

**The Impact of Cultural Values and Norms on First-Generation Latinas:
A Case Study on the University of Chicago**

By

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*Para mis motivaciones más grandes: mi Mamá, Diego, y mis hermanos, con mucho amor y
cariño.*

Introduction

Since 2010, Latinos have accounted for most of the total U.S. population growth, but despite this boom in the population, Latinos continue to be one of the least educated groups in the United States (Krogstad, 2020). Consider this for perspective: the current degree completion rate for Latinos is 10% lower than the attainment levels of White adults in 1990 – over 30 years ago (Schak and Nichols, 2017). Put another way, the highest level of academic attainment for over a quarter of Latino adults is less than ninth grade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). While this issue plagues all Latinos, first-generation Latinas are especially impacted as they are the least likely to earn college degrees (Sy & Romero, 2008). This marginalized population has been vulnerable to poverty and associated difficulties for their entire history in the United States, yet there is not a comprehensive understanding of how to uplift this community through education. Some studies have focused on the factors impacting college application rates, but few have considered how cultural values and gender norms affect college experiences and by extension, retention rates.

The topic of this study was chosen because while all Latinos are subject to challenges that lead to low educational attainment, Latinas occupy an especially unique role in their family. First-generation Latina students often must play a balancing act as they navigate college while attempting to keep up with familial obligations and expectations. Studying the cultural values and beliefs of Latinas allows for the formation and implementation of culturally appropriate interventions to increase the educational attainment and overall socioeconomic position of Latinas across the country. This study aims to identify the link between cultural values and gender roles and the experience of first-generation undergraduate Latinas at the University of Chicago. This research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do first-generation Latinas at the University of Chicago view their familial expectations/responsibilities and cultural gender norms?
 - a. How have these perceptions adapted or evolved over the students' time in college?
2. How do cultural norms regarding family and gender affect first-generation Latinas at the University of Chicago?
 - a. What, if any, added pressures and stress do Latinas experience regarding these cultural norms? In what ways, if at all, do these norms enrich the students' experiences?

Significance

Only 11% of Latinos have a bachelor's degree or higher, and consequently, Latinos are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to be unemployed. Latinos who are employed are more likely to work in service jobs and receive lower wages than whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). These facts are incredibly alarming because the rapid growth of the Latino population will fundamentally impact the economy and politics of the United States. Without greater educational attainment, there will be a negative impact on a Latino's ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder and engage in politics. This is not an issue for Latinos alone, it is an issue for the entire country as Latinos will soon make up a large portion of the country's population. To ensure that the future workforce is educated and has acquired the skills to participate in high-paying occupations, we must all be concerned about increasing the number of Latinx students completing their college degrees.

Positionality

I am the daughter of a Mexican mother who learned English at the age of ten, began working at the age of 14 to support her family, and sacrificed it all so that I could have every opportunity to succeed. I am the daughter of hundreds of women who came before me, and my story is shared by millions. This facet of my identity has guided every interaction I've ever had with the world around me, and it changes the way I interpret my experiences.

My experience as a Latina at the University of Chicago has consisted of many of the challenges outlined in this paper, as well as listening to the heartbreaking stories of my Latina friends as they were forced to learn how to navigate the oftentimes harsh and unwelcoming climate of white spaces. This first-hand experience impacts both the questions I asked and the way I asked the questions. Many times, I knew exactly what to ask because I had either experienced that myself or I knew of someone who had. This makes my research questions very relevant, as they are tailored to very specific topics that relate to this population. However, I recognize that my experience does not encapsulate the universal Latina experience, so there are likely questions I have missed that may have been relevant to this research.

Additionally, I recognize that this research topic is sensitive for participants as it asks them to recall difficult moments in their lives and consider family as both a motivator and stressor. Therefore, these questions might elicit emotional memories and responses. However, my identity as a Latina might provide some comfort to participants because I will be more likely to understand where they are coming from and perhaps even relate to the topic at hand. Participants will also have the added comfort of knowing they are in a private room where they are not at risk of being overheard by others. These factors combined may encourage more candid and elaborate responses.

Literature Review

Latinos in the U.S

Understanding the importance of studying Latinas in higher education necessitates a general understanding of the Latino population in the United States. According to the U.S Census Bureau and most research organizations, there is not an official definition of what it means to be Latino. However, it is commonly understood that Latino refers to the people from Latin American countries that share a history of Spanish colonization. While this study considers Latinos as a whole, it is important to note that Latinos are a heterogeneous group that comes from various countries, each with its cultural norms and unique histories. This history of colonization has contributed to the vulnerable positions that Latinos in the US find themselves in. Among other challenges, Latinos are subject to anti-immigration policies, poverty, workplace discrimination, and poor housing conditions.

Studying this population is imperative because Latinos are one of the fastest-growing minorities in the United States; in 2010, Hispanics made up nearly one in five people in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021). Yet Latinos continue to occupy low socioeconomic positions; only 29% of Latinos earn an annual income of at least \$50,000 despite 50% of Latinos living in households of 3 to 5 people and generally having larger family sizes than the rest of the U.S. population (Marotta and Garica, 2003). The low-income status of many Latinos in the U.S. stems in large part from the space Latinos take up in the labor force; most Latinos are concentrated in occupations that require minimal training and education (Bucknor, 2016). Without changes in the educational system, these trends will continue, and the potential of many Latinos will be unrealized.

Latino Educational Attainment and Performance

In the United States, educational attainment is largely considered to be the primary method of social mobility, especially for minority and low-income households. The U.S labor market proves this through financial rewards for postsecondary degrees, and those with low-educational attainment face unemployment, low wages, and increased poverty rates. Despite the increasing growth rate of Latinos, this population has notoriously low educational attainment rates; 43% of all Latinos have less than a high school diploma, with Mexicans having the lowest rates of all Latino subgroups (Chapa and De La Rosa, 2004). The disparities grow even greater in post-secondary education. Of the Latinos who did complete high school only 37% enroll in college, and only 15% of 25–29-year-old Latinos have a bachelor’s degree or higher (Krogstad, 2016). While enrollment rates are low, attainment rates are significantly lower. There is an issue in both encouraging Latinos to apply and enroll in college, but the greater issue is that far too few Latinos who matriculate remain in college until degree completion.

While there are a variety of factors contributing to these low attainment rates, a primary factor is the greater likelihood of Latino students identifying as first-generation and low-income (Engle, 2006). While the definition of first-generation differs depending on the institution using the term, it is generally understood to be about a student whose parents did not complete a bachelor’s degree. One study on the risks of first-generation college students found that first-generation students are less involved, have lower aspirations, and are more likely to live off-campus (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). Students who live off-campus must spend less time on campus compared to their peers who do live on campus, which may result in a decreased involvement on campus. Another limitation to the college experience is that low-income students often must support themselves financially through part or full-time work.

These barriers faced by first-generation low-income students contribute to the increased likelihood of a student leaving college before completing their degree. Chen (2005) finds that only 26% of first-generation students earned a bachelor's degree within eight years of their high school graduation compared to 68% of non-first-generation students. Additionally, the low-income status of many Latinos increases the difficulties regarding college application fees and paying for all the expenses that university entails including room and board, textbooks, and technology costs.

Traditional Values and Gender Norms in Latino Culture

Familismo

Latinos place a great deal of importance on familial relationships, both in the nuclear and extended family. This core cultural value termed *familismo* refers to the support that family provides, the way parents are valued and respected, how problems are resolved as a family, and the understanding that familial needs take priority over the needs of the individual (Jackson, 2006). The centrality of family means that Latinos spend a larger amount of time in their family networks, and they rely on their family for support more so than non-Latinos (Calzada, 2012). This focus on the collective rather than the individual has significant effects on the behaviors and attitudes of Latinos. For instance, Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez (2002) discuss behavioral familism in the context of geographical location as Latinos value living near family members.

The literature presents a mixed review on the consequences of familismo, although researchers more commonly consider the positive influences of this value as it provides a source of support and care. Dimensions of familismo have been found to aid in the protection against alcohol abuse and smoking in Mexican youth (Strunin, 2013, Marin, 1990). Familismo has also been linked to a reduction in behavior problems at school (Germán, 2009). Since this cultural

value promotes spending time with family in favor of involvement in unstructured activities, familismo is associated with lower levels of violence exposure (Kennedy, 2013).

Although it is less often considered, some research does consider how the concept of familismo can be a source of stress for Latinos. While family ties provide a substantial amount of support, Desmond and Turley (2009) found that family closeness can hinder students as they transition into adulthood because Latino students are more likely to value living at home during college and subsequently be less likely to apply to college at all, especially elite universities. Latinas who do choose to attend university commonly experience a need to provide for themselves rather than relying on family, and indirect pressure to financially contribute to their family, and obligations to care for and check in on younger family members despite their schoolwork (Sy & Romero, 2008).

Aside from these material demands of familismo, researchers have also considered how *familismo* contributes to family achievement guilt. Covarrubias & Fryberg (2015) define this to be a socioemotional experience caused by leaving one's family to attend college primarily because many colleges provide resources and privileges that family members often do not have access to. In other words, low-income, first-generation Latino students may resent the change in family dynamics caused by the choice to pursue socioeconomic mobility through educational attainment. This guilt may have mental health impacts on students which could affect a student's academic performance and ultimately impact their college success (Covarrubias et. al., 2021). Whether it is through identifiable obligations or emotional tolls, *familismo* has the unintended and often unexplored consequence of contributing to a first-generation student's challenges throughout their four years in university.

Marianismo

Hispanic culture is known for having explicitly defined gender norms for men and women that have been accepted and embodied by hundreds of generations. These gender norms serve as values that inform the behavior of Latinos. The role of a woman is heavily characterized by her motherhood, which is defined by *marianismo*, a catholic ideal based on the Virgin Mary (Cauce & Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002, Stevens, 1973). While there are many beautiful aspects of *marianismo* and Latina womanhood, this value also describes various negative aspects of Latina femininity; the literature tends to focus on the latter.

Castillo, Perez, Castillo, and Ghosheh (2010) find that Latina gender role beliefs can be described in five main pillars: (1) *Family pillar*, the belief that a woman should be the main source of strength of her family and keep the family unified; (2) *Virtuous and chaste*, the belief that a woman should be pure and remain abstinent until marriage; (3) *Subordinate to others*, the belief that a woman should be submissive to men in particular and avoid denying peoples' requests; (4) *Silencing self to maintain harmony*, the belief that Latinas should put others' needs before her own and always be forgiving and agreeable; and (5) *Spiritual pillar*, the belief that a Latina woman should be responsible for her family's spiritual growth. Ertl and colleagues (2019) found that many of these values were associated with an increase in acculturative stress for Latinas. While there is limited research on the impact of *marinismo* on college students, it can be inferred that these very distinct gender roles often lead to differing familial responsibilities among Latinos and Latinas. These differences can become exceedingly prevalent once a young person leaves home for college, as women might be held to certain expectations while men are permitted to feel less obligated to consider their families in the decisions they make throughout their studies.

Machismo

While the present study focuses on female-identifying students, it is necessary to establish the norms and expectations of the opposite gender. For Latino men, the archetypal gender norm is described as *machismo*. This term is generally correlated with negative characteristics including hypermasculinity and sexism (Arciniega et. al., 2008). This term is associated less with bringing up a family and more so with being a financial provider for a family while being tended to by a woman.

Young Adulthood

An American's late teens to twenties are widely considered to be a time of consequential decisions regarding education, careers, romantic and platonic relationships, and changing ideologies (Erikson, 1994, Rindfuss, 1991). Eric Erikson laid out much of the early theoretical groundwork for identifying this unique period as one that cannot be described using the terms childhood, adolescence, or adulthood because the late teens and twenties exist as some combination of the latter two stages of life (1991). This period of life was later coined Emerging Adulthood by Arnett, and it describes people between the ages of 18-25 who do not yet consider themselves to be adults because their primary concern is obtaining the education necessary to have a stable career in the future (2000). Much of the literature on the cultural impact on Latinas in higher education focuses on the college application and enrollment rates of high schoolers, typically the ages of 16-18. Arnett makes the argument that emerging adulthood is susceptible to cultural impacts and only exists in cultures that grant young people the independence to explore their identity (2000). Considering the cultural values and gender norms that were mentioned in previous sections, many Latinas are precluded from taking advantage of this time to focus on developing their own identities. This decade of possibilities remains largely unexplored; therefore, this study takes the unconventional approach of focusing primarily on how culture

impacts Latinas in this age group to better understand how those who matriculate can best be supported and encouraged to continue their studies.

University in the United States

For the typical middle-class American, a college education often does not represent the idea of “making it” as it might for a minority student, but it functions as more of a typical and expected milestone. In the media, college is portrayed as a turning point for one’s independence; it is when young adults leave their childhood homes and go on to make their own decisions, find themselves, and begin to make their mark on the world. Although American universities are becoming increasingly diverse, the typical student, especially in elite institutions, continues to be white and middle to upper-class. Kohn (1969) provides evidence to support the well-known fact that middle-class upbringings lead to increased access to financial resources which means that these students can afford to fully devote themselves to their studies and extracurriculars.

The typical Anglo student will have been raised in environments that promote individualism and independence. Lareau (2011) identifies two types of child-rearing strategies: concerted cultivation and natural growth. The former is typically practiced by middle- and upper-class families and involves structured activities, parental involvement in a child’s education, and an emphasis on reasoning skills. The latter involves children playing alone or with family members, less parental involvement in a child’s school activities, and discourages children from questioning adults. Lareau’s archetypal child-rearing forms support the fact that white, middle-class students are socialized to be more prepared for the individualistic environment that is perpetuated in most university cultures.

Latinx Students at University

Latinx students, on the other hand, experience university very differently. Bryan and Simmons (2009) find that first-generation students are stressed and anxious about leaving their families for university because their parents have limited knowledge about what the college experience is really like. This lack of knowledge means that parents are often unable to relate to or understand the difficulties that students face during this time of transition. Returning to the previous discussion on family achievement guilt, Latinx students in university often struggle with being one of the only members of their families who have access to higher education (Covarrubias et. al., 2021). Considering the importance of family as discussed in the *familismo* section, it is unsurprising that Latinx students may experience greater difficulty with the idea of moving away from home to attend college. While the importance of education is clear, Latinx students have the added worry of becoming alienated from their families as they must acclimate to a predominately white environment, and thus potentially sacrifice their family bonds (Moreno, 2021). Regardless of how academically prepared a Latino student may be, their experience in college is fundamentally different from that of a white student.

Methods

Participants

This study consisted of 10-15 undergraduate, first-generation Latina students. The age range is 18 to 23 years old, and all participants identify as female. The goal of this study was to uncover perceptions and impacts of cultural values and gender norms in the Latino population, so it was useful to interview both students who are in the midst of transitioning to college and those who have completed some college already. By including all students regardless of their year in college, I was able to obtain results that encompassed how these perceptions and impacts

can change over time. This experiment was conducted at the University of Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Recruitment

This study utilized three main recruitment methods tailored to the fact that Latina students make up a small proportion of undergraduates at the University of Chicago. Two participants were recruited through convenience sampling using an in-person recruitment script (Appendix A). Four participants were subsequently recruited through snowball sampling. The remainder of the participants were recruited by sending an email (Appendix B) to a Recognized Student Organization on campus that consists of Latino members.

Once potential participants were identified, an e-mail including the Online Consent Form (Appendix C) was sent out. This form included a description of the study, procedures, risks, benefits/compensation, contact information, and confidentiality information. Those who signed the consent form became participants in the study and received further details regarding the interview such as date, time, and location. Recruitment and interviews concluded once an adequate amount of data was collected to develop a robust conclusion. In this study, data saturation occurred once a total of seven participants had been interviewed.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach to illuminate the experience of a group that has been historically underrepresented in higher education. This method allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how participants perceive cultural values and gender norms. I opted for a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach because when it comes to learning about lived experiences, conversations are the best way to capture all the complexities involved. Although seven interviews is not sufficient to fully understand the experience of the entire

population of first-generation Latinas, this number of participants along with the length and style of the interviews provided valuable insight that was used to draw meaningful conclusions.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, all interviews were conducted in person in a private study room in a campus library. This location ensures that participants are not at risk of being overheard for confidentiality and comfort reasons. Prior to beginning the interview, the consent form was reviewed once again, and participants were given the time to ask any questions or express any concerns they might have. With the approval of each participant, interviews were audio-recorded using an application on my password-protected cellphone. These recordings were then transcribed using an online transcription software. Recording and transcription of the data allowed for a proper analysis to be done using qualitative coding.

A semi-structured interview approach was used in this study to elicit lengthy responses that could later be analyzed. Using a list of open-ended questions (Appendix D) allowed participants to interpret the question in such a way that their response highlighted what was important to their own experiences. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. This amount of time allowed participants to elaborate on their responses and talk freely about their experiences, which improves the credibility of my study.

Field notes were typed during the interview and were later analyzed alongside the transcriptions of each interview. Once recordings were transcribed, I coded the transcripts by identifying recurring themes using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1967). Comparing the field notes and the coded transcriptions allowed me to highlight relationships between these two sources of data. After a thorough analysis, I was able to solidify themes.

Data Storage

All data collected was stored in a secure location using my university's cloud-based storage service. The interviews were audio-recorded using an application on my password-protected and encrypted phone, which I had access to. The recordings were transferred to the UChicago secure Box site within 24 hours. Once the recording was transcribed the audio recording was immediately deleted. The transcripts were also stored in the UChicago secure Box site, which was only accessed through my password-protected computer.

To maintain confidentiality, all personal, sensitive, or identifying information was redacted. All participants were given a pseudonym upon transcription of the interview. The key that links participants to their unique pseudonym will be kept in encrypted storage.

Strengths and Limitations

The most prominent limitation of this study is that with only seven participants, the sample size is small. A study based on a small sample size runs the risk of losing insight from varying perspectives. Additionally, these results will not be generalizable to the larger population of Latina students, as the results will only apply to the population of students that participated in the study. Additionally, given that the questions are open-ended, the results will be limited based on how participants interpret the questions.

A strength of this study is that since the interviews were approximately one hour in length, I was able to gather rich and in-depth data that offers a lot of insight on the topic. Additionally, the semi-structured approach of my study allowed me to probe and ask participants to elaborate on their experiences. These interviews were conducted in a private room and the questions were asked by me, a Latina student. Both factors could contribute to making participants feel more comfortable responding to the questions, which could lead to the emergence of new perspectives.

Results

Family

When asked about cultural values, all seven participants (100%) reported the importance of maintaining close relationships with family as being a significant value that they had been taught since they were young. As Abigail put it, “the whole family first thing that was instilled into me was kind of like ‘your people first’” (February 10, 2022). Abigail reported learning from those around her to always keep her family in the forefront of her mind and to cherish the relationship she has with her nuclear family, extended family, and the more general Latino community. While caring for family is a value that transcends culture, family plays an especially powerful role in Latino households, which tend to be very close-knit and group-oriented. Participants identified various effects of familismo which will be discussed in the following subsections.

Comfort and Support

All participants acknowledged that their close family relationships provided a sense of comfort in knowing that their family is always in their corner and that they can reach out to family in hard times. Sofia describes this sort of unconditional support afforded to her by these close ties with her family,

I think that what I’ve noticed is outside of something like Mexican culture is that adults are immediately expected to provide for themselves now, thrown out into the world, which I think that’s the case for every kind of adult. But...it’s a scary thing to think about, like, all of a sudden you’re an adult and you have to take care of yourself. But it’s really nice, because of those Mexican family values that you have someone to always look back on. There’s always...that reassuring feeling that no matter what happens, there’s going to be your family to support you. (November 18, 2021).

Sofia expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the changes and new responsibilities that come with the transition to adulthood after college. However, this feeling was mitigated by

knowing that regardless of where she finds herself after college, she will not be alone, and she will always have her family's support. She noted that this feeling is unique to her experience having grown up in a Latino household because other cultures have a less group-oriented mindset and have differing ideas about how reliant on the family a recent college graduate should be.

Sofia also describes that in predominantly white spaces, it is hard to find people you can relate to. She explained how her parents are able to help with this even from afar and how frequent phone calls are a form of support for her,

[Calls are] super comforting because...I usually call them while I do my homework so it's nice to just have them there because I feel like college is kind of, hard for me in particular because I'm astrophysics major and there's not a lot of people that I would say I get along with or I like in my major. I don't work with anybody or work in any groups. So, I will do my homework and stuff with my mom there [on the call]. It's really comforting, it's like, a little bit of like support to keep going. (November 8, 2021)

Sofia felt that being a Latina in a field that is dominated by white males makes it difficult to find peers she enjoys collaborating with or working alongside. This created feelings of isolation for her, which were at least partially resolved by the close relationship with her mother that allows her to call her more frequently to keep her company.

Motivation

Participants not only noted that their families provide support to them, but also that their families are a significant motivator for them to better themselves and work hard in school. For example, Isabella says "my family is super proud of me and that's what really keeps me going" (February 22, 2022). As a first-generation student, attending college is a significant accomplishment, and attending an elite institution such as the University of Chicago is an especially celebrated achievement. For Isabella, knowing how this makes her family feel drives her to continue her studies. However, attending a prestigious university as a minority student is

difficult. Knowing that her effort and attendance has a larger meaning to the Latino community is important to Abigail, who notes,

I think it'd be really tough to be in a place like this if I wasn't doing it for other people as well...I would think to myself and be like, 'well, then why am I here?' I would just drop out or something. But now that I know that it's not just from me, and not even just from my immediate family, but it's for generations to come. (February 10, 2022)

For Abigail, attending university as a first-generation Latina is a signal to both her family and young Latinas that anything is possible. Many of her peers are students who come from educated families and communities, so attending college is considered an expectation and a given rather than an extraordinary accomplishment. Knowing that her college experience is more than an individual accomplishment and means a lot to her family gives her a sense of belonging and a reason to stay in school and do her best. Victoria expresses a similar sentiment, "I feel like if I didn't have family, I probably wouldn't care as much about things" (November 17, 2021). Victoria sees her family as a source of inspiration that gives purpose to her academic career. Knowing that she is working towards a degree that is also important to her family imposes a sense of responsibility on her to care about her academics.

Elena explains how her family motivates in aspects of her life beyond her academic career, "[my family] definitely pushes me to be my best version of myself. So there's comfort in that because honestly, if I didn't have them who knows where I'd be" (November 8, 2021). The way Elena's family cares for her and holds her accountable inspires her to strive for greatness. If she didn't have her family's support, she might not be willing to stray outside of her comfort zone to take risks and get closer to reaching her goals. Based on these lived experiences, it is clear that the support of one's family encourages these students to pursue their dreams and perform at their best.

Expectations

Maintaining relationships takes a lot of work, and family is no exception. Latina daughters expressed how expectations from both themselves and their families affected them in college. For instance, Isabella says “There are a set of expectations on top of the expectations I have for my academic performance that I have to worry about, like I have little siblings and, and I have a really good relationship with my family. So I’m always in constant communication with them. (February 22, 2022).” Isabella sets personal academic goals for herself, but she is also balancing the expectations her family has for her regarding how often they communicate. She feels that the average college student is mostly concerned with the former expectation. As an eldest sister, she worries about ensuring that she remains a part of her younger siblings’ lives despite the physical distance between them.

In a similar way, Victoria discusses her obligations to her younger siblings,

“I have to be the one to bring the spirit of celebrating things together to the family and taking [my brothers] out. My mom does not take them out. So I have to make sure that they have fun and like, take them to the movies or distract them and stuff. And I know they’re gonna figure their own stuff in the world. But when they’re younger, you definitely need someone there to help you not just financially but emotionally being there to help you and listen to you. Because doing this [college] it’s not easy” (November 17, 2021).

Her role in the family is largely defined by being a “second parent” to her younger siblings and ensuring that they are engaging in activities that promote their social development such as birthday celebrations or outings to movie theaters. Victoria feels an obligation to ensure that she is supporting her siblings even from afar while she is in Chicago and her family remains in Milwaukee.

A separate set of expectations revolves around the immigrant experience and the hope to use education as a means to climb the social ladder. First-generation Latinas expressed feeling a lot of pressure to perform well academically not only for themselves, but also for their parents.

I felt like I had to always do especially well for [my parents] so that I wouldn't disappoint them because they'd been disappointed enough already. And because to them, family is super important. They wanted to see their kids do very well. I didn't want to disappoint them. (Sofia, November 8, 2021).

Sofia expresses a lot of worry over ensuring that she is doing well enough in school to please her parents. She faces a lot of pressure to succeed because her success not only affects herself, but also her family.

Caring for Aging Parents

Five participants (71%) expressed ongoing anxieties about ensuring that their chosen major and career path will provide them with enough financial stability to support themselves and their family. As Abigail puts it, "I'm my parents' retirement plan. So I have to make enough money not only for myself, and my family, but for the family that raised me. I'm always thinking about like, will this be making enough money?" (February 10, 2022). In all decisions regarding her education and future career, Abigail has to consider whether her choices will allow her to support two families in the future.

Similarly, Victoria mentions having to postpone her personal long-term goals in order to ensure that she can provide for her mom in the near future:

"I would definitely want to go to law school. But I know that personally for me, I can't because my mom is getting older. And I feel like if I were to take three more years of law school and not work and save up the money I need for my mom...my focus right now is trying to get my mom her house and get her immigration papers and stuff like that. So basically I need to get the money first, and then when I have it for myself, I can go to law school. (November 17, 2021)

The opportunity cost of attending law school is far too great for a first-generation student like Victoria, who anticipates needing to earn a salary to support her mom within the next few years. Keeping all of this in mind, Victoria plans to graduate with a Business Economics degree in 2023, obtain a job in the financial sector, and remain there for a few years while she saves money. She plans on working until she feels that her mom is settled and that she has enough money to support her next three years in law school.

Fernanda expresses a similar sentiment of feeling like she is her parents' "trust fund," and how this responsibility might be different from her peers'.

Because my parents are immigrants, I always thought "I need to be their trust fund when they're older, I need to provide for them because at the end of the day they're gonna only have me and I have that responsibility towards them, because I care about them." And I think that talking to other people my first year, they were like, well, you can do whatever you want. And it's like, well, your parents don't have to rely on you. (February 1, 2022)

As an older sister to one other sibling, Fernanda feels that it is her responsibility to care for her parents after retirement because of how much she cares about them. Moreover, she mentions her parents' lack of resources to fall back on once they are elderly. She feels that she is all her parents have because she comes from a low-income family that likely does not have much savings or forms of passive income. Once they are no longer working, Fernanda's parents will have to rely on her for basic necessities such as food. This is a worry that she has found to be generally unique to her low-income peers of color. She recognizes that other students have the luxury of making their career choices without having to worry about how this will affect their families.

Family Impact on Choice of Major

A first-generation Latina's choice of major in college is also largely informed by what her family members do for a living and how they advise her to think about a career. Sofia, a Latina in STEM, talks about her realization of just how many career choices exist:

I'm an astrophysics major, I would like to do astrophysics research, which you can do industry or you could try and become a professor, work in academia, and do all of that. I didn't even know that really existed. I thought that there was blue collar jobs, like you're a waitress, you work in a factory, do that kind of stuff, or you're a lawyer or doctor or whatever. (November 8, 2021, 21)

Prior to attending college, Sofia understood careers as a binary: either someone worked a blue collar job or they attended graduate school and became a doctor, lawyer, or some other form of a clear cut career path. She was not aware that she had so many options and that a field such as academia existed.

Elena describes feeling a bit pressured by her parents to study something they considered to be very traditional and secure, "[My parents] wanted me to be premed because they wanted me to have a major that would guarantee me a job. So I came into school choosing a major that they wanted, but then I ended up switching it because I was bad at it. And I didn't like it. (November 8, 2021). Elena's parents encouraged her to pursue a career in medicine because they saw it as a choice that would ensure there were job openings she was qualified for and that she would be financially stable. Following this advice, Elena proceeded to enroll in pre-medicine courses that she did not enjoy and had difficulty succeeding in.

Campus Life

Moving out

When it comes to attending four-year colleges, many students, either by choice or by necessity, choose to leave home. For first-generation Latinas, this process was not nearly as smooth as they had imagined. Four participants (57%) mentioned this process creating a lot of

tension in their relationships with their mothers. For Abigail, her mother's reaction "was kind of negative even up until I left. She still told me 'oh, I don't even understand what you're leaving. Like, I don't get it' (February 10, 2022). Julia's mother "took [my acceptance to UChicago] so personally, she literally started crying and was like, 'why do you want to leave me?' I feel like she thought that I wanted to get away from her. When in reality, it was a hard decision to make to come here. Because I didn't want to leave her" (February 23, 2022). Victoria said her mother didn't understand why I was leaving. "And she was like, you should just stay here...so I felt kind of sad that she wasn't as happy for me" (November 17, 2021). All of these women were coming to Chicago from out of state, and they all discussed conflicting feelings about moving out after seeing the effect this had on their mothers. Many mentioned that their mothers simply didn't understand that they were not moving out because they did not want to live at home anymore, but that this was what made the most sense for them financially or for their future success. This misinterpretation caused many participants to feel a lot of distress and sadness because they did not feel supported during such a significant milestone.

Elena, who was born and raised in Chicago, had a slightly different experience. When asked about her college application process, Elena said "I only applied to schools in Chicago because I wanted to be close to my family" (November 8, 2021). The very close relationship she has with her family led to her choice to only apply to schools where she could remain physically close with her family. Following the COVID shutdown when Elena lived at home, she decided that she wanted to live in an off-campus apartment for her final year of college. However, Elena recalls struggling to discuss this with her parents whom she feared would not understand. She says "When I talked to other people about it they say 'it's just your parents getting mad at you. Why do you even care?' But like, the amount of anxiety I get from the potential of getting in

trouble is insane” (November 8, 2021). To outsiders, her fear of talking to her parents about moving out seems illogical and unreasonable. However, knowing how much her parents want her to remain at home causes a tremendous amount of angst for her because she does not want to disappoint them. After having discussed this with her parents, she says “I think my mom got comfortable with me being home because I helped out with a lot of things. So I know when I told her [I was moving out] she literally cried for three days because she was like ‘who’s gonna help me in the house now?’” (Elena, November 8, 2021). Being at home for about a year and a half allowed Elena to help her parents by taking on household responsibilities. Her mother expressed sadness that Elena would be leaving, and she expressed that it might be hard for her to get used to not having Elena’s help anymore.

Moving into a college environment presents first-generation students with a plethora of resources they might not have access to at home. This causes Victoria, who comes from a Midwestern state to describe feeling some guilt when she returns home: “Every time I go home, I get sad because I feel like where we live...then I come back here and I feel good being here, but I wish I could give them the same things that I have here” (November 17, 2021). She is saddened by the realization that her life in college is drastically different from her life at home. While she is able to take advantage of resources that come with being a student such as wifi access, food, printing, and more, she recognizes that her family at home might not always have access to these things. She expresses a desire to provide these resources for her family.

Social Experiences

For many, a significant part of college is the newfound social aspect. However, participants discussed how their parents’ viewpoints on this are vastly different from their average peers’ parents. Isabella says,

Most of my peers don't have immigrant backgrounds, which I think has a lot to do with those values. Their family might be more lax and more in tune with the American lifestyle, which is all about experiencing common things like, for example, dating, partying, because we weren't comfortable with those topics. (February 22, 2022).

Since her parents did not grow up in America and did not attend higher education institutions, they have a very traditional mindset when it comes to social experiences. Her parents do not approve of these activities, so she says

When I drink or smoke, that's something I do not talk to my parents about, or talk to my family about in general, just because that's very badly looked down upon. So I just had to be really sneaky with it. And I also feel guilty when I do those things because again, it's just very looked down upon in my family and my growing up (February 22, 2022).

Similarly, Julia says "I have to keep it a lot from my family, I don't ever mention that I'm going out to drink or that I'm smoking weed or anything like that" (February 23, 2022). Both women discuss feeling like their personal choices regarding social situations would be harshly judged by their families, so they make an active effort to keep these activities hidden from their family.

This act of maintaining a dual identity leads to feelings of guilt that impact how often they take part in socializing with peers. For example, Elena says "if there's a social event that I want to go to, I'll feel really guilty telling [my parents] I can't spend time with them. And if I do tell him then I feel bad about myself because then I missed out on an opportunity to meet more people or just to have fun" (November 8, 2021). Elena discusses feeling guilty choosing a social event over spending time with her family, so she often does not mention these events to her parents. When she does tell her family, she ends up not attending the social event and feels some regret for having passed up a chance to enjoy herself with new people.

Individualistic vs. Group Oriented Mindset

For many people, attending college marks the beginning of one's individual journey and the point in life where they begin to make choices themselves. First-generation Latinas, however, reported that they are not often granted this privilege to separate themselves from their families.

[Non-Latinas] are able to kind of have their separate life and if they want to just you know, not not be active in their family or like, not care about these traditions whereas for me, it's a balance and I have to consider my culture in everything I do, and it's always present, and I can't just ignore it (Fernanda, February 1, 2022).

Fernanda discusses being unable to separate her cultural values and identity from her individual choices. For her, these two things are always intertwined. Before making any individual choice, she considers her family's needs and desires. She goes on to discuss how this separates her from her peers even further as a queer student: "sometimes my family values don't align with, like, my other identities. And so it's really hard to want to keep doing these traditions that come from a place that's hostile to me sometimes. But at the same time, I want to keep my culture alive" (February 1, 2022). She faces an internal struggle because she observes how her peers are able to distance themselves from non-accepting family members, but she is not able to make this decision nearly as easily. Since family plays such an important role in her culture, she struggles to decide how to make individual choices that do not remove her completely from her family.

Similarly, Victoria says "other people, they do their own thing, but they don't have to consider their family in everything that they do" and "I think it's easier for [white peers] to just focus on themselves and their work in school without stressing so much about how their family is doing" (November 17, 2021). Victoria also deals with having to constantly consider her family's input or the impact it might have on her family before she makes a decision. Victoria manages the average stress that is involved in a college workload, but also must manage being worried about her family's well being and what her family thinks of her choices.

Working Hard

Learned Work Ethic

A second cultural value mentioned by participants is the value of hard work. Sofia explains how value has influenced her way of thinking: “there’s this idea that you have to work hard, past what’s reasonable, because you want to get ahead because you’re already behind essentially” (November 8, 2021). She describes having to work harder than many of her peers because her status as a first-generation Latina places her at a disadvantage. Parents seem to echo this idea according to Abigail: “I think, in a way, I was always told, maybe not explicitly, my mom told me, you need to be working overtime...you could always do more. And she would always tell me, you know, there’s always a way, there’s always a way” (February 10, 2022). Abigail describes constantly hearing from her mom that there is always more work to be done. She has carried this ideal with her to college, where she hears these messages in the back of her mind and works herself to the extreme.

This value of working hard in school that these parents have is largely influenced by a desire for their children to have careers where they will be financially stable: “[My mom] has worked her whole life doing [manufacturing/low-wage jobs], and has taught me that I have to value education, so I don’t end up in the same place that she is” (Victoria, November 17, 2021). This experience and desire leads the parents of these first-generation Latinas to have a very strict idea of what a college timeline should look like. For instance, Isabella says

There were times when I was considering taking a quarter off or something like that. But any time I mentioned that to my mom, she would be like no, you’re not doing that, you’re gonna finish when you’re supposed to finish. There’s absolutely no room for that, you don’t have time for that type of thing (February 22, 2022).

Isabella feels a pressure to work hard so that she doesn’t fall behind, because her mother has a set idea of when she should graduate, which is exactly four years after she began college.

Wrestling with Guilt

While most participants identified hard work as a cultural value they grew up with, most participants also discussed being unsure of what really constitutes work.

It's difficult defining hard work when all you see back home is like people working overtime and doing really tough physical labor. And sometimes you think to yourself, and it's like, well, I'm sitting in a library for eight hours, and that's exhausting. But I can never compare. (Abigail, February 10, 2022)

The nature of work being done by students is very different from what they grew up watching their parents do. Many participants have parents who work jobs that involve standing for eight or more hours at any given time, or jobs that involve heavy lifting. Abigail mentions seeing her parents do these kinds of jobs while working over 40 hours a week. In comparison, the work that she does by studying or reading seems minimal.

Some participants reported feelings of guilt when they consider this difference in type of work, whether it's with studying or working internships. Regarding the latter, Sofia recalls "So I got this office job. And I was like, what the heck am I allowed to do, because I feel like I have to be doing something constantly" (November 8, 2021). Watching her parents work jobs that did not allow for interruptions and involved constant supervision, it was a new experience for her to work a job that allowed for more flexibility. She felt an internal pressure to take as few breaks as possible and to always be working on something. Julia also compares the type of work she is required to do in college to the type of work she grew up watching her parents do:

I just kind of...I feel guilty, you know, relying on [my parents] when they have so many things to do at home and you know, trying to compare my situation to theirs, like I study all day, I'm sitting in front of a computer all day, but they're out having to work. So I feel kind of selfish reaching out to them and being like, you know, I'm so stressed out or oh, I'm so tired (February 23, 2022).

Julia feels that because her school work does not involve being physically tired like her parents' jobs do, her tiredness is unjustified. The difference between the work that they are doing causes Julia to refrain from talking to her parents about some hardships she may be experiencing due to being overloaded with work.

Work-Life Balance

These learned ideas about what constitutes work influenced how much work participants thought they should be doing. For instance, Elena recalls her parents constantly saying “you can’t manage both working hard and having fun. You’re either working hard, or you’re having fun” (November 8, 2021). Her parents instilled in her a belief that it is not possible to have fun while you are working. Abigail talks about how growing up with a similar mindset causes her to “always think about, like, hey, is it worth me wasting a weekend to go do XYZ? You know, just for fun? Or should I get ahead and, you know, make sure that I’m on top of things?” (February 10, 2022). Even when she is up to date on her work, she still thinks twice before spending time with friends or otherwise engaging in leisurely activities over the weekend. She feels a sense of guilt about choosing to go out rather than spend her time getting ahead on her schoolwork.

Similarly, Sofia said “I drowned myself in stuff to do all the time because I felt like that was indicative of me making good use of my time and being a hardworking individual.” (November 8, 2021). She would find ways to keep herself busy to uphold this value that she had been taught by her parents. As a result, she recalls moments from her first year in college: “I would leave hanging out with friends to go do more work, because I felt like hanging out with people was just a waste of time” Sofia, November 8, 2021). The notion that a hardworking person is working all the time causes her to not see the value in spending time with friends.

Gender Norms

Taking Care of Others

When asked about gender norms in Latino culture, many participants recalled their role in the family both as daughters and older sisters. Abigail says sisters are “like the caregivers, I’m acting as a second mom” (February 10, 2022). Victoria also said “I had to learn how to be the second mother to my brothers” (Victoria, November 17, 2021). As older sisters, they had the responsibility of helping to care for their younger siblings much like a Latina mother cares for her kids. Elena says “I’m pretty sure white girls or like any other girls have no family obligations like that. And I don’t think they let their family influence their own, like personal decisions” (Elena, November 8, 2021). When comparing her upbringing to other cultures, Elena believes that non-Latina women tend to have less familial responsibilities and are allowed to have a more individualistic outlook on life as opposed to basing decisions on what their family wants or expects.

Family Reputation

Participants further differentiated the role of Latino sons and Latina daughters by how outsiders judge their actions. Abigail says “Latina daughters aren’t supposed to mess up in any way. Because that’s a reflection of not only their mom, but like, their family overall” (February 10, 2022). The choices of Latina daughters are harshly scrutinized by outsiders and taken to be an indicator of how much one should respect the family that raised them. Growing up, Isabella remembers being taught to “make sure I’m presentable and having really good poise so I can be respected outside the house” (Isabella, February 22, 2022). In order to be respected as an individual and bring respect to her family’s name, Isabella was taught to be very mindful of her outward appearance. Sofia was taught the opposite: “Growing up, it was heavily instilled into me that caring about the way that you look, or caring about the opposite sex in any way whatsoever,

was an indicator that you lacked motivation, and that your mind was in the wrong place” (November 8, 2021). In Sofia’s family, being too mindful of your appearance means you are giving too much attention to the wrong things and that you do not have a drive for success. Isabella sums up these contrasting viewpoints: “I feel like for women it’s like a losing game...there’s just so many expectations” (Isabella, February 22, 2022). It is not often that a Latina woman is seen as doing the “right” thing, but rather they are often criticized for their choices no matter what they do.

Role of Latino Men

Having established that the role of women in Latino culture generally revolves around them being caretakers, participants discussed what the role of Latino men entails. Unlike Latinas who have little room for error, men are seen as being granted the benefit of the doubt. Sofia says,

There’s this expectation that [as a woman] you’re going to take care of yourself from a young age, but Hispanic men, or just like men in general, they’re allowed to just suck at things and never get good at them. Because they know that there’s going to be a woman there to save the day. (November 8, 2021)

While Latinas are often taught to take care of themselves in terms of domestic duties, Sofia observes that men are not held to these same standards and instead depend on women to take care of these things for them.

Regarding the role of men in the Latino household, Isabella says, “growing up I was taught, not explicitly taught, but through actions that the man of the household gets the last word. What he says goes” (February 22, 2022). Isabella grew up in a household where women were expected to allow men to have the final say and to agree with whatever that decision was. This taught her to be submissive to men in general.

Influence on Academics

Growing up with those learned ideals of what a woman should be and what a man should be proved to have a significant impact on how participants behaved in school. Julia says “I do think I’m like a more quiet student, when it comes to speaking up in class. I don’t think that’s always been the case. I think that kind of happened whenever I got here” (February 23, 2022). While she has not always withheld her thoughts and opinions around men, she does catch herself doing this in college, partially because this is what she learned to do at home. Similarly, Isabella says,

If any guy would speak up I feel, I don’t know for some reason I would just think that everything they said was a really good point. Even though that might not be the case most of the time I guess I just have this upheld idea of men and them being successful, regardless of whether they actually are successful, just because, again, I grew up with the idea that the man is the powerhouse and is the one who has the last word... and that held me back from participating in class because I would be nervous to be not validated by those men. (February 22, 2022)

Growing up in a machista household causes Isabella to make the assumption that when a man speaks, he is most often right and that he is making an intelligent point. Whether or not this is actually true, Isabella does not assume that a man is ever wrong and this impacts how comfortable and willing she is to offer her own opinion in class.

In terms of how these gender roles affect their choice of major, Julia offers the following:

Latinas tend to go into roles where they would be caretakers in some way or helping people in some way. Whereas, at least many of the Latinos (men) that I know, go to college strictly for their own financial gain. It usually has to do with economics or some kind of engineering or other STEM relate (February 23, 2022).

She relates this to the concept of the Latina as a caretaker, and mentions that Latinas are less likely to pursue a career in STEM because of this conception that a Latina’s role is to take care of others and allow men to manage the household. Latino men do not tend to grow up with these

ideas, so they are more likely to pursue what makes the most financial sense to them as individuals.

Analysis (~8 pages)

Familismo as Beneficial

For most participants, the importance of family was the first thing to come to mind when asked about Latino cultural values. When elaborating on this value, all participants quickly identified various ways in which having close family ties has a positive impact on their college experience. Most notably among these reflections, participants reported especially appreciating the sense of community and support they received from their family members. As opposed to many non-Latino peers, their relationships with parents and siblings did not drastically diminish upon beginning college. Instead, participants found themselves relying heavily on their family members when they were feeling overwhelmed or simply felt like they needed to ground themselves. As students in a predominantly white campus, participants indicated being grateful to have close relationships with their parents and siblings which allowed them to call and visit as they please and rekindle feelings of home and belonging. Having these close family ties reminded them that they are not alone, and that they always have a support system in their corner.

Additionally, participants noted that the value that is placed on family in Latino culture is a major source of motivation. Many students alluded to this idea that accomplishing their degree would be not only for themselves, but also for their family members who support them from afar. In many ways, familismo fosters a group-oriented mindset as opposed to an individualistic mindset, which makes it difficult for many first-generation Latinas to leave their homes and families to attend an institution that only immediately benefits them. Recognizing that they are

accomplishing a larger goal of making their families and communities proud, and working to eventually be able to financially support their parents, gives them a lot of comfort and helps to mitigate feelings of selfishness one might have about leaving their home to attend an elite institution with a plethora of resources. The support their families provide helps to give first-generation Latinas a sense of purpose and motivates them to do well in school.

Having family as an additional support system is especially important to first-generation Latinas at elite institutions such as Uchicago because for many, family provides a sense of comfort, belonging, and understanding that is otherwise hard to find on campuses with low populations of people of color. While recognized student organizations put in a lot of effort to attempt to replicate those feelings, it is important to recognize the unique positive impact on mental health that cultural values can have on students. Additionally, since family is a value that a majority of Latinas grew up with and are accustomed to prioritizing, it is important that Latinas are equipped to handle the transformations that attending college will inevitably bring to these close relationships so that they can continue to enjoy the benefits of familismo after they leave the home.

Familismo as Damaging

While there are many ways close family ties improve the college experience of a first-generation Latina, there are also various ways in which these ties hinder a students' time in college. Most prominently, while students appreciate knowing they will eventually be able to financially support their families, there is also an *expectation* that they have to support their families. These feelings of simultaneously being both an individual with interests and passions and a form of insurance for aging parents is a significant burden to carry that can have many negative impacts. This expectation causes students to pursue careers in science, technology,

engineering, and math (STEM) or business that may not personally interest them, but appears to be a path to financial success. Since there is a lack of interest, many students find themselves struggling to succeed in these types of classes. This lack of success appears to be due not to a lack of knowledge or skills, but rather to factors relating to their status as first-generation students of color. In a predominantly white institution, it is no surprise that first-generation Latinas make up a small percentage in virtually any department, and especially in STEM and economics classes. Additionally, a majority of professors in these fields are white males. These two factors combined create an environment where participants felt less able and willing to reach out to peers to form study groups or attend office hours to receive additional guidance from professors or teaching assistants. These feelings of failure, isolation, and general disinterest have negative effects on students' mental health because of the pressure of needing to succeed.

These feelings of discontentment have negative impacts on the relationships first-generation Latinas have with their families and their friends. For the former relationship, first-generation Latinas might experience feelings of resentment towards their family members, who might not be equipped to completely understand what a college workload is like or how the grading system differs from what they were previously used to, yet continue to pressure them into meeting certain expectations that may no longer be feasible. Further resentment can arise from the fact that first-generation Latinas often defer pursuing their personal interests and careers while they pursue more lucrative fields for the sake of family. These familial relationships can then be strained by the intense pressure and stress a first-generation Latina may feel throughout her first few weeks in college, especially if she is enrolled in classes where she feels she doesn't have the resources to succeed. Many students might interpret their hardships in class as a sign to

significantly increase the time they spend studying, which means they will have less time to tend to their relationships outside of school, including family.

As for relationships with friends, this push from parents for first-generation Latinas to pursue careers in STEM might limit the amount of students and professors of color she meets in her first few weeks of college, a critical time for new people, establishing friendships, and learning to navigate white spaces. Many first-generation Latinas will find themselves in classrooms and activities with peers they cannot relate to at all, which makes it difficult to create meaningful connections. Even when these meaningful connections are made, the pressure faced by first-generation Latinas makes it difficult to maintain these relationships. Latinas may choose to refrain from participating in social events to ensure that they are working hard, as their parents taught them, so that they can one day support them. This places a strain on friendships, especially those with people who come from different backgrounds, which may cause miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Furthermore, participants reported being regularly concerned about the wellbeing of their families. Physically leaving for college meant that participants could no longer help take care of their younger siblings or help their mothers around the house. Considering the gender norms existing in Latino culture that encourage women to be caretakers of both men and children while maintaining various domestic responsibilities, this topic is one that is specific to Latinas. Latinas experience a significant amount of mental discomfort resulting from the duality of needing or wanting to take care of their families, while also recognizing that college is an important time to develop their independence and pursue their own passions. Given that they are the first in their families to leave for college, first-generation Latinas are often not equipped to cope with this cognitive dissonance that arises from the value of putting your family first, yet also embarking

on this unprecedented experience that is university, which often requires a student to geographically distance themselves from family and therefore be unable to engage with this value as much as they might be used to. Living with this mental game of tug-of-war is exhausting and likely to cause added stress for first-generation Latinas.

These feelings of guilt and constant worry appear to be more prevalent during one's first couple of years in college, when the concept of being away from home is still relatively new. Many participants recalled their mothers taking their decision to attend a college that requires dorming in a personal way, and additionally adding to the feelings of guilt by reminding daughters that they will be left without a helping hand. While most people experience feelings akin to homesickness throughout their initial months away from home, first-generation Latinas are especially impacted by this because it means abandoning their roles and responsibilities and trading them in for privileged experiences that cannot be shared with family. Many Latinas do recognize the benefits of attending a prestigious college as a way to reduce the dissonance they likely experience. However, another mental conflict is faced when they compare the work they do in school to the work their parents do for a living. By dismissing the mental work they do on a daily basis as "not enough" or "not comparable" to more physical forms of work, first-generation Latinas miss out on a key aspect of managing one's mental health, which is to see the work they do as meaningful and valid, and recognizing this as something be proud of.

Traditional Social and Classroom College Experiences

There is an immediate distinction between the social experiences of first-generation Latinas and those of their white counterparts because of the previously established guilt and pressure that Latinas carry. This guilt and pressure, combined with the Latino value of working

hard, causes students to question whether they deserve a break or if spending time with friends is a waste of time that could have been spent getting ahead on schoolwork. Since these students are the first in their families to attend college, there is a pressure to do extra well to make their families proud. Many participants reported passing up on social opportunities in order to focus on their work, call their families, or simply feeling as if it was not something they deserved. These actions further distance Latinas from their peers, as others who do not come from similar backgrounds may not understand why first-generation Latinas might place more emphasis on family as opposed to individualism. By isolating themselves in this way, they are missing out on valuable opportunities to develop social skills and deepen their understanding of themselves. The consequences of this become more impactful as time goes on. In one's final years of college, these relationships become extremely important for networking purposes. At this time, first-generation Latinas will have limited resources to help them decipher what kind of career they want to pursue, whether they want to continue their education, and how to go about the process of doing both. Resources run by the university do exist and are important, however it is also meaningful to get feedback and guidance from people who know you well and whom you are comfortable with.

Questions discussing cultural gender norms revealed that first-generation Latinas who grew up in households where the man is the head and the women are caretakers were less likely to participate in class or attend office hours. In classrooms surrounded by many peers who grew up in spaces that encouraged them to always contribute to conversations, Latinas are further disadvantaged because of the intimidation that comes with unlearning traditional gender norms and instead learning how to make your voice heard. This is an important skill to develop in college in preparation for interviews, internships, and future careers. Being confident that what

you have to say has value and adds to the conversation is a skill that first-generation Latinas must learn years after their peers have learned it. For most classes, participation is a key component of your grade and engaging with professors outside of class is critical not only for success in the classroom, but also for guidance regarding career pathways and letters of recommendation that might be needed in the future for graduate school or fellowship applications. Feeling comfortable to offer a differing perspective in class or schedule a meeting with a professor might seem trivial initially, as the most apparent consequences are relatively short-term. However, these lessons are incredibly valuable and have significant implications once one begins to consider their place in the workforce.

Recommendations

Based on evidence produced from this study and gathered from previous research regarding this topic, this study recommends that all first-generation Latinas at the University of Chicago should be required to attend an event during their Orientation Week that provides resources to help foster a sense of belonging, comfort, and ultimately contributes to their success as a student. This programming should be culturally sensitive, inclusive, and comprehensive. This study also recommends that the program should be run by a Latina faculty member or a faculty member who is a person of color and has received extensive training on the experiences of first-generation Latinas and is committed to promoting their mental health and wellbeing. Third and fourth year first-generation Latinas should also help to facilitate the event in order to provide first year students with familiar faces they can connect with and reach out to in the future.

Orientation Programming Curricula

The following is an outline of what this study recommends should be taught and reviewed during the orientation event.

- I. Identity
 - A. Discussion of students' different backgrounds and how they impact who they are today
 - B. Identify students' passions and interests, and discuss how to get involved in them on campus
- II. Personal Development Workshop
 - A. Discussion of what students value and how well their personal interests align with other values and concerns
 - B. College as a place to not only gain education and practical skills, but also experience
- III. Major Choice and Career Paths
 - A. Gender Disparities in Majors and Salaries
 - B. Salary Transparency
 - C. Alumni Guest Speakers on Career Paths
- IV. Boundary Setting/Conversations with Family
 - A. Discussion of healthy dynamics
 - B. How to set and reinforce boundaries
- V. Imposter Syndrome
 - A. What is "work?"

- B. Taking advantage of available resources (office hours, networking, RSO's)

VI. Taking Care of Yourself

- A. Importance of balancing life and work
- B. Mental health resources - how and when to access them

Rationale

Upon entering college, many students are beginning to consider who they are and how they will change in the next four years. It is important to begin by exploring their backgrounds, what they value, what their passion is. Students will be better prepared to decipher what they want to invest their time and energy in on campus. If there is something they are interested in but they are uncertain about what the path looks like, this should be a safe space for students to receive advice and guidance to begin exploring that area. It is equally important to discuss the importance of the personal growth that is to come. By teaching students that growth is positive, it may mitigate some of the feelings of guilt many may have about leaving their families to pursue their education. Additionally, it may teach them the importance of engaging in events and activities that promote their personal development and independence. Having established the self, it is important to consider how this translates into what they will study. It is important for students to make informed decisions about their major as opposed to encouraging a decision that is made lightly on the pretense that all majors will lead to financial success. It is important for students to know how their status as minority women influences their future earnings, as these students are under immense pressure to support their family at the conclusion of their four years.

Finally, it is important to address students' mental health in a variety of capacities including ensuring that students have access to the tools they need to have difficult conversations

with their families, mitigate feelings of not doing “enough,” seeing their work and struggles as valid, and pointing out exactly where and how one can reach out to for help regarding mental health issues. The topics presented in the outline touch on most of the difficulties first-generation Latinas experience when they first arrive on campus. By having difficult discussions and providing students with resources, they will be better prepared for the challenges they will experience in college and in the professional world. They will feel more confident in taking control of their informed decisions.

This outline is meant to serve as a starting point for the University of Chicago to better serve and support its population of first-generation Latinas from the moment they stop on campus. This is not an exhaustive list of topics that first-generation Latinas should learn about, nor can all of the information be compressed into a single one-day session, however, it sets the foundation for administrators and students to begin to shed light on these topics and create a space where first-generation Latinas can thrive. This study and curricula outline not only aim to highlight key areas where first-generation Latinas are lacking support, but also provide a potential solution.

Key Take-Aways by Population

The following lists are key points for the intended audiences of this study, and are meant to summarize the study in a brief manner.

Parents

- Choosing to attend an out-of-state college or moving out to live closer to campus is not done out of spite, nor is it an attempt to leave home. This is a hard decision for your daughter as well. How you choose to support her will be an influential factor in her mental health and well-being

- Your daughter will invariably have less time on her hands. It is important to support her especially when she is most strained for time

Administers and Professors

- First-generation Latinas will likely feel out of place, overwhelmed, and unsure of their capabilities. Create spaces where they feel safe and welcome to contribute to conversations
- Familiarize yourself with the backgrounds that first-generation Latinas are coming from. This will help you understand how to best support them, and how what they need differs from the average student

First-Generation Latinas

- Whether you arrive at college feeling like you have it all figured out or feeling completely lost, take advantage of all the resources available. They are meant to help you succeed, and they are a great place to get to know students who come from similar backgrounds as you
- Take time to take care of yourself. It's hard feeling tied to two places - home and your education. Know that your feelings are valid, and identify ways that others can help you manage those feelings

Conclusion

This study utilized the interviews of seven undergraduate first-generation Latinas at the University of Chicago to delve deeper into the impact of cultural values and gender norms on their experiences as students at an elite university. The goal of this study was to identify areas in which participants need extra support from the University, and develop an outline for how

students can begin to address these issues right from the beginning to better serve this group of students.

The results of this study confirmed that while cultural values and norms have aspects that are beautiful and beneficial, there are also ways in which these values are not necessarily conducive to a Western approach to higher education. Hosting an Orientation Week event for this particular group of students can help to address the duality of these values, and better prepare students to make the most of their time at this prestigious university. By addressing these issues faced by first-generation Latinas, their struggles are recognized as valid and worth investing in a solution.

It is not enough for first-generation Latinas to have a seat at the table, especially when they are not equipped with the tools and support systems they need to best utilize their seat. While getting first-generation Latinas in the door is indisputably a necessary objective, further resources must be invested to ensure that upon graduating, they are pursuing meaningful careers that allow them to continue honoring their familial values. This study understands that there is not a clear-cut “solution” for the complexities of attending an elite university as a student of color, nor can all of the issues be addressed in a single sitting. However, this study hopes that its existence encourages first-generation Latinas to persevere through it all, and encourages professors and administrators to care for these students and provide them with ample resources to help mitigate these challenges.

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Appendix A
In Person Recruitment Script

My name is Ashley Del Toro, and I am an undergraduate Public Policy student at the University of Chicago. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study on how cultural values such as gender roles and familial expectations impact the college experiences of first-generation undergraduate Latinas at the University of Chicago. The purpose of this study is to learn how students perceive these values and responsibilities, how this perception has changed throughout the students' time in college, and if there are any benefits or negative effects of these responsibilities. You may participate if you are a University of Chicago student between the ages of 18-23 who identifies as a first-generation, female, Latina student.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in one 60-90 minute interview. These interviews will be conducted in person, barring any illness or personal preference to connect via Zoom. With your consent, the interviews will be audio-recorded. All information will be kept strictly confidential using the University of Chicago's cloud based storage service that is password-protected and encrypted. Personal and identifying information will always be replaced with pseudonyms.

Participation in this study does not involve any risks to participants beyond those of everyday life. Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study. Identifiable information will never be shared outside the research team. The information collected as part of this research will not be used or shared for future research studies, even if all identifiers are removed. All personal or identifying information will be redacted to protect the identity of participants.

Participation is completely voluntary and will in no way impact your standing with the University of Chicago.

If you would like to participate in this research study, please provide me with your email so you can receive a copy of the consent form. Once the consent form has been reviewed, we will schedule an interview time.

Do you have any questions? If you have any questions later, please contact me via email ashleydeltoro@uchicago.edu or via phone at (312) 802-7120.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, feel you have been harmed, or wish to discuss other study-related concerns with someone who is not part of the research team, you can contact the University of Chicago Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB): phone (773) 702-2915, email sbs-rib@uchicago.edu.

This research is approved by the University of Chicago's IRB under protocol number IRB21-1744.

Appendix B
Email Recruitment

Dear XYZ,

My name is Ashley Del Toro and I am currently working on my Public Policy thesis project. I have decided to study the impact of cultural barriers that first generation Latinas encounter throughout their time in college. In particular, I am interested in how familism and gender norms shape a student's decisions, experiences, and overall well being.

I am reaching out to your organization because I am hoping to conduct in-person interviews with 10-15 participants. I would deeply appreciate it if you were willing to forward this flyer to your organization and mailing list.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me if there are any questions.

Warmly,
Ashley Del Toro
University of Chicago, Class 2022



Appendix C Online Consent Form for Research Participation

Study Number: IRB21-1744

Study Title: The Impact of Cultural Values and Norms on First-Generation Latinas

Researchers: Ashley Del Toro and [Chad Broughton](#)

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Description: We are researchers at the University of Chicago doing a research study about how cultural values such as gender roles and familial expectations impact the college experiences of first-generation undergraduate Latinas at the University of Chicago. The purpose of this study is to learn how students perceive these values and responsibilities, how this perception has changed throughout the students' time in college, and if there are any benefits or negative effects of these responsibilities.

Any University of Chicago student between the ages of 18-23 who identifies as a first-generation, female, Latina student will be eligible to participate in this study.

You will be asked to participate in one 60-90 minute interview. These interviews will be conducted in person, barring any illness or person preference to connect via Zoom. With your consent, the interviews will be audio-recorded. All information will be kept strictly confidential. Personal and identifying information will always be replaced with pseudonyms.

Financial Information: Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation in this study does not involve any risks to you beyond those of everyday life. Taking part in this study may not benefit you personally, but we may learn new things that could help others.

Confidentiality: Identifiable information will never be shared outside the research team. The information collected as part of this research will not be used or shared for future research studies, even if all identifiers are removed. All personal or identifying information will be redacted to protect the identity of participants. All participants will be given a pseudonym upon transcription of the interview. The key that links participants to their unique pseudonym will be kept in encrypted storage.

Interviews will be audio-recorded using an application on a password protected and encrypted phone. The recordings will be transferred to the UChicago secure Box site within 24 hours. This recording will then be transcribed, and the audio-recording will be deleted after transcription. The transcripts will be stored in the UChicago secure Box site, which will only be accessed through a password-protected computer. All data will be disposed of following the conclusion of the research.

If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used.

Contacts & Questions:

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you can contact Ashley Del Toro: phone (312) 802-7120, email ashleydeltoro@uchicago.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, feel you have been harmed, or wish to discuss other study-related concerns with someone who is not part of the research team, you can contact the University of Chicago Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB): phone (773) 702-2915, email sbs-rib@uchicago.edu.

Consent:

Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawing from the research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You will be provided a copy of this form. By clicking “Agree” below, you confirm that you have read the consent form, are at least 18 years old, and agree to participate in the research. Please print or save a copy of this page for your records.

- I agree to participate in the research
- I do NOT agree to participate in the research

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

The following questions are what I intend to ask my participants during the interviews. The first section is to gain demographic information, and the second set of questions will involve familial obligations, gender roles, and cultural values. All of these topics have been identified as important in the literature. If necessary, in order to touch on all of these topics, I will ask follow up or clarification questions.

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your expected graduation year?
3. What is your major?
4. Do you have any siblings?
 - a. Are you the eldest?
 - b. Do you have any sisters?
5. How do you identify ethnically?
6. Where were you born?
 - a. If outside of the US, when did you come to the US?
7. Describe the demographic makeup of your hometown.
 - a. Was it predominantly white or people of color?
8. Did you grow up in a single-parent or two-parent household?
9. What is the highest level of education your parent(s) received?
10. How do you identify in terms of socioeconomic status?

Open-Ended Questions

1. When you consider your ethnic identity, what are some values that come to mind?
 - a. How were you taught these values?
 - b. Do you agree or disagree with any of these values? Which ones?
 - i. When did you begin to agree or disagree with these values?
 - ii. What influenced this change?
 - c. How do these values compare with your non-Latino/a peers?
 - d. Do these values affect your academic decisions in college? Your social decisions?
 - i. Academic decisions can include your choice of major, the classes you choose to take, the days you take classes, etc.
 - ii. Social decisions can include your choice of friends, how you spend your leisure time, whether you drink or smoke, etc.
 - e. Are these values a source of stress for you?
 - f. Do these values provide you with any benefits or comfort?
2. Considering these ethnic or cultural values, have you ever had an experience in which a peer had differing cultural values or you felt misunderstood? How did you handle the situation? How did you feel during and after the interaction?
3. When you consider your gender identity, what are some cultural norms that come to mind?
 - a. Are these gender norms related to any of the cultural values you talked about previously?
 - b. How did you learn these gender norms?
 - c. In what ways do these gender norms affect your experience as a student?

- i. Do they affect your social relationships at all?
 - ii. Do they affect how you view certain areas of study?
 - d. How do these norms compare to your male (Latino) counterparts?
 - i. How does this make you feel?
 - ii. Are your interactions with Latino peers influenced by these norms?
 - e. How do these norms compare to your non-Latino/a peers?
 - i. Tell me about when you first noticed this discrepancy.
 - ii. How does this make you feel?
 - f. Are these gender norms a source of stress for you?
- 4. What do you think was expected of you from your parents as a child growing up?
 - a. Were these expectations similar to expectations your parents had for your siblings?
 - b. Do you believe that these expectations are at all connected to your gender?
 - c. Once you began college, were you/are you still held to these same expectations?
 - d. Do you feel that anything new or different is expected of you?
 - e. How have these expectations changed since you began college?
- 5. How would you describe your role in your family?
 - a. What are some of the responsibilities you had at home before attending college?
 - i. Did you have any obligations to care for younger family members?
 - 1. What did this care look like?
 - ii. Did you have any financial obligations?
 - iii. Did you have any obligations regarding language translation or assimilation?
 - iv. Are there responsibilities you were not explicitly told or asked to fulfill but you did anyway? What were they?
 - 1. Why did you take on these responsibilities?
- 6. How would you describe your role in the family once you began college?
 - a. How did your role in your family change?
 - b. Do you have any familial responsibilities while you are in school?
- 7. Think back to your senior year of high school. What were some of your major considerations when deciding which college to attend?
 - a. Did your family offer any input on these considerations?
 - b. What role did your parents play in your choice of college?
 - i. How active of a role did they play in the application process?
 - ii. Did they influence your final decision at all?
- 8. What are your family's expectations regarding higher education?
 - a. How were these expectations communicated to you?
- 9. Why did you choose to attend the University of Chicago?
 - a. Why did you choose to study your choice of major?
 - b. What motivates you to continue your education?

10. How far is the University of Chicago from your home?
 - a. Did this have an influence on your decision to attend?
11. How often do you visit/call your family?
 - a. Who initiates these visits/calls, you or your family?
 - b. How do these calls/visits make you feel?
12. What does success mean to you?
 - a. What do you hope to accomplish with your degree?
13. What was your transition to college like?
 - a. What were some difficulties you faced?
 - i. Were there any academic difficulties?
 - ii. Were there any environmental difficulties?
 - b. What helped you cope with the transition?
 - c. Did you experience a culture shock at all? How?
 - d. In what ways, if any, did you feel supported by your family?
 - e. In what ways, if any, did you feel that your family was a source of stress for you?
14. Where do you find community in college?
 - a. Why do you feel particularly drawn to these groups or organizations?
 - b. Do you feel understood in these spaces?
15. Do you feel that your family understands the culture and demands of college?
 - a. How has this understanding changed throughout your time in college?
 - b. If you felt that your parents didn't understand, did you do anything to try to help them understand?
16. Thinking about all the questions you were asked today, how do you think your white peers navigate through school or interact with these topics differently than you?
 - a. If a participant identifies a difference, how does this difference make you feel?
 - b. Were you prepared or warned about this difference prior to starting college?
17. Is there any other way you feel Latino cultural values impact your overall college experiences and/or mental health that we have not yet discussed?