if they needed extra support. Another student mentioned that she could talk to her professors as if they were friends. This student also added that the staff was supportive and that it could be because they were diverse. She stated, "the staff [referring to faculty] is very diverse, so I feel like they could understand the problems that I was going through." This finding of supportive faculty and staff was supported by the literature. They all conclude that it contributed to retention. (Rodriguez, et al., 2016; Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Leslie, 2020).

Subtheme: Faculty and Staff of Similar Ethnic Backgrounds Matter to Students. The participants also stated that faculty and staff of similar backgrounds mattered to students.

Three of the students interviewed explained that having a Dominican instructor made their learning individualized or specific to them; they felt welcomed and accepted. The student participants also felt a sense of community and belonging. For example, one of the student participants interviewed explained how having a Dominican instructor or professor could explain things to Dominican students in a manner that they understood, simply by sharing a Dominican background.

This finding was supported by a few authors in the literature. Luis et al., (2020) support this subtheme. The authors suggested that when Latino males begin to navigate their college experience, they begin to seek successful individuals that share their same background. Basile and Murray (2015) indicated that diversity in faculty is critical to inspiring young African American and Latino students to become STEM professionals. Moschetti et al., (2017) indicated that students with mentors of the same ethnic background viewed their mentors to be more supportive in improving their personal and career development. Santos and Reigadas's (2016) finding revealed that students with same-ethnic mentors reported much higher program satisfaction.

Research Question 3

Theme 5: The Importance of Support Systems

Subtheme: Family Emotional and Financial Support. The third research question in this study examined external supports, including family, community, relationships, that impacted Dominican students' perception of retention. The findings concluded that participants perceived that family support was important and felt supported by their family. This finding aligns with Preuss's et al. (2020) findings which stated that Hispanic students consider their parents as their first role model and look for their support. Only

one of the student participants interviewed reported that they did not feel supported by her parent. This student stated that she did not feel that she received emotional support from her mother. Another student felt that the support that he was receiving from his mother was not enough. He stated, “I don’t think I receive that much emotional support from my mom.” Another student participant mentioned that because of the support that she received from her father was the reason why she was now in college. A student also mentioned that she was out of school for two years right after high school as she did not want to come to college because she was embarrassed by her lack of English fluency and did not feel comfortable speaking it. Similarly, another student participant also mentioned that her family was very supportive, and she received the most support from her father. One particular student spoke highly about his parents and their support. This student stated, “my mom is the best. She has seen my mistakes, my trials, and errors, and she has been with me throughout the entire journey, and she is still proud of me.” The topic of financial support was supported by the literature. Gil (2016) for example recommended that institutions should provide targeted financial assistance to admitted Latino students to help them navigate and continue schooling. Furthermore, Guzman (2016) spoke about the impact of finances on Latino students pursuing postsecondary education. He concluded that Latino students receiving any form of financial aid to attend community college were more likely to continue their education than those who did not.

Subtheme: Connection and Help from Peers. All students interviewed mentioned that connections and peer support were important. For instance, when asked to speak about the connections she made with her peers and the support she received from them, Ana, mentioned that they (peers) were very influential. Similarly, Jessenia, Katherine, and

Gisela also affirmed that peers are a source of support and contribute to sense of belonging.

The theme of supportive peers aligns with Tinto's (1993) theory that a structure of peers helps students ease into the unfamiliarity of academic rigor. Strayhorn (2017) identified peers as having a significant role in contributing to the support of first-year students. Gasman et al., (2017) also indicated that having a supportive peer group could be helpful since peer groups can provide useful suggestions and solutions to common problems.

This study also responded to the theoretical theories that guided the research. The two theoretical frameworks for this case study involved Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and sense of belonging. Bronfenbrenner's theory affirmed that human beings should be understood as multiple nested systems and that their development results from complex interactions between individuals and various systemic components that influence each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In essence, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system asserts that the systems or environments that individuals grow up in affect every facet of their life. This has been highlighted through the results of this study, where the participants reported different backgrounds that have influenced the choices that they have made when attending college. For example, many participants reported the importance of peers and family support. Family is represented by the microsystem in Bronfenbrenner's theory. Thus, the microsystem played a big role in students' life. Some participants stated that they had to take care of their ill parents, while others had to ensure that they took time completing responsibilities as parents.

Additionally, it was the foundational product of their lives that was also important to view, as many participants stated that their parents urged them to attend college so that they could go on to have a successful life; something that their parents were not able to obtain. It was through this theory that the participants reported major influences on their lives, current circumstances, and the foundation of their families. In this study, we can also see how students are affected by their mesosystem. This system, according to Bronfenbrenner's theory, encompasses the interactions between school and home and how environments are intrinsically connected. The findings of the study revealed that whatever affects the household (home) also affects the school environment. For instance, one of the students mentioned that she had to register for evening classes when her father became ill so that she could take care of him in the morning. Also, one student mentioned that since her son is Autistic, and needs to attend many appointments with therapists, she is not able to participate in social activities in school. Once again, we see the interconnection of the mesosystem and how one affects the other. The student mentioned that night classes were not ideal because they prevented her from participating in social activities and many other aspects of college life. Another student mentioned that he had not seen his father since he was five-year-old, and he misses him. He mentioned that he sought the support of "father-like" role models in school. He is the same student who mentioned that he wants to be a good role model to his two brothers and the same student who mentioned that he doesn't feel that his mother gives him enough attention.

The other theoretical framework used in this case study was sense of belonging. Sense of belonging permeated the different environments that students were exposed to in and outside of school. For instance, Katherine, mentioned that joining the Math club

(although she hated Math however, her professor encouraged her to join the club) brought her a sense of belonging by creating a new group of friends that were fun, and accepting of her.

In terms of sense of belonging, the findings of this study highlighted how the students felt a strong sense of belonging and community when they were working with an instructor that was of a Dominican background, as there were increased understanding of their life circumstances. Having someone that reflected their culture, norms, and language made the students felt comfortable. For example, one students mentioned that she felt comfortable when she could speak Spanish with her Dominican professor. Also another student mentioned that she felt that her Dominican faculty member were friendly, and were very helpful. Another indication of sense of belonging in this study was related to the way the students felt in general about college's faculty. Students stated that the college's faculty created a sense of belonging. All students stated that the professors treated all students the same. One student mentioned that professors made her feel welcome when she first came to college.

In this study Dominican students learned to navigate their various and sometimes complexed environments (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem), and having a sense of belonging helped them adjust and integrate into their college environment which for some of them, lead to their retention. Lack of sense of belonging was highlighted within this study when the participants reported that there were no current supports that were exclusive to that of Dominican students; all student supports of the institution were offered to all students. A sense of belonging and sense of community appeared to be important constructs within the findings of this study, as with

barriers that they experienced, such as their limited ability in English, appeared to decrease their ability to form such belonging while on campus.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify how first-year Dominican students perceived their first year of college and how those perceptions impacted their retention. However, the narrow focus of this study precluded the generalizability of the findings. This was one of the first limitations experienced in this study. This case study only examined one institution; therefore, future research should compare more than one community college with a similar population to understand the broader perspectives of how first-year Dominicans perceive their first-year experience and how their perspective influences their retention. In addition, this study did not compare first-generation Dominican's perspectives vs. second-generation Dominican's perspectives. Future research should explore the perspectives of these two groups to understand if there is a difference in perspectives and outcomes between the two generational groups.

In addition, this case was limited in that it only researched Dominican students in their first year of college. Further retention studies should include a longitudinal qualitative and quantitative study following students from their first year until they graduate from their community college. This would provide a broader perspective of students' lived experiences from their first-year experiences and all the other experiences that take place throughout their educational journeys. Another limitation of this study was the purposeful sampling. The sample of student participants was selected through purposeful sampling since all participants were recruited from the College Discovery Program, which was a small support program only available to students who met New

York State's low-income guidelines. Selecting a broader sample size from the general student population would provide more heterogeneous when it comes to Social Economic Status (SES), high school GPA or incoming class standing, and even their generation college student's ranking. These may in turn provide a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of their first-year experience. This would in essence provide a more realistic representation of the population.

A final limitation of this study could have included the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic altered the way that institutions of higher education provided services to their students, including both academic and social support. At times during the pandemic, institutions of higher education had to follow specific social distancing and quarantining guidelines that could have affected the way in which first-year Dominican students experienced their educational journeys. In addition, COVID-19 could have affected retention rates, as previous research has depicted that, in general, college enrollment and retention decreased (Dennis, 2020; Swani et al., 2022). Therefore, future research could focus on Dominican students and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their intentions to remain or end their college careers.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Recommendation at the College Level

While support services are essential for students to successfully navigate the educational higher educational system, the finding of this study revealed that first-year students were unaware of any support services available to them such as tutoring, the writing center, etc. Therefore, the institution needs to make intentional efforts to ensure that students are aware of those services. Making these services available exclusively to

first-year students will make them feel as if they are an integral part of the institution, which in turn could increase their sense of belonging which was supported by the literature (Castleman & Meyer, 2017; Luis et al., 2020; van Herpen et al., 2020).

The second recommendation has to do with appeals. Students expressed difficulties when appealing academic decisions. Students reported that the process was not smooth and that they had to submit documents multiple times. The college should ensure that the academic appeals process is manageable, as this prevented students who were trying to readmit from returning to the institution. The institution should investigate what is causing such problems and invest in software or personnel that can mitigate these problems, especially for students representing marginalized groups.

Recommendation at the State Level

The third recommendation is related to the theme of lack of English fluency or difficulty in understanding English. This was a main barrier that recurred among many of the first-generation Dominicans interviewed in this research. To meet Dominican students' academic needs, instructors, policymakers and researchers should develop a curriculum that promotes the student population's cultural identities. This was supported in the literature (Valenzuela, 1999). stated that students must not be put in a subtractive schooling situation, where success is achieved at the expense of giving up their culture, i.e, their native language and other aspects of their identity. Instead, she states that effective schooling must allow them to retain their proficiency in Spanish and the ways of that linguistic exchange. Using the student's native language as a bridge to continue to support the student while the student acquires their English skills is one way to go about this. In addition, the institution should work closely with the Department of Education to

create initiatives and collaboration to address or mitigate these issues before students arrive at the college. Such as offering summer Bridge programs starting in the high schools taught by college professors offering English language.

Another way that the institution can mitigate this barrier is to work at pairing Dominican students with Dominican instructors. The literature supported that (Herrmann et al., 2016; Luis et al., 2020 Santos & Reigadas, 2016) that having faculty and other institutional agents of the same ethnic or gender background contributes to students' sense of belonging, retention, and overall academic achievement. Many of the participants in this study reported that when working with an instructor that was Dominican, they experienced increased individualized learning or experiences that were specific to them. In turn, the participants reported that this made them feel welcomed and accepted, which increased their sense of community and belonging. By working to increase Dominican students with Dominican faculty whenever possible, the institution can increase their students' sense of belonging and community, which in turn could work toward increasing their retention.

Students in this study indicated that they wanted to take part in the school's social activities (such as being part of clubs, or attend workshops, etc.,) but were not able because they had to work outside of the institution. Therefore, the fourth recommendation is that the institution should work with policymakers such as City, State, Federal, and philanthropic agencies to build a sustainable budget/foundation to create jobs for students to work on campus. Last spring, the institution created something similar to this suggestion but it only provides students 10 hours a week at \$20 dollars an hour. Although this is a great beginning, this initiative is only able to accept a handful of students. More

efforts need to be made to bring more funding in order to hire more students and give them more hours.

The last recommendation is that some students indicated that they were not able to participate in social activities because they had children and they had no one to care for their children or they did not have enough help. To that end, the City, State, and Federal governments, and philanthropists, should come together to invest in providing funding to increase personnel for childcare services to cover night classes and take infants. Most childcare centers in community colleges only cover the hours of the traditional students (9-5), leaving the non-traditional students, without childcare. This would prevent them from having to make the tough decision of deciding whether to continue with their degree or drop out because of a lack of childcare. The college's daycare should find ways to serve the evening students. Not providing childcare for their evening students could cause some students to withdraw from school or not return like it happened to Gisela, the student in this study.

Many students in the study expressed having difficulty with the language and also mentioned that they did not receive financial assistance from their family members while in school. These language problems, for some students, started in high school and continued through college. Policymakers and educators must understand that without adequate attention and support to the language development needs, economic, academic, social and emotional of ELL students, they will take longer to graduate or, even worse, discontinue their education. Thus providing adequate support to schools and instructors to help the ELL students acquire the English fluency necessary to participate in and outside of classes is both economically sound and morally responsible.

This research shed light on the numerous challenges affecting Dominican students during their first year in college in a community college in New York City and the lessons learned from this research can benefit other community colleges and Hispanic students, ELL students, and even African American students since they also experience retention challenges.

Recommendation for Further Study

For this research, the researcher focused on first and second-generation Dominican students. One recommendation for further study would be to conduct research on the third-generation Dominican to discover how much this generation is holding on to their roots/culture, language, norms, etc. Perhaps, conduct a comparative study comparing third-generation Dominican students with third-generation Hispanic students from other Latin American countries to determine which ones are holding more to their roots/culture, language, etc. Future research should explore how researcher identify and their positionality in their research when it comes to their Dominican identity. Do they consider themselves indigenous-insider or indigenous-outsider?

Conclusion

One important takeaway from the findings of this study is that although Hispanic Serving Institutions were designated in 1992 by the federal government to service Latina/o students, these students are still struggling facing the barriers mentioned in this study. Some HSI are just “Hispanic Enrolling Institutions” and not Hispanic Serving Institutions as stated by Calderon Galdeano et al. (2012) and Contreras et al. (2008). The college selected for this study was an HSI, and one of the themes that emerged was English barrier. Moving from simply enrolling Hispanic students to effectively serving

them requires an institution to recognize, embrace, and enhance the racial and cultural ways of knowing of Latina/o students (Garcia, 2017). Therefore, recognizing the complexities of embracing and enhancing the language skills of Hispanic students, HSIs, should move forward legitimizing the language diversity among Latino students, which will ultimately translate into effectively serving them. Enrolling and serving students are not the same thing. Hispanic Serving Institutions should be accountable for the students they are bringing into their institutions and should provide them with the support they need to ensure their retention and ultimately graduation.

The purpose of this study was to identify how Dominican students perceived their first-year experience and how those perceptions impacted their retention at a community college in the New York City. There is scant literature on Dominican students and retention. Therefore, it is critical to understand how Dominican students navigate their first year of college in order to investigate what is working or not working for them. It is also important that researchers continue to do more research in the area of retention and the Dominican population. Researching this population and listening to their stories helps to give a voice to their issues and bring about awareness to policymakers and hopefully solutions to their challenges. In this study, twelve freshmen students enthusiastically shared their first-year experience at Quisqueya college and the results of their sharing produced findings that expanded the literature on this group.

One of the findings was that faculty of the same ethnic background matter to students. The students in this study mentioned that having a Dominican faculty was important to students. They mentioned that it contributed to sense of belonging and that Dominican faculty were able to explain the materials in a way that they were able to

understand. However, only two of the twelve students interviewed had a Dominican faculty as an instructor. The faculty members at this institution, is not representative of the student body at the institution. Quisqueya College needs more Latina/o faculty. How can this institution be an effective HSI without adequate Hispanic representation, particularly Dominican faculty representation when the highest representation of students are Dominican students? Latina/o and faculty of color are more likely to understand the needs of the students of color and incorporate their ways of knowing into the classroom (Garcia, 2019).

Childcare was also an issue for some of the students in this study. Therefore, this is also an opportunity to reflect as an HSI, of the support that is necessary for the students that they are bringing into the institutions. It is just not enough to bring them; the institution needs to think about how to keep them by providing them services that each distinct student needs in order to graduate. Remember, the goal of an HSI should not be to enroll the student, but to provide them with the service they need once they are in the college.

This study has not only contributed to the literature on Dominican students in community colleges, but it is the hope of the researcher that this study has contributed to the literature on the challenges and issues affecting other Hispanic students, such as ELL students, student parents, and students with financial barriers. This research has identified new themes that have not been previously explored and have contributed to the literature. Furthermore, having the stakeholders understand the first-year pressures that Dominican students experience can help them address the barriers not only for Dominican students but also for other students. Without addressing the needs of the students once they are in

college, they will continue to struggle when accessing and participating in higher education, leading to a continuation decrease in retention and graduation. It is imperative that stakeholders work to bridge the gap and barriers that students are experiencing on campus so that Dominican students or any students struggling in school can have a strong and successful educational journey.

While HSIs need to be accountable for providing targeted services to the students they bring into their institutions, it is also important to note that HSIs have gotten shortchanged from state and federal dollars to provide the services they were created to provide. While the growing number of HSIs suggests their increasing critical role in educating underrepresented students, funding trends have not kept pace with institutional needs, according to organizations that advocate for and monitor some MSI groups. These trends have been exacerbated by the sequester – a cluster of cuts to federal spending that took effect in March 2013 (Mathews, 2013). Furthermore, what some media outlets have termed “sequestering minority education,” HSIs are likely to face even deeper cuts than the average college & universities due to the additional funding they have become accustomed to competing for since 1999 (Domonell, 2013). The president and CEO of the Hispanic Association for College and Universities (HACU), noted that, as HSIs are typically allotted 66 cents to the rest of the country’s post secondary’s institutions’ dollar-per students every year, the cuts will be particularly damaging to students who attend these institutions in terms of their rates of recruitment, support, and completion (HACU, 2012).

Based on the information stated above, students attending HSIs may be facing double jeopardy, as the college or university they have selected to attend may not be able

to provide them with the support they need to successfully graduate due to lack of accountability for their students or due to underfunding by state and federal dollars to be able to provide adequate services.

APPENDIX A IRB Approval



Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Jun 8, 2022 1:29:13 PM EDT

PI: Maria C. Cano

CO-PI: Catherine DiMartino

The School of Education, Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2022-349** *How Do First-Year Dominican Students Perceive Their First Year of College and How Do These Perceptions Impact their Retention*

Dear Maria Cano:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *How Do First-Year Dominicans Students Perceive Their First Year of College and How Do These Perceptions Impact their Retention*. The approval is effective from June 7, 2022 through June 6, 2023.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B Letter of Consent for Focus Group



Dear participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate how first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention. This study will be conducted by Maria C. Cano, a current third-year doctoral student at St. John's University. As part of this study, the researcher will be interviewing Dominican students to listen to their collective voices and experiences. Your participation will contribute to this study and to the literature on Dominican students in higher education.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual focus group interview consisting of 4-5 Dominican students and the researcher. The focus group session will consist of 4-6 short open-ended questions and the interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded so that the data can be transcribed and analyzed. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. The recording will only be used by the researcher. Please note that your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.

Your identity as a participant will remain confidential. To protect your identity, the researcher will not use your name in any written reports. A pseudonym will be used in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant. This consent form will be stored securely on a password-protected computer in the researcher's home. Any electronic or digital data (audio-recordings) will be written down and analyzed, and the recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study.

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Maria C. Cano, at 646-831-9944 [REDACTED] maria.cano18@my.stjohns.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a human participant, you may contact the University's Human Subject Review Board at St. John's University at 718-990-1440, specifically Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, [REDACTED], or digiuser@stjohns.edu or the research committee mentor, Catherine DiMartino, at [REDACTED], or dimartic@stjohns.edu

Agreement to Participate in this Study

Your signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX C Letter of Consent for Individual Interviews (Students)



Dear participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate how first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention. This study will be conducted by Maria C. Cano, a current third-year doctoral student at St. John's University. Your participation will contribute to this research and to the literature on Dominican students in higher education.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual individual interview. The individual interview will consist of a series of 10-12 short open-ended questions and the interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded to help the researcher capture your rich dialogue and feedback. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. It will only be used by the researcher. Please note that your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.

Your identity as a participant will remain confidential. To protect your identity, the researcher will not use your name in any written reports. A pseudonym will be used instead. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant. This consent form will be stored securely on a password-protected computer in the researcher's home. Any electronic or digital data (audio-recordings) will be written down and analyzed, and the recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. If this study is published only pseudonyms or aggregated results will show in the study.

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Maria C. Cano, at [REDACTED] or at maria.cano18@my.stjohns.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a human participant, you may contact the University's Human Subject Review Board at St. John's University at 718-990-1440, specifically Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, at [REDACTED], or at digiuser@stjohns.edu or the research committee mentor, Catherine DiMartino, at [REDACTED], or at dimartic@stjohns.edu.

Agreement to Participate in this Study

Your signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX D Letter of Consent for Individual Interviews (Instructors & FYE Staff)



Dear participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study to first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention. This study will be conducted by Maria C. Cano, a third-year doctoral student at St. John's University. Your participation will contribute to this research and to the literature on Dominican students in higher education.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual virtual interview that would last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will consist of a series of 10-12 open-ended questions. The interview will be audio-recorded to help the researcher capture your rich dialogue and feedback. The recording will not be shared with anyone else; it will only be used by the researcher. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.

Your identity as a participant will remain confidential. To protect your identity, the researcher will not use your name in any written reports. Pseudonyms will be used instead. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant. This consent form will be stored securely on a password-protected computer in the researcher's home. Any electronic or digital data (Video-recordings) will be written down and analyzed, and the recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. If this study is published only pseudonyms or aggregated results will show in the study.

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Maria C. Cano, at [REDACTED] or at maria.cano18@my.stjohns.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a human participant, you may contact the University's Human Subject Review Board at St. John's University at [REDACTED] specifically Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, at [REDACTED], or at digiuser@stjohns.edu or the research committee mentor, Catherine DiMartino, at [REDACTED], or at dimartic@stjohns.edu

Agreement to Participate in this Study

Your signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX E Protocol for Focus Groups

(Script)

- **Welcome participants**
 - Thank you for choosing to participate in this focus group. This study will explore how Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how those perceptions impact their retention. My name is Maria Cano, I am a third-year doctoral student at St. John University and I am the primary researcher in this study.
- **Purpose of the Study**
 - The purpose of the study is to understand the challenges affecting Dominican students that impact their retention in order to create initiatives or enact policies that help this group of students to be retained until graduation.
- **Focus group interview structure**
 - As a focus group participant, you will participate with 3-4 Dominican students and will be asked 3-5 short-ended questions. The focus group session should take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded to capture the rich dialogue. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. The recording will only be used by the researcher. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.
- **Participants rights**
 - Please be reminded that you may withdraw from this interview at any time without explanation or penalty. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential throughout this study. Your name will not be disclosed or included in any forms, transcriptions, data analysis, or research findings. Pseudonyms will be used when discussing the research. Are you ready to start?
- **Start the focus group interview**

1. What college support did you receive last semester or are you receiving currently as a first-year student? What college support is available for Dominican students in particular?
 2. What is your opinion about faculty members in this institution? How supported do you feel by them? How do they support students? How do they support Dominican students? How do they make you feel?
 3. What is your opinion about your peers in this institution? How supported do you feel by them? How do they make you feel?
 4. In terms of your parents, or family members how much support do you receive from them? Give examples.
 5. What type of support do you need that it is not provided? In other words, what type of support should be provided? What is missing?
- **Close the interview**
 - Thank you once again for participating in this focus interview. Your contribution and feedback are greatly appreciated and will be useful for this study. If you don't mind, I will share this interview session with you once it is transcribed for you to check for the accuracy of the details and interpretations. This will also test the validity of the study.

APPENDIX F Protocol for Individual Interview/Two Students from the Focus Group

(Script)

- **Welcome participant**
 - Thank you once again for choosing to participate in this individual interview. It is nice to see you again. This study will explore how Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how those perceptions impact their retention. My name is Maria Cano, I am a third-year doctoral student at St. John University and I am the primary researcher in this study.
- **Purpose of the Study**
 - The purpose of the study is to understand the challenges affecting Dominican students that impact their retention in order to create initiatives or enact policies that help this group of students to be retained until graduation.
- **Focus group interview structure**
 - As a focus group participant, you will participate with 3-4 Dominican students and will be asked 3-5 short-ended questions. The focus group session should take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. The recording will only be used by the researcher. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.
- **Participants rights**
 - Please be reminded that you may withdraw from this interview at any time without explanation or penalty. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential throughout this study. Your name and the name of your school will not be disclosed or included in any forms, transcriptions, data analysis, or research findings. Pseudonyms will be used when discussing the research
- **Start the interview**

- 1 Tell me a little about yourself? Describe your high school experience?
What were your grades like?
- 2 Describe your first-year experience? What was it like?
Prove: Did you work while attending school? Did you join clubs or involved yourself in any activities while in college?
- 3 *What college support did you receive last semester or are you receiving now as a first-year student? What college support is available for Dominican students?
- 4 *What is your opinion about faculty members in this institution? How supported do you feel by them?
- 5 *What is your opinion about your peers in this institution? How supported do you feel by them? How do they make you feel?
- 6 What can this institution do to support students to remain in college? What type of support did you receive?
- 7 What type of support do you need that is not provided?
- 8 Describe your experiences with administrative processes (such as submitting documents to financial aid, complying with policies, uploading forms, academic appeals process, vaccination info, etc.), how was that process like? Give examples.
- 9 In your opinion, what practices, programming, initiatives do this institution use to retain first-year students? Give examples? Did you use them?
- 10 What advice would you give to a Dominican student entering this institution to help them stay in college?
- 11 We have come to the end of the interview. I want to thank you for your valuable time and for helping me with this study. Do you have any questions for me? or is there a question I missed to ask?

- **Close the interview**

- Thank you once again for participating in this focus interview. Your contribution and feedback are greatly appreciated and will be useful for this study. If you don't mind, I will share this interview session with you once it is transcribed for you to check for the accuracy of the details and interpretations. This will also test the validity of the study.

APPENDIX G Individual Interview Protocol (Students Who Continued)
(Script)

- **Welcome participants**

- Thank you for choosing to participate in this interview. This study will explore how Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how those perceptions impact their retention. My name is Maria Cano and the primary researcher in this study. I am a third-year doctoral student at St. John University.

- **Purpose of the Study**

- The purpose of the study is to understand the challenges affecting Dominican students that impact their retention in order to create initiatives or enact policies that help this group of students to be retained until graduation.

- **Individual interview**

- As an interviewee, you will be asked 8-12 short-ended questions. The session should take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded.

- **Participants rights**

- Please be reminded that you may withdraw from this interview at any time without explanation or penalty. Refusal Also, please know that your identity as a participant will remain confidential throughout this study. Your name and your school will not be disclosed or included in any forms, transcriptions, data analysis, or research findings. Pseudonyms will be used when discussing the research.

- **Start the interview**

1. Tell me a little about yourself? Describe your high school experience? What grades did you receive? What type of student were you?
2. Describe your first-year experience in this school? What was it like?

Probe: Did you work while attending school? Did you join clubs or involved yourself in any activities while in college?

3. What can this institution do to support students to remain in college? What type of support did you receive?
4. Describe your experiences with administrative processes (such as submitting documents to financial aid, complying with policies, uploading forms, academic appeals process, vaccination info, etc.), how was that process like? Give examples.
5. In your opinion, what practices, programming, initiatives do this institution use to retain first-year students? What support did you receive?
6. What is your opinion about the faculty members of this institution? What kind of support did you receive from them? What type of support was not provided? What was their interaction with students in general and their interaction with you as a Dominican student?
7. What is your opinion about the staff of this institution? What kind of support did you receive from them? What kind of support was not provided? What was their interaction with students in general and their interaction with you as a Dominican student?
8. Describe your interaction with your peers at the college? How supportive/influential were they during your first semester in college and so far, this semester?
9. What type of support, if any, have you received from your parents/family or other family members during your first year of college? **Probe:** Financially, emotionally, physically?
10. What advice would you give to a Dominican student entering this institution to help them stay in college?

11. We have come to the end of the interview. I want to thank you for your valuable time and for helping me with this study. Do you have any questions for me? or is there a question I missed to ask?

- **Close the interview**

- Thank you once again for participating in this focus interview. Your contribution and feedback are greatly appreciated and will be useful for this study. If you don't mind, I will share this interview session with you once it is transcribed for you to check for the accuracy of the details and interpretations. This will also test the validity of the study.

APPENDIX H Individual Interview Protocol (Students Who Did Not Continue) (Script)

- **Welcome participants**

- Thank you for choosing to participate in this interview. This study will explore how Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how those perceptions impact their retention. I am the primary researcher in this study. Currently, I am a third-year doctoral student at St. John's University.

- **Purpose of the Study**

- The purpose of the study is to understand the challenges affecting Dominican students that impact their retention in order to create initiatives or enact policies that help this group of students to be retained until graduation.

- **Individual interview**

- As an interviewee, you will be asked 8-14 short-ended questions. The session should take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded to capture the rich dialogue and to transcribe the conversation.

- **Participants rights**

- Please be reminded that you may withdraw from this interview at any time without explanation or penalty. Refusal Also, please know that your identity as a participant will remain confidential throughout this study. Your name and your school will not be disclosed or included in any forms, transcriptions, data analysis, or research findings. Pseudonyms will be used when discussing the research.

- **Start the interview**

1. Tell me a little about yourself? Describe your high school experience? What grades did you receive? What type of student were you?
2. What are you currently doing? What are your future plans?
3. Why did you not return to school this semester?
4. Describe your first-year experience in this school? How was it?

Probe: Did you work while attending school? Did you join clubs or involved yourself in any activities while in college?

5. What can this institution do to support students to remain in college? What type of support did you receive? What type of support did you need?
6. Describe your experiences with the administrative processes at this institution, (such as submitting documents to financial aid, complying with policies, uploading forms, academic appeals process, vaccination info, etc.,) how was that process like? Give examples.
7. In your opinion, what practices, programming, initiatives do this institution use to retain first-year students? What support did you receive?
8. What is your opinion about the faculty members of this institution? What kind of support did you receive from them? What type of support was not provided? What was their interaction with students in general and their interaction with you as a Dominican student?
9. What is your opinion about the staff of this institution? What kind of support did you receive from them? What kind of support was not provided? What was their interaction with students in general and their interaction with you as a Dominican student?
10. Describe your interaction with your peers at the college? How supportive/influential were they during your first semester in college and so far, this semester?
11. What type of support, if any, have you received from your parents/family or other family members during your first year of college? **Probe:** Financially, emotionally, physically?
12. What advice would you give to a Dominican student entering this institution to help them stay in college?
13. What advice would you give an administrator, instructor, or staff at the college to help Dominican students remain in college?
14. We have come to the end of the interview. I want to thank you for your valuable time and for helping me with this study. Do you have any questions for me? or is there a question I missed to ask?

APPENDIX I Individual Interview Protocol (For Teachers)

(Script)

- **Welcome participants**
 - Thank you for choosing to participate in this interview. This study will explore how Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how those perceptions impact their retention. My name is Maria Cano and I am the primary researcher in this study. Currently, I am a third-year doctoral student at St. John's University.
- **Purpose of the Study**
 - The purpose of the study is to understand the challenges affecting Dominican students that impact their retention in order to help stakeholders to create initiatives or enact policies that would help this group of students to be retained until graduation.
- **Individual interview**
 - As an interviewee, you will be asked 8-10 short-ended questions. The session should take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be recorded to capture the rich dialogue and to transcribe the conversation. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. The recording will only be used by the researcher. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.
- **Participants rights**
 - Please be reminded that you may withdraw from this interview at any time without explanation or penalty. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential throughout this study. Your name and your school will not be disclosed or included in any forms, transcriptions, data analysis, or research findings. Pseudonyms will be used when discussing the research.
- **The interview will begin now**

1. Tell me about your background? How long have you been teaching? How do you prepare for class? How do you keep your students engaged in the subjects being presented to them?
2. Describe your student population? Who makes up your class?
3. Tell me about your curriculum?
4. How have you adapted your curriculum to be culturally responsive and relevant to your students' population?
5. What challenges do you believe first-year students face during their first year in college?

Probe: How are those challenges different from those faced by Dominican students?
6. In your opinion, how are instructors supportive of students? What type of support do they provide? Give examples?
7. What administrative processes such as financial aid, appeals, vaccination, uploading forms, or any other processes or policies, within this institution or outside this institution, influence students' decision to remain or leave college during their first year?
8. How do you ensure your students develop a "sense of belonging? Give example?
9. In your opinion, how important is family or peer support for the retention of first-year students?
10. What are two or three recommendations that you would give an entering student to help them stay in college from one semester to the next or from fall to fall?
11. We have come to the end of the interview. I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. Do you have any questions for me? Or can you think of a question that I didn't ask?

- **Close the interview**

- Thank you once again for participating in this focus interview. Your contribution and feedback are greatly appreciated and will be useful for this study. If you don't mind, I will share this interview session with you once it is transcribed for you to check for the accuracy of the details and interpretations. This will also test the validity of the study.

**APPENDIX J Individual Interview Protocol (For First-Year Experience Leaders)
(Script)**

- **Welcome participants**
 - Thank you for choosing to participate in this interview. This study will explore how Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how those perceptions impact their retention. My name is Maria Cano and I am the primary researcher in this study. Currently, I am a third-year doctoral student at St. John's University.
- **Purpose of the Study**
 - The purpose of the study is to understand the challenges affecting Dominican students that impact their retention in order to help stakeholders to create initiatives or enact policies that would help this group of students to be retained until graduation.
- **Individual interview**
 - As an interviewee, you will be asked 8-10 short-ended questions. The session should take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. The recording will only be used by the researcher. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time during the study.
- **Participants rights**
 - Please be reminded that you may withdraw from this interview at any time without explanation or penalty. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential throughout this study. Your name and your school will not be disclosed or included in any forms, transcriptions, data analysis, or research findings. Pseudonyms will be used when discussing the research.
- **The interview will begin now**

12. Tell me about your background? How long have you been at this institution?
What do you enjoy the most about this job? What are some of the challenges?

13. How long has FYE been at this institution? **Probe:** Why was this program created?
14. Tell me about the students' ethnicity at this institutions, what is it mainly composed of? **Probe:** Regarding the Hispanic population at this institution, do you know the disaggregated number of students that make-up that population? Is there a place that you can find that information at this institution?
15. What challenges do you believe first-year students face during their first year in college?
Probe: How are those challenges different from those faced by Dominican students?
16. In your opinion, how are instructors supportive of students? What type of support do they provide? Give examples?
17. What administrative processes such as financial aid, appeals, vaccination, uploading forms, or any other processes or policies, within this institution or outside this institution, influence students' decision to remain or leave college during their first year?
18. How do you ensure students develop a "sense of belonging? Give example?
19. In your opinion, how important is family or peer support for the retention of first-year students?
20. What are two or three recommendations that you would give an entering student to help them stay in college from one semester to the next or from fall to fall?
21. We have come to the end of the interview. I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. Do you have any questions for me? Or can you think of a question that I didn't ask?

- **Close the interview**

- Thank you once again for participating in this focus interview. Your contribution and feedback are greatly appreciated and will be useful for this study. If you don't mind, I will share this interview session with you once it is transcribed for you to check for the accuracy of the details and interpretations. This will also test the validity of the study.

APPENDIX K Recruitment Email for Focus Group



Dear (Name of student)

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate how first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention. This study will be conducted by Maria C. Cano, a current third-year doctoral student at St. John's University. As part of this study, the researcher will be interviewing Dominican students to listen to their collective voices and their experiences. Your participation will contribute to this study and to the literature on Dominican students in higher education.

You were selected for this research because you were registered or are registered in SSD 100 during fall 2021 or spring 2022 semester. **To take part in this study you need to self-identify as a Dominican individual and must be 18-years or older.** If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to participate in a remote focus group interview consisting of 3-5 Dominican students and the researcher which will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded to help the researcher capture your rich dialogue and feedback. The recording will be stored securely and will be destroyed after all information is transcribed (written down). I will not ask you to give your institution's or your name on the recording. I will take all necessary steps to keep your data confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time or choose not to answer specific questions.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email and select a date/time that best fits your availability from the dates below.

Monday, May 2nd (3:30pm to 4:30)

Monday, May 2nd (5pm to 6pm)

Tuesday, May 3rd (3:30pm to 4:30pm)

Tuesday, May 3rd (5pm to 6pm)

Wednesday, May 4th (3:30pm to 4:30)

Friday, May 6th (1pm to 2pm, 2pm to 3pm)

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Maria C. Cano, at [REDACTED] or send me an email at [REDACTED]

I thank you in advance for your consideration and I look forward to your response.

APPENDIX L Recruitment Email for Individual Interviews



Dear (Name of student)

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate how first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention. This study will be conducted by Maria C. Cano, a current third-year doctoral student at St. John's University. As part of this study, the researcher will be interviewing Dominican students to listen to their collective voices and their experiences. Your participation will contribute to this study and to the literature on Dominican students in higher education.

You were selected for this research because you were registered or are registered in SSD 100 during fall 2021 or spring 2022 semester. **To take part in this study you need to self-identify as a Dominican individual and must be 18-years or older.** If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to participate in a remote interview which will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded to help the researcher capture your rich dialogue and feedback. The recording will be stored securely and will be destroyed after all information is transcribed (written down). I will not ask you to give your institution's or your name on the recording. I will take all necessary steps to keep your data confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time or choose not to answer specific questions.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email and select a date/time that best fits your availability.

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Maria C. Cano, at [REDACTED] or send me an email at [REDACTED]

I thank you in advance for your consideration and I look forward to your response

APPENDIX M Recruitment Email for Instructors



Dear (Name of instructor)

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate how first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention. This study will be conducted by Maria C. Cano, a current third-year doctoral student at St. John's University. As part of this study, the researcher will be interviewing Dominican students to listen to their collective voices and their experiences. Your participation will contribute to this study and to the literature on Dominican students in higher education.

You were selected for this research because you are an instructor of a first-year seminar course/learning community (SSD 100) and your input can contribute to this. If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to participate in virtual interview which will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded to help the researcher capture your rich dialogue and feedback. The recording will be stored securely and will be destroyed after all information is transcribed (written down). I will not ask you to give your institution's or your name on the recording. I will take all necessary steps to keep your data confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time or choose not to answer specific questions.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email and select a date/time that best fits your availability.

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Maria C. Cano, at [REDACTED] or send me an email at maria.cano18@my.stjohns.edu

I thank you in advance for your consideration and I look forward to your response.

APPENDIX N Recruitment Email for FYE Staff



September 28, 2022

Dear Participant of FYE Committee:

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate how first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention. This study will be conducted by Maria C. Cano, a current third-year doctoral student at St. John's University. As part of this study, the researcher will be interviewing Dominican students to listen to their collective voices and their experiences. Your participation will contribute to this study and to the literature on Dominican students in higher education.

You were identified for this study because of your involvement with first-year students through the First-Year-Experience Committee. Your input and insights about first-year students, particularly Dominican students, can significantly contribute to this study. If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to participate in a remote interview which will last approximately 15-20 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded to help the researcher capture your rich dialogue and feedback. The recording will be stored securely and will be destroyed after all information is transcribed (written down). I will not ask you to give your institution's or your name on the recording. I will take all necessary steps to keep your data confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time or choose not to answer specific questions.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email and select a few dates/times that best fits your availability.

If you have questions about the purpose of this research study, you may contact the principal investigator, Maria C. Cano, at 646-831-9944 or send me an email at maria.cano18@my.stjohns.edu.

I thank you in advance for your consideration and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Maria Cano

Maria Cano

APPENDIX O Recruitment Flyer



**ST. JOHN'S
UNIVERSITY**

ATTN: DOMINICAN STUDENTS... HELP A DOMINICAN RESEARCHER.

I am looking for Dominican students who took SSD 100 during the fall 2021 semester or are taking the course this semester (spring 2022) to participate in a research study. **The student must be 18- years or older and self-identify as Dominican.** The interviews will take place virtually and will be conducted by a third-year doctoral candidate from St. John's University. Participation in this study is voluntary and your identity as a participant will remain confidential.



Research Topic:

How do first-year Dominican students perceive their first year of college and how these perceptions impact their retention?

Researcher: Maria C. Cano

Email: maria.cano18@my.stjohns.edu

If interested in participating, please click on the QR code to complete a brief questionnaire and the researcher will follow up with you via email.

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