“Latinos” are the fastest growing population in the United States. They are an ethnically diverse group of people from different national origins and races (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Approximately one in seven people in the United States are of “Latino/a” origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Yet, despite this surge of “Latinos” in the U.S. population they continue to be the most misunderstood and undereducated ethnic minority group in the United States (Gracia & De Greif, 2000). This study speaks to the problems of ethnic labeling, acculturation and assimilation, educational underachievement, and marginalization encountered by a select group of “Latino/a” students and the impact these have on the formation and affirmation of identity. In an effort to promote greater understanding of “Latinos,” this study examined how ethnic identity unfolds and changes as “Latino/a” college students negotiate what it means to be different in learning environments where their official ethnic categorization represents a small minority. My interest was to build theory on how the informants’ perceptions of institutional climates for racial and ethnic differences, cultural identification and practices, and minority status all intersect to influence and shape the formation of ethnic identity and ultimately, integration into the academic and social systems of the university.

“Latino/a” Ethnic Identity

The findings of my two-year ethnographic investigation were derived and presented through the narrations of a group of undergraduate “Latino/a” students at a predominantly white, land-grant, research institution. The narrations revealed perspectives that were multiple and at times contradictory because they emerged from a group of ethnically diverse individuals from varying national origins and emergent discourses generated by a variety of personal and contextual experiences that contradict the concept of a “Latino/a” pan-ethnicity.

Ethnic labeling is a hegemonic process that undermines the ethnic identity, social experiences, culture, and political beliefs of collective groups of people (Gracia & De Greiff, 2000). The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” are interchangeably used to refer to a heterogeneous population of people who outside the United States do not recognize themselves as a single pan-ethnic group (Mendieta, 2000). These labels fail to contextualize the specific histories, ethos and cultural values that define and distinguish the many people who hail from a diverse number of
Latin American countries, communities, and families arriving into the United States everyday (Oboler, 1995; Trueba, 1999). In this study, the use of the term “Latinos” as a plural noun is consistent with Spanish grammar encompassing both masculine and feminine audiences (Kattan-Ibarra & Pountain, 1997). However, as other researchers have noted, when the male referent term “Latino” is used as an adjective the more cumbersome form “Latino\’a” will be used so as not to exclude the representation of “Latinas” in this body of research (Goodwin, 2002; Hernandez, 2000).

In the United States, racialized ethnic identity implies homogeneity, easily visible identifying features and biological heredity (Alcoff, 2000). For “Latinos,” these characteristics simply do not apply. “Latinos” share a wide variety of phenotypes. They can be white like mainstream Americans and Europeans, black as native Africans and African Americans, as Asian as Japanese or Chinese, or they can look like Indians from a variety of countries (Trueba, 1999). This apparent lack of phenotypical homogeneity among “Latinos” is also evident in the cultural and linguistic preferences they embrace.

Although the informants in this study all hailed from many countries and had very distinct cultures and linguistic preferences, like many immigrants who arrive from a variety of Latin American and Caribbean countries and U.S. “Latinos,” they are lumped together and labeled as one racialized ethnic group (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). While ethnic labels attempt to homogenize the identities of a vastly diverse group of people who immigrate and live here in the U.S., there is strong resistance by “Latinos” to total assimilation into mainstream American society. This suggests that instead of forming fixed or static identities as Phinney (1993) suggests, “Latinos” construct multiple identities based on national and cultural background, gender, religious beliefs, career choices, and a variety of other contributing factors that seem to change and shift with time and place (Tierney, 1993).

*New Latino\’a Diaspora*

New diaspora “Latinos” that is, those who immigrate to rural areas and parts of the United States where local residents have had little previous contact with “Latinos” (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002), arrive here seeking integration into American society as bilinguals with linguistic command of both Spanish and English and with a strong affinity to their native cultural traditions, values, and beliefs (Herndez-Chavez, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Because residents in these locations are unaccustomed to these “outsiders,” diaspora “Latinos” face many
challenges to their ethnic identities arising from racism, discrimination, and lack of educational and economic opportunities (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002). The dilemma that plagues U.S. “Latinos” is that of inclusion into mainstream American society, which they are categorically denied because of ethnicity, language, class, and political marginalization (Mendietta, 2000). Consequently, borrowing from Villenas (2002), this dilemma forces “Latinos” to make “unnecessary dichotomized choices” (p. 31) between their own native language and cultures and/or that of American mainstream society. These issues represent the very same reasons why “Latinos” remain “the poorest of the poor, as well as the most undereducated” minority population in the United States (Mendieta, 2000, p. 45).

Over the past decades, immigration in the United States has significantly changed in the diversity of color, class, and cultural origin of people who courageously leave their homelands in search of a new life in United States (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). This huge shift in immigration has fundamentally changed the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population and the social meaning of American identity (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001). The processes of acculturation and assimilation can provide insight into the uprooting experiences that are often associated with immigration.

**Acculturation and Assimilation**

Although immigrant families migrate with the determinations to adapt to their new host environment, acculturation can be a source of stress. Borrowing from Skuza (in press), understanding the stresses associated with acculturation can be an important entry point into the everyday lives and experiences of immigrant youths. Acculturation refers to the immigrant’s experience of adapting to a new or different culture (Garza & Gallegos, 1995). Assimilation, on the other hand, “refers to the cultural absorption of a non-dominant person into a dominant culture” (Skuza, in press, p.5). “Subtractive assimilation,” refers to school policies and practices, which suppress “Latino/a” students of their native language and culture (Valenzuela, 1999). Although schools may explicitly advocate respect for cultural and linguistic differences, their goals for these students are often that of cultural replacement and assimilation into mainstream values and practices (Gibson, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). As illustrated by the students’ narratives, acculturation, assimilation, and subtractive assimilation can be sources of stress for “Latinos” and other ethnic minorities attempting to become a part of mainstream American society.
The demands of adapting to a new language, unfamiliar rules and laws, lifestyle changes (e.g. moving from rural to urban environments), discrimination, and cultural traditions of a new or different society may lead to increased stress (Berry, 1980; Berry & Kim, 1988). In this case, individuals may encounter an array of emotional, physical, and psychological problems resulting from the intercultural contact with the host environment (Berry, 2003). These problems may range from depression, fatigue, anxiety, heightened sense of frustration, and helplessness and loneliness.

Schooling

Schooling was another entry point for understanding the pathways of identity formation of the participants, because it is in schools that they acquire the competencies to integrate into mainstream society (Banks, 1977; Goodwin, 2002; Valdes, 1996; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). American schools are political domains that serve as agents of socialization whose formal pedagogy and curriculum reflect mainstream society (Giroux, 1983). “Latino\'a” students, both first-generation and those born in the continental United States, arrive in American public schools with high aspirations and determination to succeed. However, problems arising from their socioeconomic backgrounds, teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and practices (deficit thinking, ethnic stereotypes) all have a negative affect on “Latino\'a” student academic achievement (Espinoza-Harold, 2003).

Deficit Thinking and American Schools

Within the confines of American educational spaces, ethnic minority students are often judged by their lack of English skills and white middle class wealth and values (Deyhle, 1995). Instead of utilizing the cultural capital that “Latinos” bring to their classrooms in the form of family values, Spanish language ability, and culture, educators marginalize and often treat them as inferior (Gibson, 1993; Goodwin, 2002; Valencia, 1997, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Most of the “Latino\'a” students’ in this study entered American schools with competencies in math, science and other subjects, however, their deficiencies in English language skills overshadowed their academic skills. Deficit thinkers insist that “Latino\'a” children are underachievers who are both culturally deprived and must be taught mainstream culture (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966), or that they are culturally different and therefore, are mismatched with school culture (Baratz & Baratz, 1970).
In spite of the prevalence of deficit thinking among educators today, “Latino\a” students recognize the value of education and have strong aspirations to succeed academically, socially, and vocationally. However, because we live in a society where mainstream culture systematically devalues minority culture and values, the true potential of many “Latinos,” like those who participated in this study may never be achieved unless there is significant reform in our schools (Espinoza-Harold, 2003).

In spite of the subtractive elements of American schools and the deficit thinking that is perpetuated by many of its educators, the evidence found in this study implies that despite the many barriers that stand in the way of academic achievement, there is determination to overcome them as a matter of self and ethnic pride, and the desire to debunk negative ethnic stereotypes that mainstream Americans attribute to “Latinos.” Early in their educational pathways, the students in this study learned to engage in “critical resistant navigational skills” for achieving success in school (Solozano & Villalpondo, 1998, p. 216). These survival skills emerged from their abilities to resist a system of education and socialization that devalues and subtracts their ethnicity and cultural capital (Valenzuela, 1999). The informants in this study, learned early on to disassociate themselves from oppositional behavior, to develop positive academic self-concept, and to rely on social networks and cultural and linguistic capital as strategies for negotiating subtractive schools (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Rodriguez, 1996; Sedlacek, 1989).

In fact, the students” experiences within subtractive schools and their ability to succeed within them influenced that formation of identities that embodied elements of resilience. Resilience is associated with one’s ability to excel in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles (Gordon, 1996). The participants in this study exemplified resilience because despite the many problems associated with immigration, acculturation, and assimilation, they have succeeded in graduating from high school and pursuing a college degree. Although a large portion of the knowledge about “Latinos” in American schools is derived from a plethora of literature from elementary and secondary educational research (Espinoz-Harold, 2003; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Valencia, 2002), there is much to be learned about “Latinos” who endure the subtractive elements of elementary and secondary education and courageously pursue higher education. The stories of the informants in this study provide some insight on the college experiences of “Latinos” who pursue higher education.
Summary

This ethnographic investigation has explored the notion of “Latino\'a” ethnic identity through the narrations of a group of ethnically diverse college students. I examined how “Latino\'a” identity develops and changes as “Latino\'a” students negotiate what it means to be different in learning environments where their official ethnic categorization represented a small minority. My interest was in building theory on how the informants’ perceptions of institutional climates for racial and ethnic differences, cultural identification and practices, and minority status intersect to influence and shape the fluid formation of ethnic identity and ultimately, the integration of these ethnic minority students into the academic and social systems of a university where people of color are relatively few in number compared to its white Anglo population.

In chapter 2, I begin to contextualize the study by providing a brief ethnographic self-portrait of my own experiences as a point of entry into my research on the complexities of “Latino\'a” ethnic identity and the impact academic institutions have on its development. In chapter 3, I begin to explore the many facets of “Latino\'a” ethnic identity by examining the complexities of “Latino\'a” pan-ethnic identity, familial contexts, and the many pathways of identity formation undertaken by the thirteen students whose stories provided insight into the dilemma of a pan-Latino\'a ethnicity. It is in this chapter that I begin to problematize the notion of Latinidad by elaborating on the many different national origins, cultural affiliations, linguistic preferences, and distinct ways the informants in this study articulate “Latino\'a” ethnic identity. Their narratives characterize Latinidad as a vastly complex mosaic of identities that do not represent a single homogenized pan-ethnic group. In chapter 4, I continue my examination of the many facets of “Latino\'a” ethnic identity formation through an extended discussion on the acculturation and assimilation processes endured by first and second-generation children of immigrants. Moreover, I take a closer look at some elements of subtractive education and deficit thinking and the effects these have on “Latino\'a” identity formation and academic achievement. In Chapter 5, I present a descriptive account of the setting where the study takes place (Virginia Tech) through a series of vignettes.

The vignettes provide historical perspectives that helped to generate an understanding of the interactions between the participants and the institution. They illustrate that while historical experiences, national origin, culture, and linguistic preferences do have a role in the formation of ethnic identity, the manner in which these elements selectively intertwined in response to
particular events within the campus community, appeared at times to be strategically employed. Finally, in Chapter 6, I draw conclusions from the findings of my two-year ethnographic investigation to explain how the lived experiences of these students at a predominantly white university, changed my own perspectives and understandings of “Latino\’a” identity as a way of informing others. The salient issues of “Latino\’a” identity construction articulated by the informants provide important insight that can generate greater understanding of this rapidly growing ethnic population in U.S. institutions of higher learning.
Identity is about how we constitute and situate ourselves in relationship to others (Rodriguez, 2003). Spaces (particularly those in academic institutions) provide the context through which identities are shaped and constructed; they provide the means for interpreting practices, values, and beliefs that are maintained within them (Calabrese Burton, Drake, Gustavo Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Rodriguez, 2003). Identities are constructed as individuals interact with culturally and linguistically distinct people on a regular basis (Trueba, 1999).

Social institutions (the academy) are set up in ways that exert pressures and constraints on the types of identities that can be maintained and exhibited within them. They perpetuate this by the participants they recruit and nurture, the interactional spaces they create, the goals and tasks they define, and the ways they assess performance within these spaces (Calabrese Burton et al, 2004). As a point of entry into my research on the complexities of “Latino\'a” ethnic identity and the impact academic institutions have on its development, I begin this chapter with an ethnographic self-portrait of myself (the researcher) and my motivation for this study

*Ethnographic Self-Portrait: Pathways Toward Defining the Self*

In my attempts to understand the struggles of “Latinos” in this country, my study on “Latino\'a” ethnic identity is a small step in that direction. My own experiences serve as milestones for exploring the many complex issues that impinge upon the “Latino\'a” persona and subsequently, the accentuation of differences between these diverse groups of people who are referred to as “Latinos” by mainstream Americans.

By birth, I am a native Puerto Rican. However, in 1917 island natives were granted U.S. citizenship, as a result of the United States’ acquisition of the island from Spain in the war of 1898 (Ayala, 1996). Puerto Rican migration to mainland U.S. peaked in the 1950s as a result of economic changes arising from the transformation of the island’s economy from a “monocultural plantation economy” into one of “export-production” (Ayala, 1996, p. 61.). The transition from agriculture to manufacturing led to a massive shift of rural populations to the cities of Puerto Rico and mainland USA that subsequently, resulted in massive unemployment of plantation workers. My family who had come from several generations of *campesinos* (farming people) fell victim to unemployment during this era. Consequently, with the shift in the economy and the
high unemployment in Puerto Rico, my parents had to decide whether to stay in their rural home (and barely subsist) or migrate to mainland USA in search of the American dream. But having grown up in the United States, I have learned that at least for us, the American dream is nothing but rampant poverty, racism, and contempt for immigrants by mainstream Americans.

It was my father who actually made the decision to move to the mainland. My mother (the passive, faithful Puerto Rican spouse that she was) agreed to leave the island. In 1956, we arrived in New York City. While my father could be considered a voluntary immigrant (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) the rest of my family by default, were “involuntary immigrants” because we came against our own free will. Thus, 1956 marked the beginning of what would become a lifelong struggle to find our place in America.

Upon arrival we moved into a small one-bedroom apartment in Black Harlem, New York City. In retrospect, even I (in my infancy) could sense the striking differences between the concrete jungles of New York City and the acres of land that we were accustomed to freely roam around back home in the island. But this was only a minor difference between our two worlds. Nothing had prepared us for the hard times ahead in this “land of opportunity.”

By the time I was old enough to begin elementary school, we had already moved to the lower East side of Manhattan commonly known as *El Barrio* (Spanish Harlem). It was in the streets of East 100 Street that I began my acculturation into American culture and language. By listening to the black kids on the block, I learned to curse in English, and acquired quite a few important expressions that would prove to be helpful for my survival. I learned the English translations for such words as: hunger *hambre*, food *comida*, water *agua*, yes *si*, etc., and common expressions like my name is *mi nombre es*, where do you live *adonde tu vives* and so on. However, Spanish remained my primary language for communicating at home and with most of our Puerto Rican neighbors. By the time I was enrolled in first grade, I still could not speak in sentences or articulate cohesive ideas or thoughts in English. I did however, have a remarkable understanding for most of the gibberish spoken in English.

According to my parents, my first grade teacher evaluated me as “introverted” and “uncommunicative,” in spite of the fact that I had no trouble engaging in most of the classroom activities and completing the class assignments. My mother still remembers that Ms. Mayfield (fictitious name) always insisted that “the quicker I learn to speak English, the better off I would be.” My parents who had unquestionable trust in teachers, did everything to encourage this,
however, Spanish remained the only language spoken at home. If I were to learn English, it
would have to be in school. I was trapped between two worlds: struggling to learn this strange
new language, but at the same time, remaining faithful to our family traditions at home. I dared
not speak English at home in the presence of my parents for many years. I feared that I would be
abandoning who I was—a *boricua* (name given native Puerto Ricans).

Borrowing from Villenas (2002) like most children of immigrants, my encounter with the
educational system in this country was frustrating because of the painful choices I had to make:
“English or Spanish,” Puerto Rican way or the American way, “mainstream or deficit.” This
dilemma was heightened when I was enrolled in a parochial school at the beginning of my
second year in school. The Roman Catholic nuns forced my choices through public physical
abuse and constant ridicule. Whenever, they heard me speaking in Spanish or Spanglish in class,
my second grade teacher would punish me by either beating the palms of my hands with a
yardstick or forcing me to stand in front of the class where she would mock me by making fun of
my Spanish. These experiences forced me early in life to make every attempt to repress speaking
my native language. My anger and embarrassment were my motivation to acquire command of
this foreign language, so that I could show those *gringos* (disparaging term for white
Americans), that I was not “learning deficient.” For the next seven years, I forcefully
transformed myself into a monolingual *Americano* who spoke only in English and who
eventually lost his ability to speak Spanish. I had been successfully assimilated and resistance
was futile.

The problem with this form of education was that it systematically stripped away my
native language and gradually eroded my affiliation with Puerto Rican culture. These teachers
did not recognize the value of my culture and language as a foundation for building new
knowledge. Teachers labeled me as “English deficient” rather than “Spanish dominant.” My
fluency in Spanish was “construed as a barrier that [I needed] to overcome” (Valenzuela, 1999,
p. 173). Consequently, my deficiency was remediated by total immersion in a learning
environment designed to remove this “barrier.”

For many years I struggled with my own identity. I was a “Latino” as my teachers called
me, but only in the classrooms; at home I was a *Puertoriqueño*. Like the” Latino/a” students in
Wortham’s (2002) case study, I was caught in the classic either/or choice dilemma between
adapting mainstream values perpetuated by school practices or maintaining my Puerto Rican
identity that my family valued so much. My internal struggle to preserve some semblance of my Latinidad resulted in academic disengagement. Consequently, I was labeled as “learning deficient;” so I knew then that I had at least two different labels by which my school teachers categorized me by: "Latino" and “learning deficient.”

My four years at a highly selective, predominantly white, Catholic boys high school were disastrous, to say the least. Even more frustrating was how after eight years of systematic purging of my native language, my high school curriculum required four years of foreign language. We had two language choices to meet this requirement: Spanish or French. The irony of this was that as an ethnic minority, subtractive educators insisted that my ability to speak Spanish was a “barrier” to getting an education, but for monolingual, Anglo students it was intellectually enlightening for them to learn Spanish as a second language.

I barely maintained a C average in high school, but excelled in team sports. I did everything to fail out, but for fear of my parents’ wrath, I barely maintained a passing grade point average. As Fordham and Ogbu (1986) noted, getting good grades for me meant “acting white,” and I did everything I could to prevent that. The school’s guidance counselor warned that, I would be “destined to a life of failure.”

During my senior year, instead of assisting me with college applications, the guidance counselor suggested I fill out applications for welfare assistance. It was his opinion that I would never graduate from high school and that I simply was not “college material.” Therefore, my best course of action was to go on welfare. Much to his surprise, I did graduate, but did not pursue higher education for at least another year later. I found work in the mailroom of a prestigious “Fortune 500” firm on Wall Street. While working there, it became apparent to me that my supervisors neither respected me as a person nor did they value me as having the aptitude to make any contributions to their company, so I quit after a year and started college.

It was during my undergraduate years in college that I was able to reclaim my Puerto Rican identity. The ethnic studies curriculum at the colleges I attended allowed for greater exploration and expression of culture that I had never experienced before in education. It was there that I was able to feel whole again. I no longer had to deny my Puerto Rican heritage and thanks to four years of high school Spanish, I had regained fluency in Spanish. In college I learned what Gibson (1997) describes as “accommodation without assimilation.” I learned to successfully engage in learning without having to give up my own identity.
The most valuable strategy of survival that I could ever have ever learned was the ability to coexist with Anglo values and expectations while preserving my own Puerto Rican identity. It changed the way I self-identified and my perspectives on academic success. Like a chameleon, I have learned to adjust to diverse situations, places, and spaces by using a repertoire of identities that allow me to communicate and interact with individuals that are different from me while retaining my Puerto Rican-ness.

Influence on My Research

My experiences as a first generation Puerto Rican struggling to reclaim my own identity throughout my tenure in American schools has left me with many question about “Latino” identity and why we, as a community, are so misunderstood and remain “the poorest of the poor, as well as the most undereducated” (Mendieta, 2000, p. 45). This study speaks to these issues and serves as a guide for understanding the many complex issues that pertain to a “Latino” pan-identity.

Although the university served as the setting for this study, it was not meant to be the focus of my research, but rather, as an entry point into the lives of the participants (Nespor, 1977; Smith, 1987). The campus served as the backdrop for examining the impact of family history and national origin, language and culture, and institutional politics on the construction of “Latino” ethnic identity. My decision to utilize an ethnographic approach was guided by the need to generate a “rich thick” description of “Latino” ethnic identity (for a review of the Methods, see Appendix A). My reference to this study as ethnographic implies that my fieldwork consisted of in-depth interviews that were augmented by participant observations and note writing. Overall, I spent the better part of five years working within this undergraduate community both as a mentor and later as a researcher and participant observer. My in-group status within this community allowed me to build and maintain rapport and trust with the students whose stories I present in this dissertation.

Research Questions

Several questions guided my research:

- What kinds of identity repertoires (histories, life experiences, family and community affiliations) do self-identified Latino\a college students bring to the academic setting?
  - How are these related to their decision to attend this institution and the career paths they choose to specialize in?
• What kinds of educational contexts and tasks do Latino\a college students encounter?
  o Specifically, what kinds of pressures and constraints on social identification do these create (e.g. the mix of people involved, processes of exclusion and inclusion, discrimination, marginalization, and negative stereotypes, etc.)?

• What kinds of social networks do Latino\a college students establish and move through?
  o How are these networks articulated within their ethnic identity, nationality (or home ties), language, and culture?
  o How do these connect with and are utilized to negotiate the rigors of their academic majors?

In the chapters that follow, I shall explore and elaborate on the complexities of “Latino\a” identity using the narrations of a small group of ethnically diverse “Latino\a” students. My interest is to build theory on how the informants’ perceptions of institutional climates for racial and ethnic differences, cultural identification and practices, and minority status all intersect to influence and shape the formation of ethnic identity and ultimately, integration into the academic and social systems of the university. Moreover, my fieldwork is intended to serve as a guide for understanding where the diverse people that comprise this pan-ethnic group labeled as “Latino\a” come from, and what values, beliefs, and practices they bring to the educational environment.
In the previous chapter, I contextualized this study by providing an ethnographic self-portrait of my own experiences as a first-generation Puerto Rican and how they have influenced and shaped my own identity formation and motivation for my research on “Latino\'a” identity. In this chapter, I begin with a discussion on the many facets of “Latino\'a” ethnic identity, followed by the introduction of the research cohort. Subsequently, I continue this chapter with an examination of the familial contexts and pathways of identity formation undertaken by the thirteen students whose stories provided insight into the dilemma of a pan-Latino\'a ethnicity.

**Ethnic Labeling**

Ethnic labeling is a hegemonic process that undermines the ethnic identity, social experiences, and cultural practices of collective groups of people (Gracia & De Greiff, 2000). The term “Latino\'a” is interchangeably used to refer to a heterogeneous population of people who outside the United States are not recognized as a single pan-ethnic group (Mendieta, 2000). The label fails to contextualize the specific histories, ethos and cultural values that define and distinguish a large population of folks who hail from a diverse number of Latin American countries, and communities (Oboler, 1995; Trueba, 1999). In the United States, racialized group identities imply homogeneity, visible identifying features, and biological heredity (Alcoff, 2000). For “Latinos” these characteristics simply do not apply.

Recently, the U.S. Census Bureau announced there were 41.3 million “Latinos” living in the United States as of July 2004, comprising approximately 14 percent of the nation’s population. They account for 50 percent of the population growth since 2000. Current census projections estimate that by the year 2050 or sooner, “Latinos” will comprise 25% of the total population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Approximately one in seven people in the United States are of “Latino\'a” origin. The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) found that among the “Latino\'a” population in the United States, 66 percent were of Mexican origin, 14.5 percent were from Central and South America, 9 percent were Puerto Rican, 4 percent were Cuban, and the remaining 6.4 percent were of other “Hispanic” origin. Unlike other ethnic minorities in the U.S., “Latinos” are simply not homogeneous, either by race or visible traits. “Latinos” share a wide variety of phenotypes. They
can be white like mainstream Americans and Europeans, black as native Africans and African Americans, as Asian as Japanese or Chinese, or they can look like Indians from a variety of countries (Trueba, 1999). What we do share in common is a “complex history of military, political, and economically oppressive relationships over the last two hundred years” (Trueba, 1999, p. 2). Within the scope of this study, the term “Latino\a” refers to all nationalities living in the United States who were born in or trace the background of their families to one of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Central and South American nations, and second and third generation English-dominant U.S. citizens (Marin & VanOss Marin, 1991).

The New “Latino\a” Diaspora

A growing number of “Latinos” (newcomer immigrants and those already living here) are migrating to rural areas and parts of the United States where local residents have had little previous contact with “Latinos” (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002). Unlike previous “Latino\a” immigrants who arrived in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century and settled in New York, Chicago, and the southwest, “Latinos” are now settling in places like Maine, North Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas, Indiana, and rural parts of Virginia. This new migration has been called the new “Latino Diaspora” (Hamann et al, 2002, p.1). Because residents in these locations are unaccustomed to these “outsiders,” diaspora “Latinos” face many challenges to their ethnic identities arising from racism, and lack of educational and economic opportunities.

In Virginia, this growth in “Latinos” has resulted in the significant growth of the Latino\a community to 4.7 percent of the state’s population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003). Within the southwest region of the state, “Latinos” residing in the Roanoke Valley have increased from 1,359 in 2000 to 2,679 in 2003, or 1.1 percent of the total area population (Roanoke Times, 2003). However, despite the growing influx of “Latinos” in the region, their access to higher education appears to be consistently poor at Virginia’s land grant institution. “Latino\a” enrollment at Virginia Tech has never exceeded 2 percent of the total undergraduate population over the last eight years and constitutes only 1 percent of the total “Latino\a” enrollment at all four-year public institutions in the state (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2003; Virginia Tech Institutional Research and Planning Analysis, 2002). This miniscule presence of “Latinos” pursuing higher education at this and other institutions, begs for a closer look at the underlying reasons why this problem persists, despite their surge in the U.S. population.
Pan-Latino Ethnicity

Despite the growth of people who identify as “Latino” in the United States, the concept of an organized “pan-Latino” ethnicity is questionable. The term “Latino” is one that is exclusive of racial and cultural differences among a diverse population of people who have distinct cultures, linguistic preferences, and national origins (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1977; Marin & VannOss Marin, 1991; Trueba, 1999). The emergence of a collective identity among such a vastly diverse population of people emerges from our “shared common narratives of inequity, our accounts of experiencing conflict, dilemma, exclusion, and adaptation problems” in America (Trueba, 1999, p. 21). The quintessence of this new “Latino” solidarity is motivated by what Iris Marion Young describes in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, as the vulnerability of certain ethnic minority groups to oppression, marginalization, stereotyping, violence, and powerlessness (1990).

These perceived vulnerabilities specifically among U.S. “Latinos” has prompted a growing movement of individuals to cross ethnic group boundaries in search of solidarity in a broader “Latino” collective (Trueba, 1999). The significance of this new “Latino” solidarity arises from the many who have survived the immigration experience and is reflective of their “collective survival and selective successes” over several generations (Trueba, 1999, p. 9). Moreover, this new solidarity emphasizes the collective survival of all “Latinos,” rather than the survival of the individual. Yet, despite the number of people who seem to identify with *Latinidad*, there are many scholars who question the validity of a single pan-ethnicity, particularly when such ethnic categorizations fail to account for the diversity within the many constituent communities that they attempt to unify (Alcoff, 2000; Mendieta, 2000; Morales, 2002; Rodriguez, 2003; Vazquez & Torres, 2002).

My use of the term *Latinidad* refers to what Roman and Sandoval (1995) define as a “type of organic understanding and appreciation of all things Latino” and as a rubric for “identifying and codifying various practices within “Latino” popular culture” (p.558). However, I also acknowledge Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman’s (1997) assertion that *Latinidad* should also be both “fluid” and “complex,” and that it embodies the “sets of images and attributes superimposed on both Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos” (p. 15). The findings from this study present a challenge to the basis of *Latinidad* by problematizing the various races, national origins, ethnicities, linguistic preferences, cultural traditions, ethnocentrisms, sexism,
and homophobia that are prevalent among Latin Americans in the U.S. and abroad (Aparicio & Chavez-Siverman’s, 1997; Marin & VanOss-Marin, 1991). The narrations of the students described below provided the rich data from which the findings of this study are derived.

The Participants

When I began recruiting participants for this study, I feared that responses would at best be tenuous. Unlike other research projects on campus, there were no incentives offered other than the opportunity for students to voice their stories. However, much to my surprise volunteers emerged, even during the summer months when most “Latino\a” students flee to their homes in Northern Virginia. Willingly, they came forward because they felt as if it were their personal duty to tell their stories. I felt elation and guilt; elation because of their willingness to share their stories and guilt because all that I could offer was an opportunity to listen to them.

Overall, I selected thirteen students from the twenty five participants that I had originally interviewed. I selected their narratives because their accounts provided the in-depth perspectives that I was looking for in my quest to develop a rich description of what in their own voices were their representations of Latinidad. The other twelve participants’ narratives lacked the in-depth perspectives that I was looking for either because they had limited memories of their immigration experience or since they had been born in the USA, they did not have adequate knowledge to share about family histories. I was surprised to learn from the interviews that quite a few of the students had very limited knowledge about such things as why their parents or grandparents had immigrated or about native culture. Of the thirteen students whose narratives I selected, four were females and nine were males. One of these students was an incoming freshman, four were juniors, and eight were seniors. Seven of these students were first generation immigrants, they came from a variety of countries that included Australia, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, England, Guatemala, Panama, and Peru. Six were second or third-generation U.S born citizens. They mostly hailed from Northern Virginia. Their majors ranged across all colleges at the university. There was one A student, six B students, and six C students. The youngest was eighteen and the oldest was twenty-five years old. Only three lived on campus and the other ten lived off-campus. One student was openly Gay; and at the time, another was classified as an “illegal immigrant.” His family’s petition for political asylum had been pending for over fourteen years. This student’s right to pursue a college education in one of Virginia’s public four-year institutions had to be determined at a U.S. District Court (Hebel, 2004).
The following are the students whose stories allowed me to explore the many complexities of the “Latino/a” mosaic. Each student forged identity paths that evolved around family, national origin, culture and linguistic preference and would ultimately, intersect at Virginia Tech. Although their names have been changed, I intentionally edited some details from their narratives to ensure their anonymity. In spite of the editing, their stories remain intact.

Table of the Research Cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>GEND</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>BIRTHPL</th>
<th>GEN</th>
<th>YRS/US</th>
<th>LANG</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>MAJOR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Sp/Eng</td>
<td>Junior</td>
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<td>England</td>
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<td>10 –15</td>
<td>Eng/Sp</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Birth</td>
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<td>M. E.</td>
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<td>2nd</td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Eng/Sp</td>
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Julia

Julia is a first-generation biracial “Latina” born Australia and raised in Panama. Her father is originally from the United States and her mother is from Panama. When Julia knocked on the windowpane to the office door where her interview would take place, my first impression was whether or not she had read my email about the study. As I let her in to the office my thought was “had this young lady known that this was a study about “Latino/a” students?” Neither her surname nor her physical appearance showed me any indication that she was of any Latin descent. To further confuse the issue, she mentioned that she had been born in Australia. Julia’s presence caught me making the typical stereotypes about what “Latinos” should look like (dark skin, jet black or dark brown hair, and dark eyes). She had very light skin, blond hair, and I think green or blue eyes from what my poor vision could discern. She looked more like the typical Anglo, until she started speaking Spanish with a native accent.

Julia is bilingual. From early on her mother had taught her to speak both Spanish and English. She has spent time in Panama, Australia, and later in the US. Although she was born in
Australia, she thoroughly identifies as “Panamanian” and holds the culture and language very close to heart. Although Julia has been living in the United States for five years, she is here on a “permanent residency” visa. She is a junior communication and graphic arts double major. She carries a B+ GPA.

_Santos_

Santos is a first-generation biracial "Latino" who has lived in the United States for sixteen years. His Father is from Turkey and his mother is from Chile. He has grown up in a rich cultural family environment where both cultures are dominant. His parents learned to compromise on conflicts arising from differences in cultural and religious beliefs as a way of allowing both their backgrounds to influence their children’s identity formation. One parent’s cultural or religious beliefs were never allowed to subsume the other. Hence, Santos has grown up identifying equally with both, never letting one to dominate the other. He is bilingual in both English and Spanish and is comfortable speaking both languages. However, English is his primary language. He speaks it with no apparent accent.

Santos expresses great pride in having the privilege of identifying with two very distinct cultures and sharing that richness with others. He is a senior working on a double degree in Finance and Business management. His current GPA is B.

_Alex_

Alex is a first-generation Colombian with “permanent residency” status. Both of Alex’s parents were born in Colombia. He strongly identifies with his Colombian heritage and Spanish is the primary language of communication for both him and his parents. He is fluent in English and speaks it without any noticeable accent. He has lived in the U.S. for about fifteen years. Although he had completed kindergarten in Colombia, he had to repeat it upon arrival because at the time, he lacked the ability to speak English. Alex has received all of his education in the U.S. Currently, he is an Aerospace engineering major with a C average. He is actively involved with several “Latino\'a” student organizations on campus. He has also been involved with various community outreach activities that assist recent “Latino\’a” immigrants to integrate into the Roanoke Valley.

_Jaime_

Jaime is a first-generation Bolivian immigrant. Both of his parents are from Bolivia and immigrated to the U.S. when Jaime was three years old. He has been living in the U.S for
seventeen years and has received all of his education here. However, Spanish remains his primary language and English his secondary. For Jaime, identity emanates from parental histories and cultural heritage, and not from the collective values and beliefs of any specific ethnic group.

Jaime is an economics major and reports having a C average. He is actively involved in both the campus and the local community performing outreach and cultural awareness activities.

Jorge

Jorge is a first-generation Costa Rican. Both of his parents were born there also. Spanish is the primary language of communication for both Jorge and his parents, despite the fact that they have been living in this country for at least fourteen years. He speaks English well, but still has a noticeably thick Spanish accent. He also identifies strongly with his Costa Rican ethnicity and rejects the notion of assimilation, but rather views it as a process of “toning down” one’s own ethnocultural background as a way of integrating into mainstream society.

Jorge is a finance major and reports that he has maintained a C+ average. He has been involved with several of the campus Latino\a organizations. His most striking asset is his inhibition to express his love for Latino\a culture and language.

Bill

Bill is a first-generation Guatemalan immigrant. Both of his parents were born in Guatemala. They immigrated to the U.S. seeking political asylum fourteen years ago. Because of the struggles and hardship his family has had to endure in this country, Bill had decided early on that he would attend college as a way of improving his family’s situation.

During high school, he dedicated all of his energies to ensure that he was achieving the necessary grades and skills that would make him a competitive candidate for college. However, once the application process began, Bill encountered quite a few obstacles from all the institutions that he applied to because of his “illegal immigrant” status. Only through legal proceedings was he allowed to attend Virginia Tech, but although he has been living in the state of Virginia for over 14 years, he has been forced to pay out-of-state tuition until his family’s petition for legal residency was resolved by the Immigration Naturalization Services.

Much of his narratives focused on his litigation against Virginia’s State Attorney General and his fight for access to public higher education. Additional sessions explored how these experiences impacted his identity not only as an individual, but that of a “Latino\a” minority
student seeking to take advantage of the many opportunities that his family came here to benefit from. At the time of his interviews with me, Bill had not yet declared a major.

**Cass**

Cass is a 22-year-old, first-generation, Peruvian immigrant whose family came here seeking political asylum also. He and his family have lived in the U.S. for at least fifteen years. Cass has had some schooling in both Peru and in the United States. He identifies first with family and their own shared histories from Peru. Next to family, he identifies as a Peruvian, and subsequently, when forced to engage in political activism, he identifies as a “Latino.”

Cass has been the only student who exercised his right to interview in Spanglish. Most of the other students before his interview had elected to conduct their interview in English. Throughout his interview, Cass engaged in considerable code switching without any hesitation or self-consciousness. He was totally comfortable speaking in both languages and spoke them very well.

He is a Mechanical Engineering major with a B average. He has taken longer to graduate because of time spent doing co-ops and internships. He serves as a mentor for both underclassman engineering majors and members of the “Latino\a” community. He was very instrumental in initiating what students call the “System,” an array of strategies devised by Cass for negotiating the rigors and the weed-out courses of the engineering studies program at this institution.

**Celia**

Celia is a second-generation U.S. born citizen. Her father was born in Peru and her mother in Puerto Rico. She speaks both English and Spanish. She comfortably identifies with the ethnocultural backgrounds of both her parents and openly articulates it through her campus involvement with various “Latino\a” student organizations. However, despite her strong ethnic identity, she readily acknowledges that she is an “American” born citizen; this is most apparent during the times she has lived overseas. It is only when she is in the U.S. that she feels pressured to articulate her Latinidad.

Celia is an architect major and reports that she has an A+ average. My impression of her is that she will be a highly successful “Latina” and one who will serve as a strong positive role model to her peers in the community because of her open candor with ethnicity, culture, and academic success.
Geraldo

Geraldo is a second-generation “Latino” Gay male born in the U.S. His father is a native of Peru and his mother is from Paraguay. He identifies himself as “American-Hispanic.” He is English dominant with diminishing Spanish speaking skills. He speaks English with no audible accent and is quite articulate in expressing his thoughts and perspectives. While he phenotypically looks “Latino,” he can easily be mistaken for Middle-Eastern. Although he is aware of his “Latino” background and heritage, Geraldo does not readily identify with it, instead what I could visibly discern from Geraldo was an eclectic blend between his Gay and “Latino” persona. His demeanor is one of self-assuredness and extreme comfort in who he is. I find these features admirable, given that within the “Latino” community, Gayness is not an openly discussed or acceptable way of life (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999).

Geraldo is a senior Political Science major. He carries a B average and is actively involved in a variety of academic honor societies.

Jay

Jay is a Black Puerto Rican U.S. citizen. His father is Puerto Rican and mother African American. He speaks very little Spanish. Both of his parents were born in the United States and have graduate degrees in their respective fields. Although he had learned about “Latino” culture from his father, Jay has never embraced it because his family has always made remarks about his dark skin. This is why his preference has always been to embrace and identify with his mother’s African American culture and ethnicity. However, during his tenure in at Virginia Tech, he has experienced a strong desire to reconnect and identify with his “Latino” heritage. This new passion has led him to embark on a mission to reclaim and embrace his “Latino-ness.” Jay has been an active member of several “Latino” student organizations, in hope that through his continued interactions with the “Latino” community and culture; he can recapture and reconstruct a stronger identification with that part of his identity.

Jay is a senior in the Science, Human Nutrition Food & Exercise major. He has a C average.

Marcelo

Marcelo is a second-generation Costa Rican American citizen. Both of his parents were born in Costa Rica and immigrated to the U.S. at an early age. Although both parents have been living here for over twenty three years, his father remains Spanish dominant, speaking English as
a second language. His mother is mostly English dominant, but still has the ability to speak both languages. Marcelo is English dominant and although he understands Spanish, he does not consider himself to have any fluency with the Spanish language.

What I found striking about Marcelo is his charisma and nationalistic pride, despite strong recognition of his American citizenship. He was very quick to correct and inform me about Costa Rican culture. Whenever I referred to him as a Costa Riqueno, he would correct me by letting me know that the correct way to refer to his people is with the term “Costarricenses.” He also taught me that natives are referred to as “Ticos” and while they don't like to consider themselves as racist, they enjoy talking about their unique whiteness, as compared to the skin color of people in other Latin American countries. One can easily detect the positive aspects of the Tico identity in Marcelo, which are friendliness and hospitality. Although machismo (sexism) is a predominant aspect of Costa Rican culture (Infocostarica, 2005), Marcelo does not subscribe to this form of sexism towards women.

Marcelo is a senior and is pursuing a degree in mechanical engineering. He is thinking about completing the requirements for a second degree in Computer science. His current GPA is C+.

Maria

Maria is a third generation Puerto Rican American who was born in New York City. Both her mother and father were also born in the U.S. and her grandparents are natives of Puerto Rico. What I found most intriguing about Maria was the high level of identification with her native heritage not seen in most third generation children who can not speak Spanish (Goodwin, 2002; Morales, 2002). She very assuredly identifies herself as a Puerto Rican American and then secondly, as “Latina.”

Maria’s father has a Bachelor’s degree and her mother has some college. They remain bilingual but English is the main language spoken at home. Maria was raised with a rich appreciation for Puerto Rican culture. At home education was considered paramount for all of the siblings.

Maria is a wildlife science major. Throughout my interview with her, I often wondered how a young lady born in the thick of New York City’s asphalt and concrete jungle could have become so enamored with wildlife. She is carrying a B+ GPA and is very serious about her career. She shuns old fashion “Latino\’a” stereotypes where females are predestined to become
traditional housewives and males the breadwinners (DeGenova & Ramos-Zaya, 2003; Garza, 1994; Heller, 1966).

**Marisa**

Marisa is a second-generation Puerto Rican American. Her father was born in Puerto Rico and her mother in the U.S. Although her father speaks fluent Spanish, by and large, she was English dominant until she took Spanish in school. She has light brown hair and blue eyes. It would be very difficult to discern that she was of Puerto Rican descent without knowing her surname.

Because she has grown up around the Puerto Rican culture, she has always identified with it. But, because she has lived in predominantly white neighborhoods, there has been very little contact with other “Latinos.” In her early school years, Marisa believed that she was of “white” descent until one of her teacher’s made her realize that she was a member of a “minority group.” This experience marked a dramatic change in how she would subsequently self-identify as a “Latina.” Marisa is an Animal & Poultry Sciences major. She has a B- GPA and anticipates graduating this spring.

**Pathways to Identity Formation**

After each of the interviews, I immersed myself in the transcripts and began to pick apart segments of the students’ narratives that I believed were at the core of explaining the many intricacies of identity construction. Like previous researchers who engaged in similar studies (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003; Goodwin, 2002; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999), I tried to avoid essentializing the students’ narrations, noting the advise of Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) who warned that “a key problem with essentialism is its denial, or flattening of differences within a particular racially defined group” (p. 72) or in this case, within a social group whose identities are formed around the fluid constructs of language and culture. Stuart Hall’s (1996) perspectives on postmodernist conceptualizations of identity as dynamic and continuously shifting were instructive, but for this study, I also borrowed from Lois Weis’s (1990) definition of identity as a process through which “people, either individually or collectively, come to see themselves in relation to others in particular ways” (p.3). Instead of a fixed or static identity as Phinney (1993) suggests, individuals construct multiple identities based on ethnicity, national and cultural background, gender, religious beliefs, career choices, and a
variety of other contributing factors that seem to change and shift with time and place (Tierney, 1993).

*Ethnic Identity*

Identity development during college influence how individuals adapt to and manage their college experiences, but how this process differs and unfolds for Latino\'a and other minorities remains unclear (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Ethnic identity is often regarded as a social construct (Waters, 1990). Yinger (1976) notes that formation of ethnic identity is based on an individual’s identification with:

A segment of a larger society whose members are thought by themselves or others, to have a common origin and share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients (p. 200).

This identification process is mitigated by choices made between elements of American and Latino cultures. It involves conscious or unconscious affiliations with those who share a common bond because of similar traditions, behaviors, values, and beliefs (Garza & Gallegos, 1995; Torres, 1999). Such affiliations may be demonstrated by staunch conformity to such values as giving importance to ones’ nuclear family, or *familismo* (Sabogal, Marin, & Otero-Sabogal, 1987); a tendency to avoid conflict situations, emphasis of positive social desirability in agreeable situations, and minimizing negative behaviors when faced with conflicts, or *simpatia* (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984); the maintenance of personal respect, or *respeto*, in interpersonal relations (Marin, 1992); and cooperative approaches to learning (Duran, 1992). These cultural values allow in-group members to make sense of the world around them and to develop a sense of pride in their ethnic identity. However, when positive in-group messages and support systems are not available to counteract negative stereotypes from out-group members, individuals are very likely to feel shame or disconnection toward their own ethnic identity and in some cases, become academically disengaged (Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, & Hart-Johnson, 2003).

Ethnic identity development models tend to focus on shared knowledge of culture acquired from family and community. Knight, Bernal, Garza, and Cota (1993) assert that a sense of ethnic identity is developed from shared representations of culture, religion, geography, and language, which are often associated with strong kinship and proximity. Aspects of learned
culture include rituals, symbols, and behavior that are specific to certain groups of people and manifest from underlying assumptions, beliefs, and in-group values (Ott, 1989). Thus, ethnic identity models attempt to distinguish commonalities that are likely to be present in a particular group.

*Phinney’s Three-Stage Model of Ethnic Identity Development*

Phinney’s (1993) three-stage model suggests a linear process of identity development that may be applicable across ethnic groups. Rather than focusing on the content of ethnic identity (actual ethnic behaviors practiced by in-group members), her model focuses on the process of ethnic identity formation (the way individuals come to understand the implications of their ethnicity). Central to Phinney’s model are two tenets: (a) ethnic minorities must resolve negative stereotyping and prejudice from dominant white groups, and (b) ethnic identity is achieved as individuals resolve conflicts arising from differences in the values and beliefs between dominant mainstream out-groups and ethnic minority in-groups.

Phinney’s model consists of three distinct stages. Movement from one stage to the next is contingent upon having progressed through the previous one. The first stage is referred to as Diffusion-Foreclosure. It is characterized by an absence or disinterest in ethnicity. However, the individual gradually acquires attitudes about ethnicity from family and significant others that may lead to acceptance of some aspects of ethnicity-foreclosure. The next developmental stage is called Moratorium. In this stage there is an increasing awareness of ethnicity that may have been stimulated by a negative experience (discrimination). This stage is characterized by emotional intensity, anger towards white dominant groups, guilt, or embarrassment. The final stage of development is referred to as Identity Achievement. In this stage, the individual resolves his/her identity conflicts and comes to terms with ethnic and racial issues. As acceptance of membership in one’s ethnic group unfolds, a secure sense of ethnic identification is developed.

The problem with Phinney’s model is that it conceptualizes identity development as a linear process that unfolds in sequential stages. Each stage of development is characterized by specific levels of ethnic identity formation, whose end result is the achievement of a secure sense of identity that appears to be fixed. Although Phinney’s model implies that this process is sequential and fixed, others view this process as one that is multiple and in constant flux. Hall (1996) argues that identity formation is a process that results in “no fixed, essential, or permanent identity” (p. 598). Jackson (1993) notes, that people are capable of “holding down,
multiple, apparently contradictory identities, at any one time as the context changes” (p. 215). Arguably, as “Latinos” move from one experience to another (discrimination, negative stereotyping, marginalization), or one situation to another (home, school, or job), there is a constant re-conceptualization of identity that is relative to the moment. What results is a “fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, anyone of which we could identify with” (Hall, 1996, p. 598). Consequently, how well “Latinos” utilize this fluid process may be a determinant of their social mobility and in particular, their academic success.

Likewise, Phinney’s model fails to account for the influence of acculturation on ethnic identity. Saldana (1994) notes that ethnicity may accurately reflect internal factors associated with one’s level of acculturation. Acculturation refers to the changes in values, beliefs, and lifestyles that ethnic minority individuals undergo as a result of their interaction with and adaptation to a new culture (Garza & Gallegos, 1995). Acculturation models explain this adaptation process as a continuum with polar extremes of ethnic and mainstream identification (Keefe & Padilla, 1987). The strengthening of mainstream identity generally results in the weakening of one’s ethnic identification. Thus, where an individual may be on this continuum may determine their level of ethnic identity. Because Phinney’s (1993) stage model explains ethnic identity formation as outcomes triggered by external negative experiences, it fails to account for the influence of changing values, beliefs, and lifestyles on the strengthening or weakening of ethnic identity throughout the process. One’s gradual assimilation into mainstream culture may weaken one’s ethnic identification, and consequently, reactions to negative experiences may not have the same impact as those encountered while in the Moratorium stage.

**Distinguishing Characteristics**

In examining the narratives of the informants, I noticed similarities and differences that centered around four distinguishing characteristics defined by place (country of birth), time (the length of time they had been living in the native or host country), their affiliation to native or host country’s culture and language, and gender. These four characteristics represented the students’ status as either first or second-generation children of immigrant, both of which have a large influence on how ethnic identity is shaped and affirmed. The students who identified as first-generation immigrants were those whose families had for a variety of personal, economic, and political reasons immigrated to the U.S. Those who identified as second (and third) generation children of immigrants were primarily “Latinos” who were born in the continental
United States or its colonial territories (i.e., Puerto Rico). Those participants who identified themselves as first-generation and their families arrived here as Bolivians, Colombians, Costa Ricans, Panamanians, or as whatever national origins they hailed from and later, through the process of assimilation, became ethnic minorities (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). As they interacted with and assimilated into mainstream America, their experiences with isolation and marginalization initiated the homogenizing process of becoming “Latino/a” (Mendieta, 2000). What was common among this group was their eagerness to be a part of the American dream through the many “opportunities” that they believed awaited them here. In their interviews, students shared early memories of the different circumstances which led to their family’s’ decision to migrate to the United States.

Santos: Well the reason for my parents coming to the U.S. was the typical reasoning from many immigrants. My parents had been working in factories in England and wanted to have a better life than what they had at the time. They had decided that the best place to get these new opportunities would be in North America.

Alex: It was for educational opportunities…my parents made some comparisons of the educational opportunities between Colombia and the United States and they concluded that if their kids could study here and obtain a degree from a North American university, we would be able to acquire work anywhere in the world. They were thinking in terms of better opportunities for us [the children] and a better way of living for the family.

As Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) noted, people immigrate because others have done so before them - “relatives, friends, and friends of friends” (p. 21). These contacts provide the necessary connections needed by other family members who subsequently immigrate. In some cases, the decision to immigrate meant connecting with relatives already living in the U.S.

Jorge: Well, we actually came here on family business because of some problems my brother [who was living here in the U.S.] was having…but eventually we decided to stay.

Julia: My dad had always told us that it was his wish for him to eventually return to the U.S to reunite with his family, so that we could go to high school and college here. He always talked about how good the schools in the U.S. were and how much more opportunities there would be if the kids got their education there. So my mom did some research to find out which would be the best places for us to live and go to school. So it was decided that we would move to Virginia Beach. I was sixteen when I came here and I went right into sophomore year when we arrived in the U.S.
Relatives and extended family served as resource rich networks that allow families to share what Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) refer to as “funds of knowledge,” or “the accumulated bodies of knowledge of households” (p. 133) that collect information about housing, immigrant services, employment, schools, and in some extreme cases, provide financial support and housing. Immigrant families participate and rely on these family-related networks for adjustment and survival in the new host country. Julia, Santos, Alex, Jaime, and Jorge made references to the usefulness of family networks when their families first arrived:

Julia: Since my grandparents lived here in the U.S., we maintained our residency through their house. My grandfather helped us get established here and helped us quite a bit finding a place to live and getting to know the area where we were going to live.

Santos: Well, [my mother’s] cousin moved from Chile to Spain and she kept encouraging her to move from there by giving her all this information about the place. She was always talking to my mom about the area she lived at, and about jobs and other opportunities there that she thought my mom could never get in Chile. This really motivated my mother to move to Spain for awhile.

Alex: It was our aunt who had been living here for about thirty years in Virginia; now she lives in Florida. She helped us out with housing, while my father got established with employment here and after that, she helped us look for a place to stay and provided a lot of information about the area. She had been very supportive of us when we first arrived here.

Jaime: My dad first came here [he arrived a couple of months before we did] and he was able to find a job because we already had family over here who were already settled. They helped him with housing and finding a job. The reason my mom got the job she did when she first came was because there were family members at the job site already working there and they helped her get the position. My dad he worked in a roofing construction and I don’t remember him having any issues with that job. There were always people there that spoke Spanish and helped him get any information about the job or other things.

Jorge: Also, having family already living here is probably an advantage that we had when we first got here. During the first couple of years after we arrived, my mother didn’t really have to work because my sister and my brother both helped her financially and they let us live with them until we got settled in our own place. They were very familiar with the areas they lived at and so while we lived both in Tampa and then Northern Virginia, they pretty much knew where we needed to go to register for schools and that kind of stuff.

For other families the motivation to immigrate was precipitated by the need to flee from their native country because of economic and or political reasons (Oboler, 1999; Suarez-Orozco
Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The difference between families that immigrate and “asylum seekers” is their motivation for the migration (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As Ogbu (1991) noted, for the former group immigration was generally “voluntary” but for the latter, the asylum seekers, they generally immigrate for involuntary reasons.

Asylum seekers are by definition involuntary newcomers who are forced to flee from their native countries for fear of persecution, execution, or slavery (Ogbu, 1991). The process for formal admission as “permanent residents” is complex and can take years; those who are rejected are often returned to their native country (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Bill and Cass both made references to the need for “political asylum as the motivation for their parents’ decision to immigrate to the U.S.

Bill: He [father] was actually fleeing from some political involvement he had been a part of at the college where he had been working in Guatemala. There was some sort of protest against the government, and he had to leave because he was threatened and that is why he left first to the U.S seeking political asylum.

Cass: There were economic factors and the fear of terrorism…it was kind of like we came here “buscando el asilo político” [seeking political asylum] because of the situation in Peru we were not able to return to Peru for a good while and my dad decided that moving here would provide better educational and economic opportunities for us.

Transnational Identities

For immigrant families, “old traditions” collide with those of the new society (Goodwin, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Although immigration provides opportunities for new beginnings; this uprooting experience presents challenges of acculturation, second language acquisition, and adaptation to new traditions and values of the host society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995, 2001). However, as Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc (1994) assert, immigrants continually build familial and social networks that “cross geographical, cultural, and political borders” (p. 7). These networks situate them in a transnational space between their native homeland and the new host country (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2005). The availability of new communication (video conferencing, e-mail), information technology (the Internet), and the ease of affordable transportation, allow immigrants to engage in “building unbounded national spaces” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 58) resulting from their transitory status between North America and their countries of origin (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2005;
Morales, 2002). In my analysis of first-generation students, it was difficult to overlook the transnational origins of some of their families.

Julia: My dad said that he had friends in Australia and they went to visit them for a while. Since they liked it so much they decided to move there. So he asked my mom if she would go with him; she agreed and they both moved to Australia with their three kids from the previous marriage. They lived there for ten years. My dad gave up his American citizenship to become an Australian and now he can’t get his American citizenship back. I was born while they lived there.

A few years later, when I was about five year’s old they moved back to Panama, because my mom wanted us to grow up in Panama and she also wanted to be close to her family there. But my dad had always told us that it was his wish for him to eventually return to the U.S. to reunite with his family and so that we could go to HS and college there… it was eventually decided that we would move to Virginia Beach.

Santos: My father moved from Turkey (where his family lives) to England after he had actually finished serving three years in the Turkish Army. My mom moved from Chile where her family lives, to live with a cousin of hers that was living in Spain. From Spain she eventually moved to England. There my parents met and eventually got married there. I was born there in 1983 and three years later, they had my sister. When I was about six years old they came here to the U.S. as “illegal immigrants.”

While for some families, immigration represents a permanent move, for others it is temporary state before returning to their native country. For the latter, success is defined not by assimilating and establishing roots in the host country, but rather by achieving the financial wherewithal to return to a comfortable life in the old country (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). While some of the students indicated permanence in their move to the United States, others made references to parental plans for eventual return to their homeland.

Jorge: On several occasion my mom has said “let’s go back,” but I think what made it easier for her and me to stay here was the that some of my relatives from Costa Rica kept traveling back and forth to visit us or we would go visit them once or twice every year. That helped alleviate us missing the family that was still back home in Costa Rica and it kept us connected with the old home. But my mom wanted to go back on several occasions and it got to the point that after being here for seven years and the fact that I was already becoming established here with school and friends; it became evident that it would be best to stay.

Cass: My parents are considering going back to Peru now that we are all grown up and capable of taking care of ourselves here. I think that is why they have always kept close contact with my relatives there. They always make trips back to Peru and stay in touch with everything that goes on over there with my relatives there. If you compare living in the US, to any part of Peru, life is simply better there. Wherever you go, you can walk to
your destination. People are somewhat healthier and in better shape; there’s no obesity like in America. *La vida es más lenta allí* [life is slower there].

Alex: My parents have been talking about moving back to Colombia within the next five years. They are actually in Colombia right now trying to get an apartment so that when we travel we can stay at the apartment. My mom travels to Colombia about every two years with my dad, and so given the frequency with which they travel over there, getting a place for us to stay when we’re there makes sense.

Puerto Ricans, overwhelmingly represent a transnational migrant population who represents what Chaney (1979) referred to as “people with feet in two societies” (p. 209). Two of the Puerto Rican students (one was second and the other a third-generation) shared accounts of their family’s close ties to Puerto Rico and identification with the native culture:

Marisa: My father has three siblings living here and three in Puerto Rico. He talks to them every week at least once; sometimes often more than once, and he visits them every year for three weeks. I have made numerous trips to Puerto Rico with him. I think that it’s wonderful there. If I do wind up marrying a non-Hispanic individual, I want to move there for a couple of years with him so that he can become fluent with the language and appreciate the culture. I also would like to raise my children in that culture.

Maria: My family is Puerto Rican. All of us were born and raised in New York City. It was my grandparents who were the first to immigrate to mainland USA from Puerto Rico. They talk on the phone on a regular basis with relatives living on the island. This past summer we went to there to visit family… and my parent’s loved it and kept saying that… they are going to try and visit more often.

My parents always promoted and talked about our Puerto Rican heritage because they are extremely proud of it and we always grew up around our family who were equally as proud of it as my parents. They always emphasized that we should marry into our culture [meaning that our spouses should be Puerto Rican] and perpetuate the family line, so our Puerto Rican heritage was a very integral part of our lives growing up even thought we didn’t speak the Spanish language that much.

If [my parents] had not raised us to be conscientious about our Puerto Rican heritage, I probably would have had a curiosity about it, but I would have never been as interested in it if I would not have been exposed to it at such a young age. Like I would have felt like I had already grown up without it and what would be the point of having to learn it now. I think since I was exposed to my Puerto Rican heritage from a very early age I have been able to carry it with me as I grow older.

In contrast to Marisa and Maria, Celia, a second-generation U.S. citizen has spent time in Puerto Rico and lived “overseas.” Her transnational experiences have had an influence on her perspectives on the dual-transnational identities that mainland Puerto Ricans maintain. Her
references to the “ghetto” urban Puerto Rican reflects the stigmatization of Nuyoricans (New York Puerto Ricans) as the island’s undesirables who migrate to urban American cities living in “cultures of poverty” (De Genova & Ramos-Zaya, 2003; Lewis, 1965).

Celia: There seems to be a stereotype about what Puerto Ricans are like. I don’t think that I identify with the stereotypical Puerto Rican... The stereotypical Puerto Rican American is portrayed as coming from the Bronx [borough in New York City] and they all have the “ghetto” accent, which comes out when I talk to people who speak Spanish or other Puerto Ricans. Basically the Jaylo [Jennifer Lopez] stereotype and the street crud, always feeling like you must represent Puerto Rico first. They have never been to the island, but damn it, that is what they are. They don’t understand a word of Spanish, but hey, this is how [they] are Puerto Rican. I think I know what the island is about and the island is very different from New York. The feeling that you have to represent Puerto Rico first and foremost, like I am Puerto Rican first and then me second is what I think a stereotypical Puerto Rican is like. But I feel like I am different from that stereotype because I had a very international upbringing. I never felt like I had to be Puerto Rican, even in my own family it was never something I saw as different from other nationalities, until I came back to the states. My parents have never been ashamed of who they are or where they came from. So we were always taught never to hide that, but it’s not like they put a label on us either.

Jay’s father is Puerto Rican and mother African American, and he too has had the transnational exposure to both Puerto Rican and African American culture. However, his experiences and identification with Puerto Rican culture and heritage is far more complex. His identification with Puerto Rican culture differs from Marisa, Maria, and Celia because of his experiences with all three cultures (American, African American, and Puerto Rican). Of all the students that I interviewed, Jay’s narratives were the only one that I could place within Phinney’s (1993) Moratorium Stage. His narratives were suggestive of someone who had become aware of his ethnicity and was exploring its significance as it relates to his own identity.

Jay: My mother, she is black. She was born in the U.S. Her family background is Black and Native American. My dad was also born in the United States but his family is from Puerto Rico. So my mother actually identifies as African American and my dad as Puerto Rican-American. As far as the culture that we were brought up in our immediate family there seems to have been a lot of mix and matching going on. We all spent time visiting my father’s relatives in Puerto Rico and there we learned a lot about the culture. When I was younger sometimes I lived with my mom’s side of the family and at other times I lived with my father’s because they were both in the military. So whenever I spent time with his side of the family, I got to learn a lot about Puerto Rican culture. So I kind of got exposed to both cultures, but I see both as very similar.

But, I would say that I identify myself more as “Black,” because I spent more time with my mom’s side of the family than my dad’s, and the other thing is that I used to get a lot
of “crap” because my brother and me are four years apart and we have always been together, but we look nothing alike. So people would always make comments like “How come you don’t look like him” [younger brother is not Black, but rather light skin] or “why are you Black and not your little brother.” So this kind of attitude from my father’s relatives bothered me enough where I began to identify as being “Black.”

Children of biracial families face the choice of whether to identify as American or with their parental ethnicity (Waters, 1996). As Waters’ found, most children facing this dilemma tend to identify with the former because they fail to see their ethnicity as important to their self image. However, for Jay, being a part of a predominantly white campus and his interactions with campus “Latinos” provided him with many opportunities to engage in what Phinney (1993) refers to as an ethnic identity search.

Jay: My identification with “Latinos” is relatively small, but that is why I am trying to do the things that I am doing now so that I can get in touch with that part of my ethnicity. That is why I joined some of the “Latino” organizations on campus and I am trying to be actively involved with their community. Since I have been here at Virginia Tech, I noticed that there is not very much diversity here and that has been one of the things that have motivated me to get back in touch with my “Latino” roots.

Once I joined the “Latino” organizations, it drew me closer to a lot of people and I leaned a lot of about the culture that I had no idea about. Like the stuff about Puerto Rican culture; my dad’s from there and we learned a lot of things about the Taino Indians [one of the indigenous tribe that inhabited the island of Puerto Rico and were found living there by the Columbus explorations in the Caribbean], the Puerto Rican flag, and I learned about the cultures of the other “Latinos” with whom I hang out with. I also learned about their different foods, country’s flags, and reasons why their parents immigrated to this country. I had learned about Blacks and slavery and now I realized that “Latinos” had all at one time or another experienced the same kinds of oppression as Blacks in this country. So I was surprised to learn that there were so many common things between Blacks and “Latinos.”

The transnational backgrounds of first-generation immigrant families are also reflected in the multiple identities forged by their children. Santos’ narrative is indicative of how parents can nurture their children to identify with and affirm one’s biracial backgrounds.

Santos: I consider myself 100 % Turkish and a 100% Chileno. I have never ever questioned whether I was fully Latino or fully Turkish. I can’t say that there was ever a time where my identity from both cultural backgrounds was different from this. My parents have raised me to love both my cultural backgrounds. I have never ever questioned whether I was fully Latino or fully Turkish. Others may have questioned that about me, but in my mind there has never been any doubt about my dual identity.
First-generation children tend to identify with parental cultural traditions because they provide “safety nets” or internalized standards of behavior that are helpful in making sense of their everyday lives during the transition into a new host society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 90). Their parent’s value and beliefs provided “maps of experience” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 90) that serve as guides for their own internalized standards. Thus, they assimilate into the new host society by retaining their transnational identities, language, values and cultural practices while at the same time, learning new ways of coexisting with their new neighbors (Moya, 2000).

Alex: I would describe myself as being very proud of my Colombian ethnicity and secondly, as a Latino. Most importantly, I am a person who is very close to his family because I was raised with my parents’ native culture, and who was taught to be proud of being a Colombian. I have always felt the same way about my ethnicity as far back as I can remember. However, even though I was forced to learn another language [English], and culture in school it did not affect my identity or how I identify as a Colombian, that part of me will always remain constant.

Jorge: Well, first I identify myself as a Costa Rican. Then if you ask me about my ethnicity, I would answer that I am Latino. The language that I speak, the music I listen to, and dancing are some of the ways that I express it.

Jaime: Both my parents identify as Bolivians. I guess that my response would be that I am Bolivian also. I think that it is obviously a lot more complicated than that because if I was given the opportunity to say how I identify, I would say that I am my parent’s child. I think that would be the best way that I could identify myself. My values and the way that I perceive the world were in a large part because of them. They way they either taught me things or they way that I saw that they went about doing things. Most of my beliefs and morality is based on what they have taught me. That is really they way that I have always seen or identified myself. However, I did grow up here in the U.S., so I associate more generally as Bolivian as a whole. I strongly identify with the culture, the dances, the food, and that stuff. I am very proud of and take a lot of pride in my culture even though I grew up here in the U.S.

Cass: I would say that first I identify as a Peruvian and secondly with my family. I have always identified as a Peruvian, even after we moved to the U.S. If I had to choose between being called a Hispanic or a Latino, I would prefer to be called a Latino because I don’t have any roots in Spain at all. However, I see a lot of problems with using the name “Latino” because there are so many different people from so many different countries that are lumped under it. I never really use it to call someone by it. I prefer calling them by their nationality. Like if you ask me how I identify, I will tell you that I am “Peruvian.”
Bill was the only first-generation student who did not initially identify with his nationality because of his early arrival to the U.S. Children of immigrants who arrived at an early age generally do not share the same values and cultural practices as their parents; instead they identify with those of the new society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995, 2001; Moya, 2000).

Bill: Growing up, I never really identified as a Guatemalan because I had left there at the age of three and I had no recollection of what it was like there. At such a young age, I still didn’t know anything about ethnicity or being a minority. I thought that the way I was being brought up by my parents was the same way everybody else raised their own kids. I felt like everybody else around me. But as I interacted with other Latinos in school and now in college, I began to get a better sense of who I am and where I was from. So now I tend to identify more as a Guatemalan and to a lesser extent as a Latino.

Children of Immigrants: Born in the USA

The first-generation students in this study stood in contrast with those who identified as second-generation because of their proximity to the immigration experience and their ties with the native country of origin. The students who identified as second-generation articulated identities that were more indicative of both native origins and their status as United States citizens. Because they were born and raised in the United States, these youths tend to construct identities that reflect dual allegiance to both parental national and cultural backgrounds and that of the environment which they have been a part of since birth. Often, they are referred to as hyphenated Americans (Rodriguez, 2000) because they self-identify first with their national origins and secondly with their American citizenship (e.g. Puerto Rican-Americans, Mexican-Americans, etc).

Parents and extended family of second-generation youths serve as reference points for their native culture; however, their experiences in the U.S. “temper their need to affiliate deeply with their parental culture” (Goodwin, 2002, p. 39). As this occurs, there is a gradual loss of identification with the histories and cultural backgrounds of their parents and greater affiliation with the lifestyles of the new society they have grown into (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This dual allegiance was clearly articulated in the students’ narratives.

Celia: For me, when people ask me where I am from, like ethnicity wise or background, my response is that I am Puerto Rican-Peruvian American. However, it’s different when you live overseas. When you travel, for instance when I was in Malaysia I never called myself Latina, Peruvian, or Puerto Rican; I was an “American.” But back here [in the U.S.] it’s different because you tend to identify as Latino/a. A friend of mine during my
junior year in high school referred to me as a “Born again Latina.” He is German-American, and because when I was growing up my culture was just Latino, I didn’t see myself as being different from others, that was just the way I grew up. Like with the music, the food, with the dance, and the language. I knew all that and I knew my background; I had been to Puerto Rico and Peru and then when I moved back to the states, all of a sudden it was like everyone and I felt it was necessary for me to exemplify it. You feel like you have to express it more here [U.S.] for some reason. I got this feeling right away moving back here [U.S.].

Marcelo: I identify as a Costa Rican American just because the cultural background is there. My parents raised us to always remember where my roots are and what our family history is. My mom grew up in Panama so she doesn’t identify as Costa Rican as much as my father does. But then again it is a little difficult when people ask you where you are from especially here when you are speaking to someone who is Latino and they ask you that question and you wonder whether they are asking you about where you live or what is my nationality. So you sit there wondering about all these possibilities and you think about how you are going to reply. So usually I will say “what do you mean?” and then I reply. So in general when asked about nationality I will say that I am a Costa Rican American, but it will change sometimes with different people.

Maria: Well definitely, my parents were very emphatic about their Puerto Rican heritage; my whole life has been very rooted in Puerto Rican culture. But, when people ask me what nationality I am, I say “Puerto Rican American” and as far as checking off boxes on standardized forms I usually check “Latino/a.”

Marisa: I say that I am from Virginia. But when people ask what I am, my response is “Puerto Rican American.” However, for a lot of people they don’t realize it until I say it because, I have the blue eyes and the lighter hair, and they have this misconception that all Latinos have dark features.”

While these students easily constructed identities reflecting their ancestral origin and their status as U.S. citizens, it was not as easy for Geraldo who identifies first as a Gay male and secondly as an American citizen. For “Latinos” whose sexual orientation differs from the mainstream, identity formation can be much more complex.

Gay Latinidad

Identity formation for Geraldo differed, because although he too identified with his “Latino” heritage (at least before “coming out”), the process of “coming out” as a Gay “Latino” presented some unique challenges to the formation of identity. Research on sexual identity development among ethnic minorities (i.e., African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans) indicates that a dual identity is developed that reflects their status as both a sexual minority and a person of color (Bhugra, 1997; Greene, 1997; Savin-Williams, 1996).
Moreover, these studies elaborate on the incompatibilities between traditional ethnic family values and the homosexual lifestyle. In my first interview with Geraldo, he made references to his identification with ethnicity as a “Hispanic” during his Kindergarten through secondary school years, but later, when he spoke about sexual orientation there was evidence of greater affiliation with his status as a Gay-American than with his “Latino” identity.

Geraldo: When I was younger, it wasn’t something that I really thought about. I am me. I didn’t really label myself. But I mean, I think that maybe when I was younger, I would have considered myself more with my Hispanic ties. But now I am not entirely sure, I mean depending on how people word it, like I will say Hispanic American. Like if your saying ethnicity, I guess I would say more “Hispanic”, but if you’re asking about nationality or where you from, I would say “American.” When I think of ethnicity, I think of something that draws back from the past and that is why I would say “Hispanic” but I consider myself an “American.”

Once in college, “coming out” posed other considerations. Geraldo spoke about what it was like to “come out” to family and peers. I could easily detect resentment and feelings of alienation as he described his family’s reactions to his Gay lifestyle.

“Coming out” was a huge and difficult process for me. I came out after my freshman year in college. Actually my mom and dad already knew. During my senior year, they found about it when my mom found a Gay magazine in my room while she was cleaning in there. So then they knew but it was a completely taboo subject. Hispanic parents are very old fashioned about the “Gay” thing and having to deal with it in the family.

It’s weird because my dad and I have never spoken about it. He has never been present whenever it’s being spoken about and whenever it has been, it was always my mom talking to me about it. My mom she will bring it up every so often and it is just really weird for me because she really loves me regardless, but still some part of her wants to believe that it is just a phase that I am going through or that I will grow of it. My brother still won’t discuss it with me. He kind of disagrees with homosexuality, but he is like ‘you are my brother and so I love you regardless, it’s fine.’ But we never talk about it either. With my friends, the summer after freshman year, was when I started to come out to all of my friends. That definitely changed a great deal about who I was.

Although, “coming out” is stressful and often traumatic; many ethnic youths overcome barriers of homophobia from family and friends to establish multiple or dual identities that reflect both their sexual identity and their ethnocentric affiliations (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999). I saw and felt the jubilation in Geraldo’s narrative about what it was like being completely “out.”

Now that I am out, I am definitely a more open person, like with how I feel or how I am very expressive about myself. I have become more comfortable talking to strangers,
before I was this very timid person in high school. So this has been a substantial change in my life and I am a much happier person than I was back then. My behavior has changed; it’s not like when I was in the closet that I was super straight acting, but once I came out and started to hang out with more gay people I just flamed right up [flamboyant behavior typical of gay males]. I was finally able to be myself and not have to hide who I was. It felt great!

Dube and Savin-Williams (1999) noted how for some of the youths in their study, the dual identities between sexual orientation and ethnicity, often became separate “constructs” that never become integrated. They often move from one identity to another as a function of the situation or the environment. Geraldo’s descriptions of his interactions with family illustrates his ability to either shift identities or simply “tone down” his Gayness, much like how Jorge spoke about “toning down” his ethnicity when interacting with Anglo students at the campus.

But to tell you the truth, once I came out I never really thought about the whole thing about being Latino and Gay. It just really didn’t matter to me at all. I really couldn’t say that coming out had any conflict with Latinidad for me because with my family we don’t really talk about it that much. They know about it, but they kind of ignore the fact. Outside my immediate family, I don’t bring it up with extended family and even if it did come up; I wouldn’t have any problem talking about it. I don’t really see the point about just bringing it up though, because I know that some of them disagree with that lifestyle and that is something that I don’t want to deal with or care about. So I am not going to make an issue of it where it doesn’t have to be, especially with other family relatives.

When I am with my family or in situations that I know people are not comfortable with Gay people, I just “tone down” my Gayness. Since I know my family is still not really comfortable with my being “out,” whenever I am with them I just pull out my Latino ethnic personality. I even try and talk in Spanish to them. That kind of distracts them from being uncomfortable with me.

While most of the narratives of the students who identified as second-generation suggest formation of dual identities that border along culture, language, and birthplace, Geraldo’s story implied greater complexity that reaches far beyond these constructs. Conflicts arising from family disapproval, religious beliefs, racism and bigotry that target both ethnicity and sexual orientation, and gender roles often alienate Gay and Lesbian minorities from their families, communities, and ethnic peers (Greene, 1997). The formation of ethnic identity for Gay “Latino” males, as noted in Geraldo’s narratives is by and large questionable and problematic, particularly when they often face rejection from family and community. As Geraldo noted, once sexual identity became paramount for him “[he] never really thought about the whole thing about being Latino.” His sexual identity de-emphasized the need for ethnic identification.
In essence, what I discerned from the students’ narratives was the formation of complex identities that were influenced by their transnational upbringing and also reflected various national and cultural backgrounds, and at least for one student, sexual orientation. However, what I could not find explanations for was that despite their identification with native culture, students who identified as first-generation immigrants who had immigrated at a very young age and those who identified as second-generation youths born in the U.S. struggled with the stigma of being considered “less Latino\’a” by their native counterparts when their lives intersect either here in the U.S. or when they return to the old country for visits. Ed Morales (2002) alluded to this phenomenon in his book, *Living in Spanglish*, as one’s “regret over the emptiness of the new world and the rejection by the old one” (p. 99). Some of the students shared their thoughts about their interactions with native peers who attend the university as international students.

Julia: “I don’t know but I guess the international students have this unspoken prejudice against domestic [Latino] students. They insist that domestic Latinos “no son Latinos” [are not really Latino]. *Ellos no hablan espanol* [they do not speak Spanish]; *ellos no son verdadero Latinos* [they are not authentically Latino]. That is the idea; I don’t know what their sentiments are about this. So while they don’t talk about it there is a certain degree of animosity between the two groups.

Marcelo: Latino international students…treat us as if we are not as Latino as they are. Maybe it’s because we grew up here and since we speak English really well, we probably don’t speak Spanish as well as they do.

Celia: International students don’t feel pressured into having to prove their Latino-ness when they come to this institution. But for those of us who live here in the U.S. it’s the whole sense of having to exemplify that we are not different from them [the internationals] just because we have been here for a long time….

In chapter five, I take another look at the tensions between international and domestic “Latino\’a” students. International students’ perspectives and beliefs about the differences in authenticity of “Latino\’a-ness” between natives and immigrants, appear to have been one of the reasons why there has always been a rift between these two groups and explains the lack of solidarity among this “Latino\’a” student community at this institution for many years. Although there is an abundance of knowledge about the impact of transnationalism on identity formation, I have found little discussion about why these tensions exist. Perhaps this may be a topic for future research.
Transculturalism

Transculturalism, a term coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in Cuban Counterpoint, refers to the binary cultural interchanges that occur when different cultures interact with one another (Milhouse, Asante, & Nwosu, 2001; Ortiz, 1947; Spitta, 1977). However, as Spitta (1977) notes, the notion of transculturation is a Latin American interpretation of the term acculturation. While acculturation encompasses the interaction and mutual exchange between two or more cultures, Ortiz perceived it as a “one-way imposition of the culture of the colonizers” (p. 161). In contrast, today’s conceptualization of transculturalism, culture is interpreted as a dynamic “multidimensional” space where all cultures can interact over time and place (Epstein, 1995). Through a process of ongoing explorations, transculturalism affirms that the interaction of different cultures can contribute to the “creation of knowledge and human understanding” (Milhouse et al, 2001, p. x). For first generation immigrants, transculturalism facilitates acculturation because it allows for the preservation of native culture while enabling the acquisition of skills needed to adapt to a foreign cultural environment (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In the transculturation process, children of immigrants learn to creatively fuse parental traditions with those of the host society. The narratives that follow typify the transcultural blending of native cultures with American mainstream culture. The students who identified as first-generation described a variety of religious, secular holidays, and national independence days that seem similar to American traditions, but are observed here in the U.S. As with American holidays they were mostly celebrated with the preparation of ethnic foods and large gatherings with nuclear and extended family.

Julia: The truth is that the only holiday that we celebrate here that is also observed in Panama is “Mother’s Day.” In Panama we celebrate various holidays that are very similar to the ones celebrated here in the U.S. For instance, we celebrate New Years day, Thanksgiving (even though this is an American holiday, we Panamanians like to find any excuse to party), and Christmas.

Santos: Holidays are about both; for Christmas we have the tree. We get the gifts, but there was no Jesus Christ involved, there is no religious significance with it. I never really thought or knew that there was a religious significance, until I was about thirteen or fourteen years old. I thought it was just about gifts and Santa Claus. I think that our parents kind of kept both traditions as a way of helping us fit in with the other kids in school.

Alex: As for cultural traditions, I grew up here in the US with all of the traditions, music, and culture of Colombia, but we eventually also started to celebrate the American
traditions like Christmas and Thanksgiving. We still observe Colombian traditions like the independence of Colombia [July 20], La novena during Christmas [prayers during the nine days of advent of Christmas]. On New Years Eve we do the 12 grapes [while counting down for the New Year we would each have to eat 12 grapes making one wish for each grape that we ate]. At my sister’s school we would dance cumbia at some of their fashion shows dressed in typical native clothing.

Jaime: There are several but mostly Catholic dates that are prominently celebrated in Bolivia that we still observe here in the U.S. Where I live there is a very large Bolivian community and so dates like Bolivian Independence day, they have a parade, cultural dances and food. It is a real huge event in DC. We also celebrate the traditional American holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve or noche Buena and so on.

Jorge: As for cultural traditions, we still celebrate Dia de las madres, [Mothers day], noche buena [Christmas Eve], and of course dia de los reyes magos, [three kings day]. One of the things that is still certain in my house is that during Christmas the tree and the Christmas ornaments cannot be put away until the day after “dia de los reyes.” You don’t throw anything away or you can’t touch the Christmas tree [to take it down]. It could be dying [if it is a natural one], and the ornaments half broken from the little kids playing with them, but you wouldn’t be allowed to take them down until after three kings day…

As second-generation children grow up and are educated in an era of globalism and multiculturalism, transculturalism enables them to acquire the competencies to adapt to multiple cultural codes (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This adaptive strategy provides children with the ability to maintain parental traditions while simultaneously blending mainstream culture (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Some of the narratives of students who identified as second generation typified transcultural styles that exemplified fusion of both parental native traditions and American culture.

Marisa: We celebrate el dia de los Reyes Magos, but we also celebrate Christmas on the 25th too. We used to the whole grass and water for the camels [Puerto Rican tradition where, the kids would leave grass and water for the camels of the three kings and in it was believed that the Kings would leave gifts in exchange for this]. But aside from that we mostly celebrated the American holidays. During Thanksgiving it’s a huge ordeal at my house. It’s not the typical American Thanksgiving, because we have the pernil,[roast pork shoulder] and the arroz con gandules [rice with pigeon peas] and we dance and we laugh and have a great time.

Marcelo: That I can remember, for the most part, when I was growing up here, everyone from my family adopted the American holidays. So a lot of the gatherings were for the American holidays. But everyone once in awhile there would be something for the Costa Rican holidays like its independence day. Sometimes we celebrate the Mother’s day in Costa Rica which is different from the one here.
Maria: I wouldn’t necessarily say traditions; like we never celebrated “el día de los Reyes Magos” [Three Kings Day] or anything like that. We tend to celebrate most of the American holidays; but in other things such as my mom would always cook Puerto Rican food all the time, my dad always listens to Salsa and other Puerto Rican music. Our house is very cultured but as far as annual traditions, I can’t recall any.

Geraldo: My mom never really kept up with any of her native traditions, but my dad did since his family was all here. So we would have like a lot of family gatherings. I know that there were some Saints from Peru that they prayed to during certain days of the year. But I never really believed in any of that stuff. So definitely, thinking about it, I remember more of the Peruvian traditions being kept here in the states. I guess because there’s the music and the food and just like some of the stuff that my father’s family would do back in their home country. So I saw some of that, but I didn’t see it that much from like my mom’s side of the family. Myself, I mostly stick to the American holidays.

Celia: Three kings Day would be the biggest one. That is about it. The rest are mostly American holidays like Thanksgiving, July 4th, Halloween, and Christmas.

Jay: As far as the culture that we were brought up in our immediate family there seemed to have been a lot of mix and matching going on. We mostly celebrated American holidays.

The impact of transculturalism not only affects the articulation of culture, it also influences how people communicate. Just as there is an interchange of cultural traditions when different cultures interact, similar exchanges can potentially occur at the linguistic level (Milhouse et al, 2001). For “Latinos” language is source of both ethnic pride and stress. Speaking Spanish is a common attribute used to identify “Latinos” (Marin & VanOss Marin, 1991). Yet not all “Latinos” in the United States are Spanish dominant (Oboler, 1995). Many second and later generations of “Latino/a” youths are by and large English dominant and some do not speak Spanish at all.

Language

Language has always been a critical issue for “Latinos” in the United States. The goal of the Americanization of “Latino/a” immigrants entails the loss of the ability to speak Spanish and ultimately, the forced acquisition of English proficiency (Flores & Benmayor, 1997). Throughout U.S. history, the drive for American hegemony has been to eliminate non-English cultures and languages (Espinoza-Herold, 2003); “English is the door to the American dream” (Stavans, 2003, p. 3). Although the key to successful acculturation is the acquisition of English language proficiency, the rapid abandonment of linguistic and cultural capital endured by first-generation
immigrants can undermine their own agency (Milhouse et al; 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). My conversations with students who identified as first-generation indicated Spanish as the dominant language of their families.

Alex: My parents couldn’t speak any English when they first arrived in the U.S. and I couldn’t speak any either, but later they learned and now they can speak it, but not as well as Spanish. I learned to speak and write it once I started going to school here.

Jaime: At home everyone speaks mostly Spanish. We usually speak Spanish when my siblings and I are conversing with my parents. The only time English is actually spoken at home is sometimes when I am talking with my siblings. But if there is a word that comes up that you can say better in Spanish then you switch to English [code-switching]. We don’t mix words together in both languages. It’s like we will be talking together in English and usually in words of emotion or certain words we fine better meanings in Spanish, so we will switch to Spanish from English and continue the conversation in Spanish until we get to a point in the conversation where we can express ourselves in English. Whenever we are outside the house that is when we tend to speak more in English. So for all of us (siblings] we speak Spanish when we are at home and our parents are around and English when we are away from home.

Cass: My dad was fairly fluent in English, even thought he had an accent and at times could not really articulate what he was really trying to say. My mother only knew some [English] but was not very comfortable having to speak to someone in English if she had to. But eventually they both learn to speak it better. I would say that they are both Spanish dominant. I really didn’t start to get fluent with English until pretty late, like maybe by eighth grade. My brother and sister didn’t have as much problem with it as I did.

Although immigration forces the acquisition of English or bilingual skills, some of the students that I spoke to were able to find a way to “fuse” the two languages to speak what is commonly referred to “Spanglish.” Stavans (2003) defined Spanglish as a “mixture” or “a collage” of two languages, “part Spanish, part English” (p. 4). Morales (2002) referred to it as “the state of belonging to at least two identities at the same time” (p. 8). The term “Spanglish” is another way of referring to what is known as “code switching, because it occurs when an individual who is bilingual alternates between two languages (Crystal, 1997). However, the term “Spanglish” specifically refers to the switching between Spanish and English (Stavans, 2003; Morales, 2002). For some, Morales argues, Spanglish is the rejection of the separation of English and Spanish by the construction of an identity where language and cultural affiliations overlap with each other. Jorge and Bill both made references to speaking Spanglish as a way of communicating with other “Latinos.”
Jorge: My mom speaks mostly Spanish and only a little bit of English. My family is the typical family who immigrates to the U.S. but they never really learn the language and the kids grow up speaking Spanish in the house only and English outside the house. My brothers and sisters are older than me and they grew up in Costa Rica so they are all Spanish dominant. As for myself, I would say that if I were with a group of Latinos, it would be Spanish. I would rather speak in Spanish, although lately I find myself talking more in “Spanglish”

Bill: My father speaks English better than my mom, but I would say that he is Spanish dominant. My mother can speak some but she doesn’t speak it as well as my father. I am able to speak Spanish enough to communicate with them, but at the same time I learned to read also. I can read Spanish better than I can speak it now. As for English, I really have done well with it. When people ask me “how did you learn to speak English,” my answer is that I just picked up on it because I was only three when I first arrived in the U.S. Now for the most part, when I speak to other Latinos, it is mostly in Spanglish.

As second-generation children of immigrants grow up they acquire new language skills and are reluctant or discouraged to speak in their native language in public places such as schools and classrooms (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Maria referred to her grandparents’ ability to maintain their fluency in Spanish as holding on to the “old ways:”

Maria: My parents grew up speaking Spanish first, and then when they got into the NYC school systems they learned English afterwards. Then eventually English became their primary language. So they are both bilingual, but speak mostly English. They only really speak Spanish around my grandparents who generally still hold on to the “old ways” and still talk Spanish. But English is primarily the first language spoken in our home. Immediate family members at home speak English to each other. When I am with extended family, usually Spanglish is spoken.

Most of the students who identified as second-generation acknowledged that English was their primary language of communication. In my discussions with them about language preferences, they spoke about their diminishing ability to speak Spanish and the use of Spanglish.

Marcelo: Usually when the family gets together English is spoken sometimes, but then my dad will only speak in Spanish. So while my parents tend to speak more in Spanish, the rest of the family speaks mostly in English.

Celia: My brother and I speak in English most of the time. When we are speaking with my mother we both tend to speak in Spanish or “Spanglish” or both at the same time.

Geraldo: They [parents] speak Spanish to both my brother and I, but I kind of speak like a mixture back [Spanglish]. However, since I have been attending college, I have found myself speaking more English because the only times that I ever use Spanish is to talk to
my parents. Because I go to college, I don’t talk to them as often or see them everyday so
my fluency in Spanish has deteriorated over the past couple of years.

Marisa: I would say that it is an equal mix for both my parents. There are many times
though that they will start a sentence in Spanish and finish it in English [Spanglish]. I
mostly answer in English.

Maria and Jay both acknowledged that they did not speak any Spanish at all. Their
narratives suggest that they seemed to have been shortchanged because of this deficiency.

Maria: The only thing that doesn’t make me a pure Puerto Rican besides the fact that I
wasn’t born there is the fact that Spanish is not my first language. That kind of makes me
a little less Puerto Rican than anyone else

Jay: My brother and sister don’t speak any Spanish at all. Like me, they are trying to
learn how to speak Spanish. We can understand it to an extent but not as well as my
mom. Sometimes I wish that I had learned how to speak when I was younger and staying
with my dad’s family, but it just didn’t happen that way. Some things [vocabulary] I can
pick up, but all I know is that when I was younger, when we were with my dad’s family,
although I couldn’t tell you exactly what some one said to me, I could understand what
they were saying.

Schools serve as the primary vehicle for assimilation by systematically suppressing the
native language skills of immigrant children (Gibson, 1993, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). First and
second-generation children, who enter the public school systems with limited English
proficiency, are placed in English as a Second Language programs (ESL). Some of the students
recalled how they had first learned to speak Spanish at home and then later, after entering the
public school system became English dominant:

Maria: Now without a doubt, I am definitely stronger with English now. I learned
Spanish when I was younger, and I actually took Kindergarten in Spanish, but as I went
through the other grades and we moved away from New York to Florida and stopped
seeing our family on a regular basis [like all my aunts, uncles, and cousins]; at that point,
we only spoke English at home and never really had a need to speak Spanish anymore. I
just don’t get to speak it often because I don’t get much opportunity to practice it and I
am embarrassed if I mess it up when I do attempt to speak it. So I don’t speak Spanish
very much. I can if I have to, but I don’t on a regular basis.

Marisa: Spanish was my first language; they raised me speaking it because they wanted
to make sure that I knew how. I am pretty fluent. I can still hold a legitimate
conversation, but English is my primary language now.

Marcelo: Looking back, I think that I pretty much lost my Spanish fluency early in my
schooling. As soon as I started going to school, I was forced to pretty much speak only in
English and so the only time that I ever really spoke Spanish was at home with my parents. However, I never had to take ESL in school. I had spent time in daycare and there I was exposed to English.”

Summary

In this chapter, I began to explore the many facets of Latinidad by establishing the diversity that exists among all the people that this ethnic label attempts to homogenize. Through my use of the students’ narratives, I succeeded in illustrating a plethora of evidence that show how each of their lives were enriched with vastly different national origins, cultural affiliations, linguistic preferences, and even how they articulated ethnic identity. Their narratives show that Latinidad is a vastly complex mosaic of identities that simply cannot be homogenized into one pan-ethnicity.

In the next chapter, I explore the students’ experiences within American elementary public schools and ultimately, higher education. I utilize the students’ narratives to explore how the institutional cultures of these subtractive environments impact the formation and articulation of “Latino\a” identity.
Chapter 4
DIASPORA “LATINOS” and PROCESSES OF Acculturation and Assimilation

In the previous chapter, I attempted to show the dilemma of a “Latino\a” pan-ethnicity by elaborating on the many different national origins, cultural affiliations, linguistic preferences, and distinct ways the informants in this study articulate “Latino\a” ethnic identity. The participants’ narratives characterized Latinidad as a vastly complex mosaic of identities that do not represent a single homogenized pan-ethnicity. In this chapter, I elaborate further on the complexities of “Latino\a” identity by focusing on the experiences and scholastic pathways undertaken by the participants. In the first part of this chapter, I explore how first generation students cope with acculturative stress and subsequently, their entry into mainstream society by way of academic institutions. As an exercise in the examination of “Latino\a” ethnicity, my intent was to explore how acculturation and academic milieus impact and shape the formation of identity. Likewise, in the second half, I continue my investigation by shifting my focus to second generation students and their struggles to assimilate into mainstream society through the gateway of academic institutions. Together, the total sum of these generational experiences describes the dilemma of a “Latino\a” pan-ethnicity.

Current literature on “Latinos” is replete with theorizations about how immigrant and second-generation children acculturate and assimilate into mainstream society; however, few provide first hand accounts from the perspectives of the youths themselves on how these processes affect the everyday lives of these “Latino\a’ children who grow up as immigrants and ethnic others in American mainstream society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This study is an attempt to fill this void in the literature on “Latinos” by providing first hand accounts from the perspectives of the participants’ experiences with acculturation and assimilation.

My interviews with the informants illustrate how a group of first and second-generation immigrant youths adjusted and interacted with mainstream society. For first-generation immigrants the process of acculturation begins with the immigration experience and later, unfolds after arrival through continued interactions with the new host society (Skuza, in press; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). For second-generation youths, this process differs because, although they have been a part of the mainstream culture since birth, most will still have to endure the stress of assimilating into the dominant culture, while simultaneously coping with
marginalization and negative ethnic stereotypes, perpetuated by mainstream society (Oyserman, 2003; Ogbu, 1993; Rodriguez, 2000). Some scholars argue that while most first-generation youths acculturate into new environments easily, for others, it is a stressful experience (Santisteban & Mitrani, 2003; Skuza, in press). Likewise, while some second-generation youths easily find a balance between the duality of parental and mainstream culture by retaining aspects of both native and mainstream culture (Goodwin, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) others, who experience difficulty finding this balance, assimilate by either totally rejecting native culture and embracing the values and beliefs of the new society, or they completely reject mainstream culture by engaging in oppositional behavior (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Santisteban & Mitrani, 2003).

First-Generation Immigrants and Acculturation

In order to comprehend the uprooting experiences associated with immigration, it is important to understand the differences between the processes of acculturation and assimilation. Acculturation refers to the “cultural adjustments” immigrants undergo while transitioning from one culture to another (Skuza, in press). Assimilation, on the other hand, differs from acculturation because as individuals acculturate, their cultural references change from native (or non-dominant) to that of the dominant culture. At times, the demands of adapting to a new language, unfamiliar rules and laws, lifestyle changes (e.g. moving from rural to urban environments), discrimination, and cultural traditions of a new society may lead to increased stress (Berry, 1980; Berry & Kim, 1988). In this case, individuals may encounter an array of emotional, physical, and psychological problems resulting from the intercultural contact with the host environment (Berry, 2003). These problems may range from depression, fatigue, anxiety, heightened sense of frustration, and helplessness and loneliness. My interviews with first-generation students, revealed vivid memories of difficulties associated with adjusting to a new environment. For Jorge and Alex, acculturative stress was associated with language barriers. Their lack of English proficiency was a source of frustration, anger, and to some degree, fear.

Jorge: When I first arrived, although the area [where we moved to] was home for a lot of Cubans and Puerto Ricans, it was hard to actually come from another country and plunge right into the schools there. Although, I had taken some English courses in Costa Rica, it’s nothing compared to being immersed in the classrooms where everything is in English. So I had a lot of difficulty talking to my classmates and my teachers. I felt uncomfortable in a way; there were times that I felt like I didn’t want to go to school anymore. We were only supposed to stay only for a couple of months and going to school
here had not been part of the plans, so I felt like there was no point for all that. I kept asking myself, “Why am I doing this?” There were a lot of times when all of the American and some of the Cuban and Puerto Rican kids in my class would pick on me because I couldn’t speak English as well as they did, or because I would say things incorrectly, and I would get into a lot of trouble dealing with all that. I use to get into a lot of arguments and fights because of that. It was very frustrating!

Alex: I remember a frightening experience when we first arrived here [in the United States]. I was on the school bus going home from school, at the time the only thing that I knew how to say in English was “yes” and “no.” At one point going home on the school bus, I feel asleep and when I woke up the bus driver asked me where I lived. So I answered “no.” So until the driver actually found out who I was and where I lived I just kept responding “yes” or “no” to everything they asked. I was really frightened because I didn’t know where I was or what was going to happen to me. If I had been back home in Colombia, this would not have happened because I would have been able to speak in Spanish to the driver so that he could get me home.

For Julia, who was sixteen when her family immigrated, it was apparently difficult for her to adjust to living in foreign country. Research on acculturation suggests there is a direct relationship between the ability of an immigrant to adapt to a new society and the age of the individual at the time of immigration; younger children will adapt with less trauma than those who immigrate at much older ages (Gong, Takeuchi, Agbayani-Siewert, & Tacata, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). However, very little has been discussed about how exactly age affects the ability of older children to adapt to a new host environment. Perhaps Julia’s narrative can shed some light on the traumatic effects immigration has an adolescent youths.

Julia: I was sixteen when we came here and it had been very hard for me to move here with my family; I thought that it was the end of my life. I went right into sophomore year in high school and I felt that Americans were the most terrible people. At first, it was very hard. I hated it. I cried every single night for about three months because I thought that it was the end. I didn’t make a lot of friends, and I felt very uncomfortable, especially in school.

At first, for Julia the differences between the high school environment here and in Panama seemed to be sources of acculturation stress. She articulated concerns about her sheltered upbringing and the dissonance experienced when forced to attend an American school.

Julia: Coming from Panama to an American high school at the age of sixteen, I was very sheltered. It was not easy to adjust to an environment where girls were less conservative and reserved than what I was accustomed to. I heard and saw a lot about sex, drugs, and drinking there [at her high school] that I had never been exposed to back home. This was a more permissive environment than I was used to back in Panama.
Cass echoed Julia’s sentiments about differences in the discipline between schools back home in Peru and schools in the U.S. He too, spoke about the permissiveness in schools he attended in the United States.

Cass: First of all I was used to going to all boys schools; here it was always coed. You didn’t have to wear uniforms and here you could talk back to your teachers. If I had done that in Lima, that would have been a painful mistake. The discipline in Lima schools was very strict, whereas here the school system has little discipline on the kids. They always insisted on order and discipline in Lima schools. We even had to march once a week and learn nationalism. In a sense, I kind of miss that discipline. All of these differences made it really hard to adjust to being here in the beginning, but then after awhile, I started to get used to it and being here in the U.S wasn’t at all that bad.

Julia’s accounts provide a first hand perspective on the troubling effects immigration has on older children. Although it can be easily be argued that the experiences of one student is hardly an indicator of what other adolescent youths may experience, it is generative enough to warrant consideration and further exploration.

Differentness and “Latino\'a” Family Values

The feelings of differentness that Julia and Cass were sensing with their new school environments are a common phenomenon among immigrant youths in the U.S (Ramirez, 1991). One source of these feelings is the changes in value orientations encountered as they interact with the host society. “Latino\'a” value orientations are comprised of conscious or unconscious affiliations with those who share a common bond because of similar traditions, behaviors, values, and beliefs (Garza & Gallegos, 1995; Torres, 1999). These affiliations may be demonstrated by staunch conformity to such values as giving primary importance to one’s nuclear family, or familismo (Sabogal, Marin, & Otero-Sabogal, 1997), a tendency to avoid conflict situations, with emphasis of positive social desirability in agreeable situations, and minimizing negative behaviors when faced with conflicts, or simpatia (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984), and the maintenance of personal respect, or respeto, in interpersonal relations (Marin, 1992). These cultural values allow in-group members to make sense of the world around them and instill a sense of ethnic pride in their identity. However, acculturation entails significant changes between the value orientations of immigrating families and those of the host society (Szapocnik, Santisteban, Rio, Perez-Vidal, & Kurtines, 1986).

As “Latino\'a” youths interact with the host environment, perceived differences in value orientations can be source of significant tension and feelings of differentness (Suarez, Fowers,
Garwood, & Szapocnik, 1997). Hence, support from family members or ethnic peers can be a positive source for reducing tension and conflicts (Skuza, in press).

Julia: If I did not have my sister with me when I first came here [to the U.S.], I think that I would have died. Especially since the school that we went to was public and attendance was based on Districts. The area that we lived had a lot of Latinos living there but not at the school that we went to. You couldn’t even see black kids there; it was mostly white. People there weren’t very open and friendly with newcomers. So having my sister with me made it easier for me to get use to being here.

Biculturalism and Acculturation

Another source of acculturation stress emanates from feelings of loneliness and alienation (Suarez et al, 1997). Loneliness and alienation can occur when individuals perceive themselves as different from others (Ramirez, 1991). The negative affects of loneliness and alienation can be prevented through involvement with others who share similar ethnicity, values, beliefs, and cultures (Peplau, Miceli, & Morasch, 1982). However, biculturalism can minimize the affects of loneliness and alienation that “Latinos” and other immigrants often experience, particularly in environments where they are marginal in numbers (Suarez et al, 1997). Biculturalism as an adaptive stance allows individuals to adapt to multiple diverse environments. Adaptation occurs through the retention of identities, language, values and cultural practices of one culture, while at the same time, learning ways of adapting to another (Moya, 2000). Although most of the first-generation participants in this study are bicultural in the sense that they arrived here with their native culture and through the process of acculturation learn and adjust to the culture of the host society, Santos impressed me as someone who utilizes biculturalism to adapt to different cultural milieus. As a first-generation Turkish Chileno, Santos maintains identification with both cultural backgrounds, but at the same time, he has learned to easily adapt to different cultural contexts. For Santos this seemed like an adaptive stance to overcome the problem of not having friends.

Santos: Well, I can remember that what made it easier for me to get used to living in the U.S. was that I had spent time in both of my parents’ native countries and there I learned a lot about the different cultures. Because of this, I learned early on to always be as my parents raised me and that was being proud of my Turkish and Chileno background and at the same time learning to feel comfortable in different cultural places. So when we came here [U.S.], to me it was just another culture to learn and live with. I never felt like I had to change who I was when I came here, it was like I could be myself and at the same time learn to be part of the people I went to school with or that I hung out with as friends. In a way this helped me to always have friends wherever we lived.
Family and Acculturation

Acculturation is both an individual and collective family experience (Skuza, in press). Family members’ lives are intertwined and affect each others’ acculturation in a variety of ways. For instance, family members can be a source of positive support and encouragement for those members whose immigration experiences are stressful. Jaime, who had arrived at a very early age, remembered that for his brother immigration meant problems at school. However, together the family provided encouragement and support to help his brother cope with these problems.

Jaime: Well, when we came to the U.S. I remember that at least on some occasions my brother would get beat up and once his watch was stolen in the school bus. This made me very sad because it left me with the impression that people in this country were somewhat hostile to newcomers, but my parents and I would try to comfort my brother whenever he would come home beaten up by telling him that it would not always be this way for us here. Somehow things were going to get better for all of us.

Family involvement in acculturation can be onerous also, particularly when the problems of some family members affects other siblings (Skuza, in press). This was true of Bill, who early on was impacted by the problems his sisters were having as they adjusted to their new environment in Northern Virginia. Bill reminisced about the stress brought on by his sisters’ problems and how they affected the entire family.

Bill: Well my parents had to deal with my sisters getting pregnant [while still in high school]. Up until then we had been the perfect family after we had reunited here in the U.S.; two pretty girls, one “cute little kid;” and our parents were doing all right with their jobs and earning descent money. We were all doing fine and then my sisters got pregnant. The mistakes they made were very difficult for my family and me to get through; financially, emotionally, spiritually. It was a very stressful time for all of us to have to deal with my sisters’ problem and also try to adjust to the fact that we were living here as undocumented immigrants because our visas had expired and we had to wait for our hearing to be scheduled.

These preceding narratives suggest that although immigrant families immigrate with the determinations to adapt to their new host environment, encounters with difficulties along the way can be a source of stress. Borrowing from Skuza (in press), understanding the stresses associated with acculturation can be an important entry point into the everyday lives and experiences of immigrant children. Similarly, schooling can be another entry point for understanding the pathways of identity formation of “Latino\a” immigrant youths because it is in schools that they acquire the competencies to integrate into the host society (Banks, 1977; Goodwin, 2002; Valdes, 1996; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).
Immigrant Children in American Public Schools

Immigrant parents and their siblings arrive in the United States with very positive outlooks for schooling. They perceive education as the gateway to “better opportunities” and upward mobility (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdes, 1996). However, not all “Latino\’a” parents believe in the importance of education. Researchers have found that although some parents encourage their children to acquire the formal education they never had the opportunity to obtain (Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992; Reese, Gallimore, Balzano, & Goldenberg, 1991), others encourage their siblings to pursue early marriage or employment, rather than the pursuit of educational achievement (Fry, 2002, 2003; Fry & Lindsay Lowell, 2002; Navarrette, 1993). Even more problematic is the well documented phenomenon of “Latino\’a” school underachievement (Ogbu, 1993; Valencia, 2002; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). “Latino\’a” students, both first-generation and those born in the continental United States, arrive in American public schools with high aspirations and the determination to succeed. However, problems arising from their socioeconomic backgrounds, teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and practices (deficit thinking, ethnic stereotypes) have a negative affect on “Latino\’a” student academic achievement (Espinoza-Harold, 2003).

Children of immigrant families who attend American schools come from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, which consequently, impact their experiences in the schools they attend (Espinoza-Harold, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Immigrant families who come from families with better economic resources settle in neighborhoods that have better schools and are well quipped and prepared to deal with immigrant children (Espinoza-Harold, 2003). Conversely, families that have poor economic resources tend to settle in poorer, less integrated neighborhoods where schools are inferior and lack the resources and skilled professionals to educate immigrant children (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Some of the students who identified as first-generation that I spoke to elaborated on the notable differences they found between their schools back home and the ones they attended here.

Julia: My classes in Panama had been very different than what I had here; half of the classes were in Spanish and the other half were in English. Here they were all in English. I thought that my classes were too easy at times, but my first year I did badly because I was angry that I had to live here, and I didn’t want to meet any American people, and I just wanted to go back.
Jaime: When we came to the United States, my brother was eight, my sister was seven, years old, and I was two. Up until that point they had been educated in Bolivia. In Bolivia schooling is much more accelerated, so when they got here to the U.S. they were much more proficient in things like math and they were both head of their classes when they were back in Bolivian schools.

Cass: Here I went from sixth to eight grades without ever really studying or knowing English well, and I was still able to maintain an A average; that would have never been possible in Lima. The advantage that I got from Peru was better preparation for math, language, and science.

Although most immigrant children enter American schools with competencies in math, science and other subjects, their deficiency in English language skills overshadow these academic skills. Teachers place little value on their Spanish speaking skills and the cultural capital they bring to the classroom (Espinoza-Harold, 2003).

*Deficit Thinking and “Latino\a” School Failure*

A common interpretation of “Latino\a” academic underachievement is attributed to what some scholars refer to as “deficit thinking” (Valdes, 1996; Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking evolved from Oscar Lewis’ (1965) “culture of poverty” perspectives of the poor. Lewis argued that urban poor folk, regardless of ethnicity, lived in chaotic family structures whose ways of living consisted of violence, fatalism, and unproductive values and beliefs that were passed on from one generation to another (Valencia, 2002). Lewis’ work promulgated the notion that the urban poor were in need of re-socialization into stable, productive, citizens (Valencia, 1997).

According to Valencia (1997), post World War II educational researchers initiated what he refers to as the “cultural explanation of failure” (p.115), which blamed the victims for their failures.

Deficit thinkers emphasized that linguistic and developmental deficiency in lower class children results from parents who did not teach them to be problem solvers or knowledge seekers (Ginsberg, 1972). Furthermore, they subscribed to the notion that lower class children used impoverished language skills that were unsuitable for communicating complex ideas or articulating the abstract reasoning of academic tasks (Valencia, 1997). Hence, deficit thinkers believed that “Latino” children who historically underachieved in schools were culturally deprived and had to be taught mainstream culture (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966), or they were culturally different and therefore, were mismatched with school culture (Baratz & Baratz, 1970).

Today, at least thirty years since its emergence in the educational arena, deficit thinking is still quite pervasive among educators and mainstream students alike (Valencia, 2002).
Educators today continue to pathologize “Latino\a” students’ school failure on their lack of English skills, low self-concept, and propensity for academic underachievement (Espinoza-Harold, 2003). Several of the students’ narratives who identified as first-generation immigrants illustrated examples of encounters with “deficit thinking” from both teachers and classmates.

Jorge: When I was accepted to Virginia Tech I was surprised because many of my high school teachers never really thought that I would be accepted. So when I received my acceptance letter, I showed it to them so that I could prove how wrong they were about me.

Cass: One of my White friends who was coming here [VT] tried to discourage me from applying to the engineering program because he kept saying that it was very hard to get into and that I would never be accepted. But I applied anyway and I did make it.

Santos: When I was finishing high school, this girl that I knew, we were just hanging around talking about my interest in attending college, and I remember telling her that my plans were to go to college. So she kind of gave me a shocked look as if to say “you’re going to college?” So I said yeah, my plans are to go to college. Then she asked what school was I planning on attending, and when I replied Virginia Tech she gave this surprised look again and asked, “What kind of grades do you have?” This girl was in my classes and knew me but she automatically assumed that I would not be going to college just because I identified myself as a Latino. Then when I told her that my GPA was 3.7, her jaw kind of dropped in surprise, as if she were trying to say that she would have never expected somebody from my background to be able to accomplish what I had done in high school.

“Subtractive Assimilation”

Language has always been a matter of contention between immigrants and U.S. schools. American schools are political domains that serve as agents of socialization whose formal pedagogy and curriculum reflect mainstream society (Giroux, 1983). Schools engage in “subtractive assimilation” through policies and practices that essentially suppress immigrant students of their native language and culture (Gibson, 1993; Valenzuela, 1999). Although schools may explicitly advocate respect for cultural and linguistic differences, their goals for these students are that of cultural replacement and assimilation into mainstream values and practices (Gibson, 2002). Portes and Rumbaut (1996) applied this concept of subtractive education to the linguistic assimilation of immigrants in American Schools. They argue that mainstream Anglos are threatened by the advantages non-mainstream students may have in competitive labor markets because of liberal education policies that foster bilingualism. Hence, federal legislators have strongly supported passage of educational policies that empowers
subtractive assimilation by enacting English only school programs (for a review, see U.S. Department of Education, 2005: Public Law 107-110: No Child Left Behind Act).

Immigrant students who enter American schools with limited English proficiency (LEP Students) are either placed in lower classes or assigned to bilingual or English as a Second language (ESL) programs that “neither reinforce their native language nor their cultural identities” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 26). Virginia’s Department of Education ESL Handbook for Teachers and Administrators (2005) explicitly states that, “full proficiency in English must be the overarching goal of an ESL program” (p. 1). It was interesting to hear some of the narrations from students who identified as first-generation regarding how schools responded to their lack of English proficiency.

Julia: At the time we first arrived here in the U.S., I was sixteen when I enrolled in high school in my sophomore year. At the time I thought that I spoke English perfectly until I got to school here and even though I was fairly fluent, my teachers immediately picked up on and made an issue of my accent. Since my parents brought us up speaking English and Spanish, I learned to speak both, so I could speak English fairly well, except that my vocabulary wasn’t as developed as it could have been. Some words I definitely messed up in conversation. However, my Spanish is fairly fluent, we could conduct this interview in Spanish if you would like. However, I had to take an English Proficiency Exam when I got here. But I did well on it enough not to have to take ESL classes.

Santos: When I started grammar school, I was put in a program for foreign students who could not speak English. My mother had explained that we had moved here from England and that coming from British schools, I had excellent command of the English language. But they noticed that I came from a Latino background and they refused to acknowledge that I could speak English well. They assumed that because my mother couldn’t articulate her thoughts very well in English, that I had the same problem. So they ended up placing me in a special program for foreign students who needed to learn English, even though I didn’t need it.

Alex: When we arrived in the U.S. instead of going to the first grade they put me back a year because I couldn’t speak any English. Same thing happen to my sister, instead of going to the third grade, she ended up having to repeat second grade.

Language is not only a form of communication it is an integral part of one’s cultural identity (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). As noted by Fishman (1995) “language is a precious marker of cultural belonging, behavior, and identity” (p.51). I can empathize with Jorge’s frustration as he described how teachers made a point of harassing him because of his resistance to speak English in the classroom. This seemed to have a negative effect on his self-esteem and motivation to be in school, rather than serving as encouragement to acquire English proficiency.
Jorge: I was always being scolded in school for speaking Spanish all the time. My teachers would always make an issue of my speaking it. They would automatically call me and bring to my attention that I was in school and “I should speak English only here.” I use to tell them that I felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish than in English. So whenever the teachers heard me speaking in Spanish they would make it a point to let me know that I should be speaking “English only.” This would really irritate me! I thought that if I am not supposed to be talking, then tell me that, but don’t tell me that I shouldn’t be talking in my own language when I wanted to.” This kind of treatment made me feel like I was some sort of misfit just because I spoke a different language then everybody else. It made me feel withdrawn and not wanting to have to be there in those stupid classrooms with those people.

As agents of socialization American school systems exert pressure on immigrant students to conform to mainstream linguistic preferences. Opponents of bilingual education argue that English is not only the official language of the United States, but it is also the language of business, diplomacy, and science (Portes & Schauffler, 1996). However, it is important to note that diaspora “Latino” immigrants seek integration into American society as bilinguals with linguistic command of both Spanish and English (Hernandez-Chavez, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Likewise, their eagerness to be a part of the American dream is a driving force in their desire for academic achievement.

Oppositional Behavior and Academic Achievement

Immigrants and their children place high value in academic success, because it is the pathway to the American dream. Consequently, there is a strong belief that mimicking the same strategies for success that middle-class Americans employ, namely, “hard work, following the rules, and getting good grades” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998), will facilitate academic success and provide vocational opportunities. However, as “Latino” youths find their aspirations for making it in American society blocked, they construct identities that reject-after being rejected by-mainstream society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Because these students tend to be highly alienated, they reject norms of academic achievement and embrace oppositional culture. Youths who engage in oppositional culture employ strategies for protecting identities and setting boundaries between them and Anglos (Ogbu, 1986). Consequently, they regard certain forms of behaviors as not appropriate for ethnic minorities. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) notes how these individuals subscribe to the notion that “acting white” is unacceptable for minorities, because it entails working hard to obtain academic success. The ability for academic achievement is seen as something that is only possible for Anglo students, and therefore, it is not something ethnic
minorities should aspire to. Consequently, students who subscribe to oppositional behavior have a greater propensity for school failure and are more likely to drop out (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

As I examined the narratives of students who identified as first generation, rather than finding signs of oppositional behavior, what I did find was a pattern of behavior not currently discussed in “Latino/a” research. While these students were committed to academic achievement, they knew that academic success would require discipline and focus. Hence, very early on, these students developed strategy for success that involved disassociation from other “Latino/a” peers who engaged in oppositional culture. Their fear was that any association with these students would be counterproductive to their aspirations for academic achievement because of the stigma that came from teachers and other successful students, if they were perceived to be a part of the oppositional culture at school. Alex, Bill, Cass, and Jaime spoke about how they avoided interacting with “Latino” peers who engaged in oppositional behavior.

Alex: When I was in elementary to middle school what actually happened was that at the time my friends were both Black and Latino. I could see that most of my Latino friends were in gangs and were involved in delinquent behavior. I knew a lot of Latinos whose parents immigrated here and they were working hard to help their kids, but at the same time their kids were involved in gangs and delinquency. We all realized where this kind of behavior would eventually lead us to, so we kind of backed away from associating with any of them.

Bill: I have noticed that I don’t necessarily hang out in crowds or clicks of white folks [laughs] or even very many Latinos. I can’t fully explain why that happened in middle school, but I guess it had to do with me being kind of very serious about school and going to college. The people that I hung out with were very moral and had very strict standards, because of religion or upbringing. So I found it easier to hang out with them. I knew that they wouldn’t do certain things compared to white students or some of the Latinos that were there. In high school, I never really associated with the few Latinos that were there because there were into doing all the things that I had decided early on I wouldn’t do.

Cass: Here in Virginia the people I went to school with were too focused on what they wore like the black CK shirts and the Tommy jeans and Nike’s, I had all thought, but I didn’t really place that much emphasis on any of that stuff. The other incompatibility that I had to deal with was this notion that I was too “smart.” That meant that I wasn’t cool. If people perceived that you were school smart, you would automatically be ridiculed and set off as an outcast who had sold out. I got that for most of the time that I was here in Virginia. So for this reason I simply hung out with all kinds of people and not just Latinos all the way through high school.
Jaime: When I was in K-12 most of the other kids that I knew who identified themselves as Latinos had their own little cliques and they were always trying to be bad asses all the time and always getting in trouble. To me I didn’t really care much for that, so I just associated with whoever was a good person and who had the same ideals as I did about doing well in school.

The students who identified as first-generation immigrants positioned themselves for success by employing “critical resistant navigational skills” for achieving success in school (Solozano & Villalpondo, 1998, p. 216). These survival skills emerged from their ability to resist a subtractive system of education and socialization that devalues and subtracts their ethno- and socio-cultural experiences (Valenzuela, 1999). These students excelled by enduring the various forms of acculturative stress, successfully navigating through subtractive schools by preserving cultural and linguistic capital, and disassociating themselves from oppositional behavior. In fact, their ability to succeed despite the deficit thinking and subtractive elements of schooling helped them to forge identities that embodied elements of resilience.

Resilience is associated with one’s ability to excel in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles (Gordon, 1996). These students exemplify resilience because despite the many problems associated with immigration and acculturation, they have succeeded in graduating from high school and subsequently, moved on to college. But, why was this group of “Latino” first-generation students successful, when others fail? Several key elements emerged from the data, which may shed some insight on this.

First, unlike previous “Latino/a” immigrants (particularly those who came to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century), the new “Latino/a” diaspora immigrants sought integration into American society as bilinguals with linguistic command for both Spanish and English. For previous generations of “Latino” immigrants, acculturation meant shedding the native language and learning English (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Many first generation “Latinos” from this wave of immigration were educated in schools where total English language immersion was and remains the pedagogical praxis, and consequently, dramatically diminished their Spanish competencies by replacing them with English (Espinoza-Harold, 2003, Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Although school praxis remains the same today, the students whose narratives I explored alluded to active resistance to shedding their native tongue. Secondly, while these students sought to become part of mainstream American society, they actively resisted abandonment of native identities and engaged in the “accommodation without assimilation” that
Gibson (1997) spoke about. They adopted American mainstream values enough to successfully navigate through subtractive schools, while at the same time maintaining their own ethnic identities.

As these first-generation students entered into the academic landscape, their “funds of knowledge,” cultural affiliations, and linguistic preferences that have been passed on from one generation to another, all served as cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Cultural capital provides the foundations, knowledge and skills that makes learning and constructing knew knowledge possible (Ambrosio, 2003). Borrowing from Genva Gay’s book, Culturally Responsive Teaching, learning is enhanced when knowledge is constructed “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students” (p.29). Because these first-generation students engaged in “accommodation without assimilation,” their retention of cultural frames of references seemed to enhance their ability to learn and excel in American schools (Gibson, 1993, 1997).

Second-Generation Students and Assimilation

Aside from first-generation immigrants there were other participants in this study who identified as second or third-generation immigrants. These were youths who had been born and raised in the United States by parents who had immigrated to this country. Because they grew up here, the identities forged by these individuals accentuated both ancestral backgrounds and their experiences as native born U.S. citizens (Goodwin, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Some of these students had temporarily lived overseas with their families or simply had spent considerable time visiting their parents’ native countries. For those students who had opportunities to spend time abroad, these experiences themselves helped broaden their perspectives about life in the United States as compared to their parental native homelands. Time abroad helped fill cultural gaps through first-hand opportunities for learning and contextualizing family histories, cultures and traditions from the native perspective. For most of these students, native culture seemed too remote to identify with because of their birth here in the U.S or simply from lack of exposure to it. However, as these students moved through the educational system, they were taught that to be successful in the United States, one had to relinquish ancestral language and culture in exchange for mainstream culture (Espinoza-Harold, 2003).

As an adaptive strategy, second-generation youths forge hyphenated identities (e.g. Puerto Rican-American, etc.) that reflect both ancestral and U.S mainstream cultures (Rumbaut,
Those who cannot adapt or experience difficulty adjusting to mainstream society either constructed adversarial identities that reject dominant culture and devalue education by engaging in oppositional behavior (Fordhan & Ogbu, 1986), or they identify with native culture only (Waters, 1996). Oysermann et al’s (2003) model of Racial-Ethnic Self-Schemas speaks to the complexity of racial-ethnic schemas and how their content can influence the formation of identities that either reject dominant culture or incorporate it into one’s identity repertoire.

**Racial-Ethnic Self-Schemas**

The model of racial-ethnic self-schemas (RES) for African American, Latino/a, and Native American adolescents explains how ethnic-identity may shape self-concept, and consequently, influence academic engagement (Oyserman et al, 2003). Oyserman et al argued that ethnic minorities with complex beliefs about their own ethnic identities are more likely to excel in academic performance as compared to those who do not. Specifically, their model focuses on the content of racial-ethnic self-schemas and how they can either diminish or facilitate academic engagement.

The model of Racial Ethnic Self-Schema’s consists of four categories of racial-ethnic schemas: dual, minority, in-group focused, and aschematic. The “Dual” and “Minority” RES are correlated with enhanced academic performance and ability to contextualize minority status in terms of the larger society. In contrast, the “in-group” and “aschematic” RES are associated with academic disengagement and vulnerability to the denigrating effects of racial-ethnic stereotypes and discrimination (Oyserman et al, 2003).

Students who construct this “dual identity” focus on associating with both in-group and larger society. They place value on the positive outcomes from this duality. Oyserman et al argue that having “dual identity” provides a more effective buffer from the negative effects of out-group stereotypes. Thus, their ability to successfully engage in academics is enhanced in spite of negative attributions and stereotypes about the in-group.

Likewise, as with the dual identity “minority identity” schemas focus on two critical elements: (a) membership in an in-group that is discriminated against by larger society, and (b) promote strategies that prevent negative effects of minority status in larger society. Because there is a constant vigilance against negative stereotypes of the in-group, “minority identity” provides a greater safeguard against negative stereotypes. Students from this group generally share
automated strategies for coping with and handling stereotypic and prejudicial responses (Oyserman et al, 2003).

Such strategies may include (but are not limited to) the use of preventive focus, psychological disengagement, and situational manipulation of identity (Oyserman & Swim, 2001). Preventive focus may involve efforts to minimize encounters with negative stereotypes and prejudice by avoiding certain situations and/or focusing attention on in-group membership, rather than with being a part of the larger society (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). Psychological disengagement is a defense mechanism that allows the individual to detach self-esteem from specific outcomes within a particular domain (academic, social), such that self-esteem is not contingent upon success or failure in that specific domain (Major & Schmader, 1998). Situational manipulation of identity, involves attempts to identify with mainstream culture while in school but not at home (Becker, 1990). Gibson (1997) noted how minority individuals manage “accommodation without assimilation,” a strategy whereby students conform to mainstream culture as a means to succeed academically while preserving their own ethnic identity.

In contrast to these two complex self-concepts that are associated with enhanced academic performance, the researchers identified “in-group focused” and “aschematic” identities. Oyserman et al (2003) argue that while these two groups have positive beliefs about their in-group, they do not have any explicit associations with the larger society. Because these students tend to be highly alienated, they reject norms of academic achievement and embrace oppositional culture. Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) research on African American underachievement described how these individuals subscribe to the notion that “acting white” is an unacceptable in-group norm that entails working hard to obtain academic success, and “acting black” is cool and involves academic underachievement, despite having the ability to excel.

Students who identified as second-generation in this study were all within the group who had adjusted to both native and mainstream culture and thus, were well within the “Dual RES” group. They placed value on the positive outcomes from this duality because it in fact, did provide an effective buffer from the negative effects of out-group stereotypes. Their dual identity enhanced their ability to succeed academically, despite the negative stereotypes they endured from teachers and non-minority peers.
The narrations of students who identified as second generation revolved around their experiences at the schools they attended, their aspirations to succeed, and the roles parents and family played in supporting their aspirations. My analysis of their pre-college experiences revealed only two distinct differences from their first generation counterparts. First, as discussed in chapter three, by the time second-generation students commence their schooling, their levels of English proficiency are greater than those exhibited by first-generation students. This was expected because most of these second-generation students had grown up in the U.S. and they mostly came from bilingual homes where both Spanish and English were spoken. Furthermore, their early exposure to American television, internet, and movies provided audio-visual models of the English dominant society they lived in, which subsequently, shaped both their identities and their linguistic preferences to reflect both their parents’ influences and that of the society in which they were brought up in (Portes & Schaufler, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Secondly, as noted in some of the subsequent narratives, unlike the parents of first-generation students, the parents of the second-generation counterparts seemed to have more involvement with the education of their children through contact with the schools.

On Attaining Success

In his study on recent immigrants and their children, Hirschman (1996) described how second generation children are educated and socialized in the public schools they attend, in their homes, and in their neighborhoods. From the schools they acquire the skills and competencies to become gainfully employed citizens; from their homes and neighborhoods they learn and internalize beliefs in the American dream. For the purpose of this study, schools, neighborhoods, and homes are perceived as spaces.

“Space” is perceived as being made up of “underlying structures and resources, have weak boundaries, and are sites of contestation within which culture is produced” (Calabrese Barton, et al, 2004, p. 5). Although spaces are defined by individuals who utilize them and the roles they play within them, they are also shaped by rules and expectations of those who participate within them (Fraszier, Margai, & Tettey-Fio, 2003; Massey, 1993). Moreover, drawing from critical race theory, one can determine the connections between particular spaces and the ideas and values that are perpetuated within them (Calabrese Barton et al, 2004).

Critical race theory emerged from the premise that racism is so embedded in American culture, that it appears both normal and natural (Delgado & Stefanic, 2000). Its goal revolves
around the task of “unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). This task takes the form of storytelling to “analyze the myths, presuppositions, and perceived wisdoms that make up the common culture about race, and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2000, p. xvii).

Within the confines of American educational spaces, ethnic minority students are often judged by their lack of English skills and by their lack of white middle class wealth and values (Deyhle, 1995). Instead of utilizing the cultural capital that “Latinos” bring to their classrooms in the form of family values, Spanish language ability, and culture, educators marginalize and often treat them as inferior (Gibson, 1993; Goodwin, 2002; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) referred to cultural capital as the knowledge, skills, cultural and material resources that are passed on from one generation to another. In my discussions with the students who identified as second generation Marisa, Celia, and Jay shared stories about how they were treated as inferior or less apt to learn because of their ethnicity.

Marisa: While I was growing up through grade school, kindergarten through second grade primarily, a lot of my teachers had this notion that I was slow or had a learning disability. So they were always trying to hold me back or trying to place me in special reading programs. I never knew why my teachers believed that I was slow learner, honestly, I didn’t. I never really understood why they believed that I had a learning disability because I was doing just as well as anyone else in my class.

Celia: I have felt that some of my teachers along the way have underestimated me, maybe because of my ethnicity. That happened a lot in my high school in San Diego I think because Latinos in that school weren’t perceived as high achievers; the same was expected of me. But this didn’t affect my grades at all…

Jay: I always doubted myself and after awhile, it came to a point where I realized that I had to do things for myself [study harder, get tutoring, better grades, etc]; just because they say [Anglo teachers] or think that you are dumb does not mean that you are actually dumb. Once I finally realized that, my grades started to improve. It also made me want to work harder and believe in my abilities that I can do anything they can do [white students] because they are no different than me.”

Marisa, Celia, and Jay’s narratives illustrate some of the barriers “Latino\'a” students face in American schools. Teachers who lack the experience, knowledge, and skills to teach ethnic minority students have the propensity to attribute “Latino\'a” school failure to “internal defects, or deficits, that thwart the learning process” (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83). This form of deficit thinking is rooted in white supremacy and racism (Valencia, 1997). Indeed, racism and
discrimination have been identified as two of the most common obstacles “Latinos” contend with in American schools (Espinoza-Harold, 2003). While Marisa, Celia, and Jay’s narratives imply that their teachers subscribed to the deficit myth of “Latino/a” school failure, Marcelo and Maria’s narratives illustrate the racist attitudes among Anglo students endured by “Latinos” in American schools.

Marcelo: I do recall there were times when some of my classmates (the white ones) acted like a bunch of ignorant kids and they would make racist comments about me just because they didn’t know any better. Although that would bother me, I never let it get in the way of getting good grades. I think that they would say those things about me because they were actually jealous that I was doing better in class than they were.

Maria: In school I never felt ashamed of my culture or never felt like I didn’t want anyone to know what I was. I would get upset because a lot of my classmates had all these negative stereotypes of Latinos and that we were all Mexicans. It would make me mad when they would ask me these stupid questions like “Does your mom make tacos and burritos?” Those kinds of remarks would make me angry and annoyed with their ignorance, but it would never make me ashamed or want to hide my Puerto Rican identity. Their ignorance would make me want to work harder with my schoolwork so that I could show them that not all Puerto Ricans are stupid. Of course I always did well in school no matter what those ignorant white kids would say.

Parental Involvement in the Educational Process

Another explanation for “Latino/a” school failure that is perpetuated by mainstream educators is the myth that parents of low socio-economic backgrounds do not value or get involved with their children’s education (Calabrese Barton et al, 2004; Valencia & Black, 2002). However, as evidenced by the students’ narratives, it appears that parents of second generation students maintain some level of involvement in the education of their children either through direct contact with their schools or indirectly, through their interaction with the children at home. When Marisa spoke about how she had been assessed as having a “learning disability,” she also made references to her mother’s involvement with the school regarding this matter. Celia also made references about her parents’ involvement with the education of both their children.

Marisa:...my mother did know [about her teachers trying to place her in remedial classes] and she fought it and she requested to see my test scores, and she found out that in spite of the fact that my test scores were on the same level as everyone else’s, they [Marisa’s teachers] still wanted to place me in lower remediation classes because they didn’t think that I was as smart.

Celia: …what helped me get through all that was that I knew that my parents were always involved in our lives, growing up. They were involved in our education. Whenever we
had a problem at school it wasn’t like we had to feel as if we were on our own. Our parents were always there to help us out. They would always take time to talk to our teachers and help us out with any problems my brother and I had with our schools.

Maria: My parents have always supported me financially and emotionally. They were always involved with my education, they made me study and do my homework, and my mom would just sit there and make sure that I did it right and she would check my homework and make sure that it was done correctly. Whenever there were parent teachers meeting they would always attend and spend time chatting with all of my teachers. It was almost embarrassing to have them spend so much time at my schools. My parents have always been big on studying for exams, do your homework, be on time, be organized were some of the advice they used to constantly ingrain in us.

Researchers who have used the analytic lens of cultural capital and space have found that parental engagement in the schooling of their children should be defined in terms of the “mediation between space and capital… and in relation to others in school settings” (Calabrese Barton et al, 2004, p. 6). In other words, the various forms of parental involvement within school settings (e.g. teacher-parent conferences, Parent Teachers Associations, accompanying siblings to their classrooms, etc.) is defined by the boundaries of what they want to accomplish at these settings for their children. Parental involvement as it relates to the education of their children “is a set of relationships and actions that cut across individuals, circumstances, and events that are produced and bounded” (Calabrese Barton et al, 2004, p. 6) within the school settings. Involvement cannot be perceived or assessed by any single action taken by the parent; instead it should be the quality of the actions they engage in (e.g. parents interacting with other parents, teachers, administrators, or neighbors). Therefore, the absence of parents in the schools does not necessarily indicate lack of involvement, it may be an indicator of involvement at a different level or context (e.g., helping with homework, conversing with other parents to acquire information about the school, etc.). The students’ narratives indicate differing levels of parental involvement in their education. While there is some indication of active interaction with their children’s teachers, they were also engaged in their children’s learning at home (checking homework, providing advice, etc.).

*Debunking Negative Ethnic Stereotypes*

Despite the subtractive conditions that “Latino/a” students endured at the hands of their schools and teachers, they demonstrated elements of resilience. Similar to their first generation counterparts, second generation students in this study recognized the importance of education as
a major resource for improving their economic and social status within American mainstream society (Attinasi, 1989; Ogbu, 1991). Their aspirations for success and their eagerness to pursue higher education not only improved their chances of “making it,” but it also helps to debunk the negative stereotypes that deficit thinkers perpetuate about “Latino\’a” inferiority.

Celia: So I think my ability to disprove negative Latino stereotypes is evident in doing what I am already doing: graduating from high school with a 4.0 GPA, going to college, getting into the college I wanted to attend, getting into the program I wanted to, and doing as well academically in college as I am doing. I think that for me that says it all.

Geraldo: the fact that I am Hispanic and I am among the few that are going to college, that kind of makes me kind of more proud of what I am about to achieve. It certainly dispels some of those negative stereotypes about Hispanics and Gay people, that we don’t care about education.

Maria: My main push for academic success is a lot due to my parents. I would be completely happy living in a tree house in South America watching animals because that would be my ideal life. But, that is not socially acceptable and that is not cool thing to do just because of the way the world is these days, and I think that higher education is something that is really promoted these days. Especially for Latin and minority people, because not enough of them are getting higher education and getting to those desirable positions that mostly whites get into. So I want to succeed to make my parents proud and happy and to do something that they never had the opportunity to do, and to be a role model for other people, just so that they know that it is possible to do, and to show all of my ignorant white classmates from my past that not all Latinos are stupid like they thought we were.

Marisa: there’s some pride that comes with the knowledge that you are one of the few that “making it” [graduate from high schools and go to college] proves that you can be as good as anyone else and that we can do it and your success gives your family something that they can be proud of. My family tends to brag a lot about their children throughout the family, so I have to be successful for my family also.

Jay:…it came to a point where I realized that I had to do things for myself [study harder, get tutoring, better grades, etc]; just because they say [Anglo teachers] or think that you are dumb does not mean that you are actually dumb. Once I finally realized that, my grades started to improve. It also made me want to work harder and believe in my abilities that I can do anything they can do [white students] because they are no different than me.

It is easy to discern from these narratives that “Latino\’a” students recognize the value of education and have strong aspirations to succeed academically, socially, and vocationally. However, because we live in a society where mainstream culture devalues minority culture and values, the true potential of many “Latinos” may never be achieved unless there is significant
reform in our schools (Espinoza-Harold, 2003). Despite the subtractive elements of American schools and the deficit thinking that is perpetuated by many of its educators, the evidence found among these students implies that despite the many barriers that stand in the way of achieving the American dream, there is determination to overcome these barriers as a matter of self and ethnic pride and the desire to debunk the many negative stereotypes that Anglo Americans have toward “Latinos.” Although a large portion of the knowledge about “Latinos” in American schools is derived from a plethora of literature from elementary and secondary education research (Espinoza-Harold, 2003; Valdes, 1996; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999), there is much to be learned about “Latinos” who endure the subtractive elements of pre-college education and courageously pursue higher education.

Crossroads: At the Juncture of Space, Identity, and Success

Although the participants have distinct backgrounds and undertaken many different pathways, it is at the Virginia Tech campus where their lives intersect. Their family histories, linguistic preferences, ancestral backgrounds and subsequently, the identities forged by each of these individuals all have an impact on the relationships and experiences encountered in college (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It is at the university campus where these students continue their pathways of identity formation and ultimately, acquire the skills and competencies to achieve their goals to be a part of the American dream. Their determination to succeed will further shape the formation and affirmation of ethnic identity, as they attempt to integrate into the academic landscape of a predominantly white institution where their ethnic categorization is neither acknowledged, nor a part of the institution’s infrastructure (governance, faculty, or staff).

Education has always been recognized as a major resource for improving the economically and socially disadvantaged; but minority access to higher education has seldom been indiscriminate (Attinasi, 1989; Ogbu, 1991). In particular, “Latinos” and other racial and ethnic minorities have been and continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in higher education (Astin, 1985; Fry, 2002; Hurtado, 1992). Having encountered 12 years in predominantly white elementary and secondary schools, it came as no surprise for the participants that the college environment was no different. In fact, for some of these students, the lack of diversity was not allowed to stand in their way of pursuing a degree.

Julia: the only choice that I really had for college was Virginia Tech. I liked the campus and it seemed like it was the kind of place that I wanted to be at even though there were
so few Latinos here. I wasn’t going to let that discourage me from getting a college degree because I was already used to being around mostly White kids in my high school.

Santos: Honestly, it is difficult when I look around to see if I can identify others who may be similar to me ethnically or culturally, but most of the time I am the only Latino in the classrooms. But I try not to let this bother me too much. I know that I am here for one reason, and that is to get a degree. I can’t let the lack of diversity here stumble me.

Jorge: I thought that this place was huge [the campus], but at the same time really nice. After a few days, I realized that I wasn’t seeing too many of us around [Latinos] and it started to make me feel depressed. But like with my previous schools where mostly everyone else was white, I just got use to it. Eventually, I started to meet a few other Latinos at the Circulo parties and after that, I started to feel more at home here. I knew that just because we were so few in numbers that I was not going to allow this to get in my way of getting a college degree.

Celia: I knew coming here [Virginia Tech] that this was not going to be the most diverse place to go to college. But, I am pretty confident in my abilities and know that despite the lack of diversity here at Virginia Tech, I am going to graduate.

Alex: I didn’t really know about the diversity of this university until I got here. I knew that it was predominantly white, but I didn’t think that there would be so few minorities here, especially Latinos. At first, this was kind of intimidating, but I knew that if I was going to graduate with a degree in engineering, I was going to have to get used to this pretty quickly; in time I actually did.

Although Alex, Julia, and Jorge were cognizant of the lack of “Latino\(a\)” presence here, for at least Julia and Jorge it was something that would not interfere with their plans to pursue their goals to graduate. Cass, on the other hand, was not overly concerned with the lack of diversity on campus. The potential to move away from home was more comforting to him for a variety of reasons.

Cass: I had been accepted at George Mason University but I really didn’t want to go there because of its proximity to home would be a hassle. My mom and dad would be confrontational, so I wanted to be away for college so that I wouldn’t have to deal with my parents and that kind of stuff. I had to get away from home at all cost. I was like no offense, but I need some time off away from the family. So I was so excited when I got the thick envelope from Virginia Tech and I thought about how now “I am out” of my parents fold. I didn’t even visit the campus before I accepted and I knew that there weren’t that many Hispanics at Virginia Tech, but that really didn’t bother me anyway. I don’t think that this was ever a key factor for me to make my decision because since I was one of those people that didn’t associate that much with Latinos in high school, I had already been used to not being around them.
Cass’ intent on moving away from home for college departs from what is known in the literature about the reasons why “Latinos” students attend four-year institutions. Recent nationwide surveys examining the many factors that influence abstention from college among “Latino/a” youths indicate that among 18- to 24-year-olds, attachment to family, community, and the economy of staying home during college are factors considered when making the decision to either move away for college or attend locally (Fry, 2002, 2004). These surveys indicate that a common reason why many “Latinos” prefer to attend community college, rather than go to a four-year institution is because it allows them to stay near family. For Cass, it seems there were other underlying complex reasons related to family that were at the root of his determination to attend college away from home.

Cass: Being away from home for college helps me focus, meaning that I would have had more chores and responsibilities at home, than I would have had to do here [Virginia Tech] and that would have taken away my focus on my studies. It would have definitely taken time away from my studies, and I would have to take fewer credits than I am taking here in order to keep up with my family responsibilities if I had gone to college in Northern Virginia.

Contrary to what is known about “Latinos” college students’ preferences to stay near home and family during college, Cass was intent on attending a college away from home. He perceived this as a way of avoiding familial responsibilities that would otherwise distract him from achieving academic success. This had been found true for many of the "Latino/a" students in my pilot study who were attending Virginia Tech and who hailed from Northern Virginia. They too, wanted to concentrate on their college experience without the distraction of family and friends back home.

*Academic Self-Concept*

One of the most important predictors of academic success for students of color is having a positive academic self-concept (Sedlacek, 1989). Academic self-concept is defined as “possessing confidence, a strong self-feeling, strength of character, determination, and independence” (p. 3). Rodriguez (1996) asserts that minority students who feel confident about succeeding in college are more likely to persist and graduate. Most of the first and second-generation students’ narratives personified some of the attributes of “academic self-concept” and assuredness of success, particularly because of their level of comfort at Virginia Tech.

Julia: My comfort level here at this university is pretty good, because I don’t generally get placed in any ethnic stereotype because of the way that I look [she looks Anglo]. So I
don’t get stereotyped as a Latina. But, I try to be open about the fact that I am Panamanian and people give me this weird expression when they realize that I am not white. But, I don’t let that bother me anymore because I feel like if I am a student at this university, then I must be just as smart as anyone around here.

Jaime: I never felt being treated different or unfairly here, at least not by faculty because I showed them very early on that I was very capable of working hard and getting good grades. I came in with confidence in myself and being around other successful Latinos always motivates me to be successful as well.

Celia: I feel that I am pretty comfortable with who I am to be able to feel that I fit in and can be successful here.

Marcelo: I am pretty comfortable here at this university and because I know that I will not have problems getting my degree. I can get along well with people of different races and cultures. I don’t really have any problems with that. I have my Latin friends and I have my white, black and Asian friends. I can get along pretty well with people that are mostly Americanized rather than with those who are here as international students. They grew up here in the US, but they have parents that grew up in a country outside of the US. Most of them understand what it is like to be a minority in a mostly white school and to come from a culturally different background, but at the same time they can relate with being an American too.

Maria: I have always been comfortable with myself and who I am, as well as my nationality. I have never had any negative instances here at VT where I felt that I was compromised or had to hide or promote my ethnicity. I am the only Hispanic person in my major. In a lot of my classes I am the only Latina, but it doesn’t make me feel uncomfortable at all because I know that I am just as competent as anyone else to be there.

These students’ self-confidence stand in contrast to Santos’ who appears to have had some ambivalence about whether or not he could persist in a predominantly white campus. Although the likelihood that a student will persist in college is contingent upon many factors, a student’s ability to integrate into the campus community is a strong indicator of persistence for most college students (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Integration is a process that involves one’s transition from previous familiar associations that may include family, high school, and local community (Tinto, 1993). Students are likely to encounter problems with adjustment to the college environment as they begin to separate from familiar associations. These problems may include incompatibility with the institution, feelings of alienation, or lack of fit with the institution, which may lead to early decisions of withdrawal from college (Tinto, 1997). Although, Santos
and Jay perceived there was some degree of incongruity with Virginia Tech initially, they were however, able to successfully adjust.

Santos: Sometimes it was difficult to get used to the fact that I was always in the minority here and I often wondered if I was going to make it here, but I stuck to it and know I hope to graduate this spring.

Jay: Right off the bat, I felt like maybe I shouldn’t be in those classes, you had people talking down you all the time, so they actually made me feel as if maybe I didn’t really belong there. So when I first got here [VT] my grades suffered and I always doubted myself and after awhile it came to a point where I realized that I had to do things for myself [study harder, get better grades, get tutoring, etc].

Although some of the students expressed a strong level of confidence and compatibility with the campus, others reported experiencing less tolerance for ethnicity than for sexual orientation. I found Geraldo’s comment about Anglo students’ willingness to be more accepting of people on the basis of sexual orientation, rather than on race or ethnicity surprising. That seems to be in contrast to what is known about “Latino/a” or minority Gays and Lesbians, because research shows that aside from family and community, Gay ethnic minorities encounter greater prejudice and alienation from both white Anglo heterosexuals and Anglo Gays and Lesbians (Bhugra, 1997; Cerbone, 1977; Greene, 1997; Savin-Williams, 1996).

Geraldo: For the most part I think that the climate for Gay people on our campus is good. I would say that there is not that much hostility against us. I haven’t really experienced anything like that here. I have spoken openly about being gay with professors and they are all ok with it. For the most part the atmosphere here is very accepting here as long as you are not cramming it down people’s throat. I don’t think most people really care. I think that most people are for the most part okay with it. It’s strange but I think that people here tend to be more accepting of Gay people than they are of ethnic minorities.

**Social Capital**

In spite of Virginia Tech’s lack of diversity, the participants came with aspirations to succeed. The students quickly became part of a culture that would require academic and social skills. As they navigated through the rigors of academics, they learned early on that survival meant learning to rely on one another as capital for maximizing each others’ success. Coleman (1988, 1990) developed the notion of social capital, which can be an appropriate lens for examining the structure of relationships formed among Latino college students at predominantly white institutions. It refers to the reciprocal relationships that groups of people engage in to enable the achievement of goals that cannot be achieved individually (Valenzuela, 1999).
Cass: My close friends always helped me with homework or with anything about a class that I didn’t understand. I also started this “system” of sharing class notebooks with other Latino engineering students that I knew as a way of helping each other get through the weed out classes. This helped a lot of people to make it through the tough engineering courses during the first two years.

Julia: Well I have friends that are in the art department that I admire as artists and I learn from their art and what they are doing, more so than from my courses. They serve as an inspiration to my own work and that is worth a lot to me.

Alex: I rely on all of my close friends to be a part of my strategies for success because when we talk to each other we share any resources that helps us get through the tough engineering course; like Cass’ “system” of sharing class-notes, we do homework and study in groups, especially if we are in the same engineering course and that really helps.

Santos: I rely on most of my friends to get through some of my courses and even the times when I get depressed about not being around other Latinos. They would help me by sharing class notes, sometimes if my computer was not working right they would let me use theirs, so that I could do get my homework done. Also when we did too much partying, I would caution them that we needed to crack down on our books; they wouldn’t try to contradict me. They would always follow my advice and I would do the same when it came from them. So they were very supportive; at times if I ever needed money for a book or something, I always had someone there to help me out.

The students’ ability to rely on each other for achieving the success of the community resembles what Enrique Trueba (1999) describes as “a new collective identity” (p. 9), which is one that is “structured to advance the cause of Latinos” (p. 9) and not just the individual. However, while this rang true for most self-identified first generation students here, those who identified as second generation seemed to prefer autonomy and individualism. Their reliance on others was mainly for emotional or social support.

Maria: I don’t feel like my friends are instrumental in contributing to my personal or academic success. I can do that on my own. My friends are actually rich resources for social development more so than academic or personal development.

Marisa: I have come to rely on my friends more for emotional support but not academics. They have played a large part in me being emotionally and socially sound, but as far as academics I honestly can’t attribute much of my success there to them.

Geraldo: I rely on my friends a great deal but not for academic success but mostly for camaraderie. I mean a lot of times when I am working on a project or just studying I ask my roommate to come in the same room with me because that keeps my interest level up. When I am with other friends knowing that someone else is studying or working along with me that motivates me even more.
American education traditionally fosters individualism and competitiveness. It is no wonder that after twelve years of elementary and secondary education, most college students lack the ability to learn collaboratively (Kohn, 1998). Although education research has shown that “Latinos” and other ethnic minority youths experience greater academic success in cooperative learning environments (Cohen, 1994; Duran, 1992), mainstream teachers emphasize individualism and competitive learning and achievement in the classroom, rather than facilitating socially constructed and collaborative learning (Bredo, 2000; Kohn, 1998; Nieto, 1999). When students learn from one another, rather than individually, they create greater opportunities for scaffolding (sharing information, encouragement and guidance) one another’s learning (Brunner, 1996; Harmin, 1994). The fact that most of the second generation students had received all of their pre-college education in American schools may be an indication why they seem to place less value on their peers as a source for achieving academic success. For these students, their determination to achieve academic success appears to be a personal matter, rather than a group or community effort.

Motivation for Success

Drawing once again from the notion of space, the university can take on dimensions of contested spatiality, where “Latino\a” students within constrained boundaries are enabled to achieve aspirations of academic success. Although they bring academic and cultural capital to the university, experiences often led them to the realization that cultural capital, at least on this campus was not always valued by their mainstream peers, faculty, and staff, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. Moreover, as we shall see from the vignettes in chapter five, the only way for this community to be truly recognized by the institution was through the acquisition of political capital. Yet, in spite of their marginalized existence within this subtractive environment, these students, both first and second generations, shared a common drive to integrate into the university community without sacrificing their cultural capital and to achieve academic success.

In closing my interview sessions with all of the respondents, I asked them to share their motivation for success. For some of the students success meant uplifting their status for both self and family, and most importantly, for their ethnic community. Success was perceived as the vehicle for enhancing economic, cultural, and political capital.

Alex: It’s important for me to succeed in college because I have had this “dream” that I want to accomplish my goals. I also want to be the type of person that my dad always
used to tell me about. He would say that when you get to the top, never forget about your roots and who you are. So I won’t forget that I am Colombian when I do get to the top. It would really make me feel accomplished if I became an engineer and who came from Columbia. That would allow me the opportunity to be a positive role model for my people. This would motivate other Latinos to do the same.

Bill: It is very important for me to succeed in college, first because they made it so difficult for me as an immigrant to get to college. Secondly, I want to make my parents proud of me by getting this degree because my sisters never really got one, and that means that I would be the first in my family to graduate in an American college. Lastly, I want to show Americans that immigrants can be a lot more than just an economic liability and that we can be just as successful as anyone else here. By me graduating, I have proved my point.

Santos: I would say that I am doing it mostly for my mother. It would make her life to see me graduate from college. So she is the number one reason that I want to succeed in college. But I understand that my success is going to motivate other people. Like my little brother, he never really cared about school, but when I got into VT that changed. My mom would ask him if he wanted to go to Virginia Tech, and when he would say that he did, she would insist that he needed to start doing well in school. So now he is starting to improve in school and he looks up to me as somewhat of a role model. I think that if I can go on to do bigger things or go on to become a CEO of a corporation or an attorney, other kids from my neighborhood can look up to my success and believe that they too can do the same, just because I came from the same place they are from. I came here as an illegal alien, my parents came here with nothing, and I am basically trying to live the “American Dream.” My parents worked hard to put me through college and I want everybody to see me as a role model and maybe use me as an example when they talk to other minority kids.

Jorge: It is very important for me to get that degree because first, I want to make my family proud of me. It is also important because it sends the message to Americans that we Latinos can be just as successful here in this country as they are. We just need the opportunities to be able to succeed. If they gave us a level playing field to compete with them, we can be just as competitive as they are at anything. The myth that Latinos are lazy and do not care about education or success is something that Americans want everyone to believe about us. My graduation is a step in trashing that myth.

Jaime: It is important for me to graduate because, that would allow me to pursue the economic mobility that Latinos generally don’t have in this country. It would also help to dispel the negative stereotypes about Latinos as underachievers in education. The only way we as a community will be able to change these negative stereotypes is to continue to achieve success in education and then by acquiring jobs that will change the low status of our community in this country.

Geraldo: Regardless of whether I am Gay or Hispanic I want to succeed. I know that a BA is almost useless now anyway. Like you need more that that to begin with, but at
least a BA will be a foundation. But the fact that I am Hispanic and I am among the few that are going to college, that kind of makes me kind of more proud of what I am about to achieve. It certainly dispels some of those negative stereotypes about Hispanics and Gay people that we don’t care about education.

Marcelo: When I graduate, I will be one of the first to graduate in my family. Within the level of first cousins, I will definitely be the first. Even my family as a whole and that includes the extended family, there are few that have graduated from college. So I will definitely be the role model for the family. The other thing is that my being able to graduate is another way of changing the negative stereotypes that white Americans have about Latinos and it shows that we can be successful and do just as well as non-Latinos as long as we are given the opportunity to do so.

Celia: It’s my parents…they always instilled in both me and my brother that education was very important if you wanted to be successful in life. So I know that my parents will be very proud of me when I do graduate. Also, my graduation from college will prove that Latinos shouldn’t be underestimated by anyone. We can be just as successful as anyone when the opportunities are there for us.

But not all the students were thinking about the politics of their success, instead success for Cass and Julia was associated with economic mobility and vocational agency derived from a college degree. Perhaps, inherent in Cass and Julia’s aspirations to succeed was what many first generation immigrants seek to acquire from their long journey here: wealth and mobility.

Cass: So my goal is to get rich in this music industry, rather than just being average having some engineering job. Engineering actually became my fall back. So the business is basically music productions at parties and clubs.

Julia: I know that if it were up to me, I wouldn’t get a degree. I would be studying on my own and traveling all over the world and I wouldn’t have to sit in a classroom listening to those “bs” lectures. But I know that to in order to succeed and be taken seriously in the work world or do the things that I want to do, I will have to earn a degree and so I will have two degrees from this university.

Summary

In the first part of this chapter, I explored how first-generation students coped with the stresses of acculturating into a host society and subsequently, their entry into mainstream society by way of academic institutions. I explored the issues and barriers faced by “Latino\a” immigrants and how these influenced and shaped the formation of identity. In the second half, I continued this line of exploration by shifting my focus to second-generation students and their struggles to assimilate into mainstream society. The obstacles faced by both first and second-generation respondents revolve around numerous issues of acculturative and assimilation stress,
racism, negative ethnic stereotypes, deficit thinking, and the devaluation of cultural capital at all levels of American schooling. Although “Latinoˈa” students comprise a large portion of the academic landscape, few institutions are responsive to who they are and what their presence can contribute to the learning environment. Yet, in the face of this barrage of negativity and subtractive elements of the schools they attended, “Latino” respondents showed resilience and determination to succeed.

The experiences encountered by these students, particularly in academe, influenced and shaped who they are and how they articulate their own identities. In fact, it is during the college years that identity formation among adolescent youths occur (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As Goodwin (2002) noted, resilient college students “actively engage in the construction of their identities from the margins of an oppressive university” (p. 211). As they interact among themselves, their families, in their schools, and among mainstream teachers and peers, identities constantly shift and change as an adaptive stance to the changing environments and situations they interact in. Moreover, complicating the fluidity of identities forged by these students are their diverse ethnicities, cultural heritages, and linguistic preferences, none of which “Latinoˈa” students desire to relinquish in exchange for a place within American society. The very term “Latinoˈa” use by mainstreamers to labels us, either intentionally or not, subverts and devalues the rich complex identities that each of these students have forged over the span of their lives and through the many pathways they have traveled on in their journey to achieve success.

In chapter five, I will take a closer look at how the experiences and pathways undertaken by the “Latinoˈa” students’ impact how they articulate identity and interact within a predominantly white university. Through a series of vignettes, I shall illustrate how these students navigate and establish agency in a subtractive environment where they exist within the campus margins to a point of invisibility.
Chapter 5

The POLITICS of PLACE, RECOGNITION, and TRANSFIGURATION

In the previous chapter, I continued my examination of the many facets of “Latino\a’” ethnic identity through an extended discussion of the acculturation and assimilation processes endured by first and second-generation children of immigrants. Moreover, I take a close look at some elements of subtractive education and deficit thinking and the effects these have on “Latino\a’” identity formation and academic achievement. In this chapter, I present a descriptive account of the setting where the research takes place (Virginia Tech) on two levels: the first begins with a descriptive account of the institution, and the second, provides a series of vignettes. The vignettes are historical snapshots that help illustrate the interactions between the participants and the institution. They show that while experiences, national origin, culture, and linguistic preferences do have a role in the formation of ethnic identity, so does the manner in which these elements selectively intertwine in response to particular events within the institution.

Virginia Tech

This study is about “Latino\a’” undergraduate students at Virginia Tech. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, commonly referred to as Virginia Tech, is a predominantly white, public land-grant research institution with an undergraduate student population of approximately 22,000 students. “Latino\a’” enrollment at Virginia Tech represents only 2 percent of the total undergraduate population over the last eight years and only constitutes 1 percent of the total “Latino” enrollment at four-year public institutions in the state (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2003; Virginia Tech Institutional Research and Planning Analysis, 2002).

The university is composed of eight colleges (the Colleges of Architecture and Urban Studies, Business, Engineering, Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Natural Resources, Science, and Veterinary Medicine). In 2002, only 11 percent of full-time instructional faculty were from ethnic minority groups; no statistics were offered regarding the number of “Latino\a’” faculty (Virginia Tech, Office of the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, 2005). In fall 2002, the student to faculty ratio was 16 students to every one professor.
The university’s main campus is situated in the southwestern rural town of Blacksburg, Virginia. In 2000, the town of Blacksburg reported a population of approximately 39,573 (Town of Blacksburg, Economic Development, 2003). At the time of this study, there were no registered “Latinos” domiciled in the town of Blacksburg. Blacksburg is a town where outside of its three Mexican American restaurants there is no visible “Latino” culture.

**Governance at Virginia Tech**

The governing authority of Virginia Tech is its Board of Visitors (Virginia Tech, Board of Visitors, 2005). The board consists of thirteen members appointed by the state’s governor, and a fourteenth member who serves ex-officio and who is the President of the Board of Agriculture and Consumer Services. They each serve a term of four years.

**Institutional Practices and Diversity**

In the spring of 2003, the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors clandestinely rescinded the University Anti-Discrimination clause, which referred to the protection of sexual orientation and race in all university matters. This resolution prevented administrators, services providers, and faculty from considering race, gender, and sexual orientation in decisions related to admissions, hiring, and distributing financial aid (Bartlett & Rooney, 2003). The Board also imposed restrictions on the selection of individuals who could be invited to speak on campus. They barred anyone who had “participated in illegal acts of domestic violence and/or terrorism” from holding a meeting or speaking on campus without prior approval from the president (Rooney, 2003). However, after weeks of angry protests and nationwide criticism the Board met again to rescind these two resolutions (Bartlett, 2003).

In spite of the restoration of Affirmative Action and their reversal to censor controversial speakers from speaking on campus, many ethnic minorities remain threatened by the Board’s indiscriminate use of power in matters of diversity. These recent strikes against equal access and protection by the university Board coupled with a university student and faculty population that is predominantly white all converge to create a “chilly” campus climate for minorities and in particular, “Latino” students.

**Narrow Tailoring at Virginia Tech**

In fall 2003, in response to the Grutter v. Bollinger (2003) decisions on the use of race as a criterion for admission’s policies, the administration undertook strides to narrowly tailor all university programs, scholarships, and fellowships that in the past had been provided for students
of color. The Supreme Court ruling in this case upheld the constitutionality of affirmative action policies in college admissions. However, the Court ruled that states using race and ethnicity in determining admissions must show there is a compelling interest for its use. Hence, if there is a compelling interest, the use of race and ethnicity must be narrowly tailored.

In response to the Court’s ruling, Virginia Tech’s administration established an internal review process whose task was to search and eliminate (or revise them to appear color blind) all programs and services that utilized “race or ethnicity as a selection criterion” (Virginia Tech, Office of the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, 2003). This review resulted in the elimination of scholarships and fellowships that “restricted or expressed a preference based on race or ethnicity” (Virginia Tech, Board of Visitors, 2005a).

Inevitably, these “narrow tailoring” strategies may have negative effects on “Latino\'a” enrollment as financial subsidies available to minorities disappear (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2002). Moreover, as Thompson (1998) noted, the move to establish a “colorblind” institution is a common reaction to diversity where “not seeing” race or ethnicity is considered to be a fair approach to creating an egalitarian system of education that favors and advantages white middle-class males. At Virginia Tech, subtractive policies and practices are embedded in the “narrow tailoring” efforts undertaken by the university. Ultimately, these policies and practices can potentially impact minority student access to higher education at this institution. Bill’s narrative is an example of how one’s status as an undocumented immigrant and “narrow tailoring” policies affected his ability to pursue a college degree in the state of Virginia.

*Narrow Tailoring and Illegal Immigrants*

Although undocumented youths have high aspirations about succeeding in school, many of their dreams to pursue higher education are shattered because most public colleges and universities will not admit them. Bill’s story is one that describes the frustrations and discouragement that undocumented immigrant youths encounter when they attempt to pursue a college education at public four year institutions.

Typically the wait for refugee families to apply for “permanent residency” is one year (Goodwin, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995, 2001). However, Bill’s family had been in the United States for at least fourteen years and their application for residency had not been reviewed by the INS. Because Bill did not have legal residency at the time of his
applications for college in the Commonwealth of Virginia, the application process for him was problematic.

…Towards the end of my junior year, the advisor for the Latino organization that I was a part of, asked me one day if I was a citizen and I said no because I knew that I wasn’t one. Then he asked me if I was a permanent resident, and I didn’t quite know how to answer him because I wasn’t even sure what that meant. So I told him that I knew that my parents kept telling me how they had been hoping that they would be called in for an interview, or for finger prints, and when he heard that he put on a worried expression on his face. Since he knew from my work in school that I was a good student and that I was college bound, he made me aware that I was going to have some difficulty getting to college.

Bill’s applications to several Virginia colleges were either rejected or the institutions were only willing to accept him as an international student provided he presented a student visa. In some ways, these institutional policies were subtractive, because they presented road blocks for undocumented or illegal immigrants who wanted to pursue higher education in the U.S. In order for Bill to acquire access to a college education, a class action lawsuit against the State of Virginia had to be filed in the courts. A great portion of my interviews with Bill was about his legal battle against the Virginia State Attorney General and his struggle for equal access to higher education.

The lawsuit that I and three other students filed against Virginia was originally going to be filed as John Doe, but at the first hearing the plaintiffs’ names had to be revealed, as a result of that three of them dropped out of the case. I remained committed to stay on with the case. Consequently, my name was out there to the universities. So every single university that I had applied to actually had my name “black listed” before I had even sent them my application. I had always heard that Virginia was trying to be strict about admitting “illegal immigrants” to the public schools and colleges, but I didn’t realize how that would apply to me until the lawsuit.

Bill’s case did generate the need for institutional review of admissions policies. However, although Bill’s case against the State of Virginia was not given “legal standing” in court, he was allowed to attend Virginia Tech as an out-of-state student (Hebel, 2004).

Although the case was not ruled on, it did initiate change at some of the institutions. For instance Virginia Tech changed its admission’s policy to allow illegal immigrants to enroll, but only if they pay out-of-state tuition. That is why am here now.

Currently, Bill’s family has been granted “permanent residency” and he is now classified as an in-state student. However, his case has generated closer scrutiny of state public colleges and universities’ admission policies. Most undocumented immigrant youths generally remain in
the U.S and eventually become citizens. Therefore it is important that they are allowed full access to education, so that they, too, can be productive, gainfully employed citizens.

*Hate Crimes*

In fall of 2004, shockwaves of fear and shame were felt when a series of race related hate crime were perpetrated in several building around the Virginia Tech main campus. One of these was the office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the campus Squires Student Center. The student newspaper *Collegiate Time* reported the office door of Tech’s chapter of the NAACP had been “scrawled with racial slurs, and smeared with a brown substance” (Compton, 2004). No one was ever arrested for the crime, and this incident is suggestive of the inherent racial problems this institution has yet to contend with.

The events discussed thus far were intended to show some of the institutional problems with racism and exclusion that people of color contend with here at this institution. While these events were not specifically aimed at “Latinos” on campus, the resulting tensions between mainstream Anglo students, faculty, and staff do have an impact on the perceptions ethnic minority students have about themselves and how others perceive them. Virginia Tech asserts that it “is committed to promoting a critical awareness and understanding of regional, national, and global diversity issues” (DePauw & Dixon, 2004), however there still remains a great deal to be accomplished within this campus community to transform this institution into a welcoming and inclusive learning environment.

Diversity must be regarded as a global issue, rather than from a Black-White perspective. Other underrepresented groups (“Latinos,” American Indians, and religious groups) should be included in all institutional diversity initiatives, otherwise these efforts are merely band aid fixes for a problem that cannot be ignored. More importantly, there has to be significant efforts made to diversify the faculty, service providers, administrators, and university staff. When all these strategies have been implemented, only then can Virginia Tech call itself a diverse learning environment.

In the vignettes that follow, I focus in on Virginia Tech by providing a panoramic view of the “Latino\'a” community within the spaces of the campus through a series of participant observations that show how the selective articulation of identity corroborates some of the complexities and discourses that emerge from a “Latino\'a” pan-ethnicity. In the first vignette, I explore the problem of ethnocentricity encountered when efforts to unite the “Latino\'a” campus
community where undertaken. Although there is notable movement within the community towards solidarity, there is evidence of tensions arising from gender divisions, ethnocentricity, resistance, and competitiveness within the “Latino\a” community. In the second vignette, I elaborate on the notion of “cultural appropriation” and the politics of recognition, by examining a meeting of the “Salsa Club” at an off-campus party. Although a great deal of effort had been invested by this community to create awareness and sensitivity to “Latino\a” culture within the campus community, their reactions to mainstream students’ teaching and dancing Salsa were ambivalent. In the third and fourth vignettes, utilizing Moya’s (2001a) politics of transfiguration, I examine gender roles and how these impact “Latina” identity formation amidst a shift in student leadership and reactions to “Latino” male sexist practices.

The Politics of Place and Tales of the “Union”

Institutions of higher learning can be seen as “places” that exert pressures and constraints on the types of identities that can be maintained and exhibited within them. One of the many ways they perpetuate this is through institutional policies and practices that often serve to exclude certain constituencies while favoring others. On a smaller scale, college campuses consist of “places” and “spaces” that instill the “visualization of specific locations that hold special meaning” (Frazier, Margai, & Tettey-Fio, 2003, p. 9). These meanings can vary, but are mostly based on institutional histories, values, beliefs, and practices that are based on exclusion of underrepresented minorities and “provide the basis for the visualization of that particular place” (p. 9). In recent years, ethnic minorities on college campuses across the country have experienced greater threats of exclusion through an array of exclusionary practices and policies, which have resulted in their diminished enrollments (Evelyn, 2003; Schmidt, 2004). Consequently, the college campus, for most minorities has become a hostile, unwelcoming learning environment. It was during my tenure as both a graduate student and a service provider at Virginia Tech, that I had the opportunity to see first hand the impact of exclusionary policies on students of color and in particular, “Latinos” at this institution.

My contact with the campus “Latino\a” community actually began five-and-one-half years earlier when the Dean of Students hired me as a Graduate Assistant at the university’s cultural centers. The Cultural Centers are comprised of two centers. One is the Black Cultural Center (BCC), which was established in the fall of 1991, and the other is the Multicultural Center (MCC), which was established four years later. The BCC was established in response to the
expressed needs of Black students to have a “place to network, socialize and find a comfort zone on campus” (Virginia Tech, Multicultural Programs, 2005). The MCC was established “as a visible symbol of the university’s commitment to diversity, and give students from small ethnic and cultural groups a feeling of ownership and belonging in the university community (Virginia Tech, Multicultural Programs, 2005).

During my tenure at the Cultural Centers, I developed close contacts with many of the “Latino\'a” students and their organizations on campus. I spent countless hours attending organization meetings and activities, and most importantly, serving as a mentor to both individual students and the organizations themselves. My long term assignment had been to seek out and unite the “Latino\'a” community, as a way of increasing their visibility and acquiring their recognition as an underrepresented group at this university. This would provide “Latinos” with access to the same representation in university governance committees that other minority communities had been afforded.

At the time, there were only three established Latino\'a groups: Circulo Hispanico, Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers, and the Latin American & Iberic Graduate student Association. Circulo exclusively focused on social activities, which primarily consisted of off-campus parties. These socials were well attended and most were often attended by a fairly diverse following of dedicated partygoers. The Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers only focused on the scholastic and professional development of “Latino\'a” engineering majors and consequently, their membership was selective. The Latin American & Iberic Graduate student Association was at the time, an exclusive club for Latin American international graduate students and their families. Their activities were well attended, but excluded most undergraduates because their meetings and activities were exclusively in Spanish. Thus, because each of the groups had distinct constituencies and interests, very few students involved with them were receptive to engage in any discussion regarding the founding of a “Latino\'a” union. Moreover, any consideration to unite as collective under the banner of “Latinicity” was perceived as a threat to the individual group identities. At the time, I could not fully understand why the mere suggestion of unification could elicit so much friction among these organizations.

Throughout the years, I struggled with the task of uniting the “Latino\'a” campus community; however, they were simply not receptive to the idea. Most of the organization members felt that unification would jeopardize their organization’s “autonomy,” or they would
regard this type of collective as a governing body that would “impose regulations that could potentially change the missions” of the groups. Others expressed concerns about “forcing domestic students to unite with international students.” Unknown to me, there had always been an unspoken friction between domestic and international Latin American students at this institution. International “Latino” students perceive themselves to have greater authenticity in the representation of their native cultures, more so than “domestic” Latin American students. Roger, an international senior mathematics major from Colombia, shared his perspective about this at one of the meetings I had with the executive officers regarding the founding of a “Latino\a” union. His comments echoed those of several international students present at this meeting.

Roger: For me domestic Latinos will be Latino about some things, because most likely they have one of their parents who were originally from some Latin American or Caribbean country, which they share the culture by reference only. They will know the particulars about what it’s like to have been from their parent’s native country, but they don’t necessarily represent their native culture authentically because it’s learned and not lived. When someone is born and raised here [United States], they might know about native culture, but it doesn’t mean that they lived it. But someone who has lived in their native country all their life, by virtue of having lived the culture, is a better representative of that culture than someone who just learned it second hand.

Roger seems to suggest that only international students, by virtue of having been born and raised in their native countries can truly represent their culture. Likewise it suggests that they perceive second generation immigrants as sharing borrowed culture that is not truly authentic. In a way this is a form of ethnocentrism\(^1\) because international students are making judgments about another group’s (domestic students) representation of culture. I believe this has been the root cause of the disunity between international and second generation students at this university.

Over time my rapport with the community improved. My consistent presence on the Cultural Center’s staff over a period of five years made it possible for organization leaders to develop confidence and trust to visit my office to obtain advice regarding leadership and other problems related to their organizations. This relationship allowed me to work closely with the leaders to strengthen their organizations and at the same time, laying the groundwork for a “Latino\a” union. As the number of student organizations continued to expand, I persisted with

\(^1\) Ethnocentrism refers to the notion of viewing other people and their culture from the standard of one’s own cultural assumptions, customs, and values. This can have positive connotations, where it instills ethnic pride, or it can have negative connotations and consequences arising from the perception that one’s ethnicity is superior to someone else’s (Taylor, 1994; Yinger, 1994).
efforts to establish a “Latino\’a” student union. Four new organizations emerged (Sigma Delta Pi, Lambda Sigma Upsilon, Latino Fraternity Inc., Latin Dance Team, and Sigma Alpha Iota Sorority, Inc.) and the competition for sustained membership and attendance to group activities among such a small community intensified. Consequently, certain inter-group conflicts began to emerge and in time, captured the attention of many within the community.

Some of the problems that emerged were conflicts arising from simultaneous scheduling of programs and activities, redundancy in the types of programs that were being sponsored, and lack of collaboration on these activities and programs between individual organizations to ensure greater quality and increased attendance. These conflicts provided the impetus for organization leaders to articulate the need for mutually agreeable solutions and perhaps, the founding of some form of solidarity between the various “Latino\’a” campus organizations. Moreover, at the time, there were mounting concerns regarding administrative initiatives that students perceived as threats to minority enrollment and retention and throughout the campus, many of the organizations were having public discussions addressing what measures of opposition should be taken to counter these threats.

In fall 2003, the semester following the Board of Visitors elimination of Affirmative Action, and the onset of narrow tailoring initiatives that signaled the potential extinction of academic support services benefiting minority students; a sense of urgency among students of color to mobilize against these potential threats spread quickly. “Latino\’a” students here felt this same urgency, but their reaction was to remain passive. While other minority organizations mobilized and formed alliances to question institutional initiatives, the “Latino\’a” community simply did not react. Mounting pressure from other communities (African and Asian American) who were leading the activism against institutional threats to minority enrollments was directed towards the “Latino\’a” community because of its lack of response to the political climate on campus. Public criticism on the lack of “Latino\’a” presence was openly articulated by representatives from other minority students at many of the public forums that were being held to discuss campus climate issues. The expectation had been that we, as an underrepresented and marginalized community, should have taken a public stance in support of those communities who were leading the activism against exclusionary policies promulgated by the administration. However, no mobilization on the part of the “Latino\’a” community occurred.
The threat against minority enrollments became a reality when the admissions office announced in late spring 2004, that Black and “Latino/a” applicants had dropped significantly from previous years. Given that our community represented only two percent of the undergraduate student population, any further drop in “Latino/a” enrollments would have meant greater invisibility of “Latinos” on this campus. This news prompted concerns regarding the future presence of “Latino/a” students at this university and consequently, the need for unification began to percolate among the various “Latino” student organizations. The membership from these organizations realized a need for representation in institutional governance that would allow us as a community, to voice our concerns to the administration. It became quite evident that representation in university governance was imperative not only for our collective survival, but also for our participation in the formation of institutional policies.

These unfolding circumstances at the university coupled by the inter-group conflicts, created the perfect timing for unification of the “Latino” campus community to occur. The realization that our minority status had made our community vulnerable to exclusionary institutional policies, along with our willingness to mobilize against these perceived threats, suggest that we as a community had finally learned the strength that can be derived from unity. Like many other marginalized groups we quickly learned to engage in identity politics for survival.

In the most general sense, identity politics refers to a wide variety of activities and theorizing that emanates from the shared experiences of certain social groups (feminist, Gay and Lesbian, Blacks, and Latinos, etc.) and serve as the basis for their political mobilization (Heyes, 2000; Kruks, 2001; Schmidt, 2000; Trueba, 1999). Individuals with similar social characteristics organize to confront claims of injustices as well as to change their situation and feelings of self-worth (Ryan, 2001). Within-group commonalities promote greater association with in-group members and less with those not identified with the group (Kruks, 2001). Construction of identities within social groups revolve around issues of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, and a variety of other variables (Heyes, 2001). One’s identity within a specific social group can potentially make you vulnerable to oppression, marginalization, and stereotyping, (Young, 1990). Therefore, rather than organizing around political parties from traditional left-right axes, identity politics concerns itself with liberating certain constituencies from oppression and marginalization (Heyes, 2000; Ryan, 2001; Young.
Identity politics offers a challenge to the superiority of one social group over another by giving oppressed groups the ability to voice their individual and collective identities (Giroux, 1992). The move by campus “Latino” students to unite against perceived threats by its very nature can be regarded as “identity politics.”

Throughout the fall and spring semesters, I met with the presidents of each “Latino\a” organization. I began with the organizations that had been around earlier (Latin Link, Circulo Hispanico, Latin American & Iberic Graduate Student Association) and then later, I met with the newly formed organizations or ones that had been inactive: Sigma Delta Pi, Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers, Latin Dance Team, Lambda Sigma Upsilon, Latino Fraternity Inc., and the Sorority Interest group (now known as Sigma Alpha Iota Sorority, Inc.) to press for the founding of an umbrella organization that would serve to unite our community and acquire representation in university governance.

Although at first, there was some hesitancy by the groups to proceed with the founding of the union, everyone knew that if we did not mobilize in support of ourselves and other underrepresented communities on campus, we were going to be left on our own. Members of the Asian and African American communities already had representation in various university commissions and were ensuring that the needs of their communities were being articulated. However, no one was representing the needs or concerns of the “Latino\a” community because we had no representation. It was apparent to everyone that we needed to come together to defend not only our right to be here, but also that of other “Latinos” who could potentially lose the privilege to attend this institution in the future. Because our community had no representation in university governance, there was no one questioning why “Latino\a” enrollments were decreasing or what actions were being taken by university administrators to rectify this problem. The realization that our community had to acquire representation on university governance had finally become an imperative matter for continued presence on this campus. Our community was no longer willing to be the silent minority; we wanted institutional recognition and representation with extreme urgency. Thus, the “Latino\a” union amidst many obstacles and institutional delays became a reality in fall 2004 with the approval of its application for University Chartered
Student Organization\(^2\) (UCSO). It exists today, but with waning support from the community because of a recent shift in leadership from “Latina” leaders in our community to several fraternity brothers.

As I reflect back on the founding of this union, there were several key elements that seemed to shed some light on the reasons why all prior efforts to facilitate some form of solidarity within our community had failed and why at the present the union is loosely bound. Some of these very same issues are relevant to the complex identities of the “Latino\(\alpha\)” students themselves.

First, as a marginalized campus community, we had never responded to calls for unification under the banner of culture and language, or for that matter, under the labels of “Latino\(\alpha\)” or “Hispanic.” Many of the students within our community hailed from a wide variety of countries with different cultures and linguistic preferences, others are United States citizens from birth. Moreover, as the findings from my interviews indicated in previous chapters, our “Latino\(\alpha\)” students engage in what Margaret Gibson (1993, 2002) refers to as “accommodation without assimilation.” They seem to have the ability to adjust to different contexts and situations, but at the same time, hold steadfast to native cultures. As individuals with distinct family histories, values, and beliefs they never fully assimilate with mainstream culture, instead, they retain their own while learning to coexist with Anglo American culture (Morales, 2002). To ask these students to be a part of a collective that would attempt to homogenize individual nationalities and cultural distinctness would be perceived as subtractive without the presence of any real perceived need. Consequently, if this community was to consider any form of unification within our campus community, it would have to consider something other than culture, and language as a rallying point.

In order for solidarity to occur among “Latinos” at this institution, they would first have to collectively engage in locating the “means and space to exercise agency” (Goodwin 2002, p. 13). This meant focusing on establishing collaborative networks within the community whose objectives emphasized the collective survival of the community through political activism and

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\(^2\) A University Chartered Student Organization is an “organization comprised primarily of students but which, by constitutional design, has a specifically established direct relationship to the university. This relationship includes but is not limited to policy review, special programs, governance, and paid faculty/staff” (Virginia Tech, 2005).
solidarity (Allsup, 1995). The founding of a “Latino” union would provide the means and space by which this community could exercise agency by virtue of its ability to give them representative and voting privileges in institutional governance. Much like second-wave feminism, which extended beyond gender as a rallying call against the oppression of women and drew upon the experiences and civil rights of emerging groups (Black Feminist, Chicana movement, Lesbian feminists, etc.), our community also had to look beyond gender, ethnicity, culture, and language as a rallying cry against marginalization and perceived threats to our continued access to this institution (for a review on feminism see Friedan, 1983; Heyes, 2000; Kruks, 2000). The data from this study show that what this community has in common is not culture and language, but rather, the desire to successfully become a part of the American dream. The gateway to this dream is higher education. Hence, the desire for continued access and the goal for academic achievement are the elements that foster solidarity for this community. When exclusionary polices and practices threaten these goals, at least within this community, there is significant movement for unification that focuses on ensuring the achievement of these goals.

From the perspectives of identity politics when “Latinos” students as an ethnic minority become threatened by institutional practices that jeopardized continued access to higher education, the reaction is to unite in solidarity to reclaim equity and access. However, when this threat appears non-existent, we return to our ethnocentric selves. Ethnocentricity is how we preserve our individualities, native values, beliefs, and cultures.

*The Politics of Recognition: Whose Culture Is It Anyway?*

The growing popularity of Salsa\(^3\) in mainstream America has propelled it to the forefront of popular culture in the United States (Aparicio & Jaquez, 2003). The crossover of Latino/a artists like Gloria Estefan, Ricky Martin, and Jennifer Lopez into global popularity has generated a growing market for “Latino/a” music in both national and international markets (Waxer, 2002). Moreover, the popularization of Latin dancing and the use of background “Latino/a” music in television commercials both serve to illustrate a “musical boom” that stands in “sharp contrast to the invisibility of Latinos/as” (Aparicio & Jaquez, 2003, p. 1) in the United States. However, this problem is not new. The histories of Latin American and Caribbean countries are replete with the

\(^3\) Waxer (2002) defines Salsa as emerging from the Puerto Rican and Cuban cultural diaspora to New York City during the 1960s and ’70s. The musical elements of Salsa are derived from Cuban music of the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, as well as Puerto Rican elements of mambo, son, guaracha, cha-cha-cha, and American jazz and rock. Because it originated in New York City, which at the time was heavily populated by Puerto Ricans, Salsa became an emblem of Puerto Rican identity both in the island and for those living in the mainland US (Padilla, 1990).
mutual representations of the old binary of self and other through the exchange, “appropriation,⁴ and reformulation of cultural icons such as food and clothing…and popular music” (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997, p. 3). Thus, the integration of Salsa into mainstream consciousness signals a contradictory message arising from the transnational migration of culture in the form of music into mainstream markets, even as their local meanings are transformed and often distorted and misrepresented (Lipsitz, 1994).

The Salsa Club

In the scenario that follows, I was able to capture the discourses and emotions that are often triggered when individuals from subordinate cultures experience the appropriation of their culture by “outsiders” or those from dominant cultural groups. The event and the conversations were real, but the names of the informants and the establishment were changed. The event was an encounter between campus “Latinos” and the “Salsa Club.”

During the summer 2004, when I first saw an advertisement announcing there would be a “Salsa Party” at one of the local drinking establishments, I was both elated and surprised. The advertisement read:

Salsa Club
Invites you to
A Salsa event this Saturday at the
Downtown Pub
Saturday 10PM-2AM
Hot summer of Salsa!
FREE DANCE LESSONS 10 PM Sharp

Since I knew that most “Latino\a” students who generally organize these events or have any affiliations with any of the campus “Latino” student organizations were gone for the summer, the question of who was sponsoring this party was to say the least, intriguing. With my curiosity at its peak, I set out to the “Downtown Pub” that Saturday night.

The “Downtown Pub” is situated in downtown Blacksburg. It is more popular among the college students who prefer drinking and dancing over drinking and playing billiards and darts. Unlike other bars downtown, it is a basement establishment. To gain access to the club one must

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⁴ My usage of the term “appropriation” in text parallels Aparicio’s (1998) definition, which notes that it is the tendency of both subordinate and dominant cultures to “recontextualize music and transform its social value to best fit their own needs and desires” (p. 219).
walk down a long stairwell that takes you below street level to the entrance of the Pub. As you enter the Pub, there is a long hallway that leads to the main room. At the end of this hallway, one can walk straight ahead into the dance floor, take a left turn onto an elevated tabled seating area, or walk to your right where the main bar is located. If you step up into the tabled seating area, walk to your right about half of its length, and swing around to your right again, you are facing the dance floor below. At one end of this elevated area is a small drink bar, at the other end, there are steps leading down to the front of the dance floor.

The main bar faces the dance floor, but is separated horizontally from it by a long couch that follows the exterior length of the dance floor. If you are sitting on this couch you are actually facing the dance floor and not the bar. It’s kind of a place to sit and cool off or rest in between dances. If you stand in front of the bar and face the dance floor, at the far extreme in front of you is the stage. It contains the DJ booth and space for performers to set up their equipment.

I arrived at the Pub shortly after 10:00 PM to watch the free dance lessons. I entered the main room and situated myself in the tabled seating area so that I could have a good view of the dance floor. As I scanned the room, I noticed that attendance for the dance lessons was a bit sparse. There was a small group of young people standing around in the table seating area to my left. Two of them were Anglo females and the guy who was conversing with them spoke with what I could faintly detect was a foreign accent. Judging by the fluorescent white bands they wore on their right arm wrists, I could easily guess that they were underage partygoers. The wrist bands signaled the bartenders that they could not sell alcoholic drinks to them. There were several ladies who because of their very light skin color, at a quick glance, did not look “Latina” to me. They were sitting on the couch by the dance floor, as if they were waiting for their boyfriends to arrive or for someone to ask them to dance. At the main bar there were a few young men standing sipping on their drinks. Like the ladies on the couch, they too looked to me like Anglo Americans. The fact that I did not immediately see any “Latinos” there made me wonder if I was at the right place. The dance floor for the time being was disserted. There was no one dancing or giving lessons even though Salsa was booming over the huge speakers in the room.

Shortly after I arrived, I heard my name called out. To my surprise it was Jorge, one of the students I had interviewed about a week earlier. He walked over to where I was standing and
chatted with me for a while and then headed over to the drink bar to get a “Corona” (beer). I accompanied him to the side bar to get a beer also. He seemed quite as surprised as I was about this party, especially since I learned that he was the social chair of one of the campus “Latino” organizations. Jorge had decided to come by to enjoy the music, but also with some curiosity about “who exactly was this “Salsa Club.”

While waiting for the bartender to bring out the Coronas, the DJ’s voice loudly announced that anyone interested in Salsa lessons should come down to the dance floor where the sponsors of the evening’s event “The Salsa Club” would be waiting to begin the lessons. It was then that the ladies sitting at the couch immediately jumped up and headed towards the dance floor. The guys, who were at the main bar, as if by cue, dashed to the dance floor and began demonstrating how to dance to the booming sounds of Celia Cruz.

Ordinarily, the sight of people dancing Salsa would have almost been mundane for those of us who attend Salsa parties downtown. However, because the eager ladies on the dance floor and the gentlemen giving mambo lessons were Anglos, this came as a bit of surprise to us. I can’t remember if my reaction was more out of surprise or because of the novelty of the situation. It is a rare thing to see Anglos dancing Salsa and even more unusual to see them teaching others how to dance to it, at least here in rural southwest Virginia. I could hear Jorge who had now moved closer to the dance floor shouting to me over the music “who are these white people teaching other white people how to dance my Salsa” and “how dare them?” After the initial surprise wore off, I walked back over to Jorge who was looking kind of awestruck. Over the glaring sounds of Celia Cruz he turned towards me again and asked, “What the hell is this!” “quienes son esta gente” [who are these people]? I looked back in a blank stare and shrugged my shoulders because I could not give Jorge an answer, not just yet.

Standing there like outsiders who were not supposed to be there, what was even more intriguing to us about the dance lessons was that the couples who were demonstrating the dancing were actually pretty good mambo dancers. We felt like outsiders because dancing Salsa is unmistakably a “Latino’a” tradition and yet, the Anglo folk at the club acted as if this was their own music and they were there to teach us how to dance it. Jorge who prides himself as an avid “Salsero” [a person who is adept at dancing Salsa] could not bear to watch this anathema for too long. By the time the second song was blaring over the speakers, he dashed over to the dance floor, swept one of the ladies off the couch, and began showing off his native dance moves. The
spectacle of Jorge dancing reminded me of a matador facing his bull in the ring; he danced as if his very own life had been challenged. As a “Latino,” he acted as if it was his personal duty to outshine every Anglo dancing on the floor. After all he shouted when he returned, “how dare they think that they could dance Salsa better than me.” What was supposed to be an hour of free Salsa dance lessons, turned into an hour of stiff posturing and competitiveness between two cultures: the dominant and the subordinate, Anglo versus “Latino\a.” It was almost mesmerizing to watch because from what I could hear from Jorge and others, the perception was that the “Salsa Club” should have at least invited some “Latinos” from the community to assist with the dance lessons. After all, Jorge exclaimed “what makes them think that they are better than us at this?”

In the meanwhile, a few other “Latinos” whom I didn’t recognize had arrived during the dance lessons, but I had been too absorbed in the battle royale on the dance floor to take notice. By the time it was 11:00 o’clock, a mix crowd of people started to flow into the Pub. It started to get fairly crowded and I decided this was a perfect time to elicit more impressions from at least a few other people about the “Salsa Club’s” party.

Roberto, an international graduate student from Venezuela was my first encounter. Apparently, he recognized me from some of the cultural shows I had helped to sponsor over the years and he was quick to offer his remarks. “It feels like non-Latinos are jacking [stealing] our culture.” “As a community we haven't supported ourselves, but then somebody outside of our community comes and basically takes over.” Several other “Latinos” standing close by who must have heard Roberto’s comments walked over to us and chimed in: “this is scary because it seems like our own culture is being grasped right from under us by these outsiders.” “mano, esto me preocupa un poco, Ojala nos despertemos muy pronto” [brother, this worries me a little, we had better wake up real quickly]. One of the “Latinas” that had arrived with Roberto noted, “wow they actually dance pretty well for gringos, but it still seems strange to see them dancing as if it were their own music, wassup with that?”

“Latinos” who were present at this party felt genuinely robbed and upset with the “Salsa Club.” They articulated a sense of jealousy and betrayal towards these “outsiders.” It was as if the proverbial line in the sand had been crossed by the Anglo American students. But they had not only crossed it, they had also taken something that is very sacred to “Latino\a” identity-their music. While Salsa represents a distinct expression of “Latino” culture (Manuel, 1994), it has
always been the means by which our “Latino\a” student organizations at this institution have generated awareness of it. Through this cultural tradition, they have been able to project a visible aspect of their “Latino\a-ness” that is both a resource for pride and identity, and a source for skilled Salseros within the community from whom others could learn to dance. Perhaps the “Salsa Club’s” dance party was not by itself offensive to those “Latinos” who were there, but rather, their omission of “Latinos” from this event a huge faux pas. Moreover, this event is indicative of subtractive practices where, although diversity and cultural traditions are publicly embraced, the very people who actually live these traditions are often divorced from them.

Given the reactions that this event had elicited from the “Latinos” present, I decided it was time to learn about this “Salsa Club.” Who the heck were they? I met Sergei at the main bar. He was surrounded by several of the ladies who had participated in the dance lessons. They lingered over him like groupies at a rock-and-roll concert. Because of his proximity to me at the bar, I felt compelled to go over and chat with him. When I introduced myself, Sergei acknowledged that he knew me by name but had never met me in person. It was kind of a surprise to me that although he knew me, I, on the other hand, had no clue who Sergei was.

Sergei came to Virginia Tech at the beginning of the school year as an international student. During Hispanic heritage month he had observed some of the Salsa dance lessons that some of the “Latino\a” student students had sponsored during the month long calendar of events. He had become completely enamored with the culture, the music, and even more so, with dancing Salsa. “I felt like I just had to learn how to dance this music,” he told me; “it was like nothing I had ever done before.” And so after making contact with a dance studio in Roanoke, he started to take Latin ballroom dancing and practiced dancing mambo until he could dance it like a native. Apparently, it didn’t take too long for him to accomplish this feat. By springtime he wanted to share this new experience with other (Anglo) students on campus whom he had been chatting with and who were just as eager to learn how to dance salsa. This led to the birth of the “Salsa Club.” It was a social dance club dedicated to learning how to dance Salsa music by and for Anglo students who were interested, but did not feel comfortable joining the “Latino\a” organizations. Sergei believed that perhaps, his club could “serve as a bridge for Anglo students to cross borders and experience “Latino\a” culture, rather than passively observing it.” However, to most of the “Latinos” at the dance party, this was the celebration of their culture without having been invited.
In his memoir, *Hunger of Memory* Richard Rodriguez argues that ethnic culture can thrive only within the domestic, rather than the public sphere. The “Salsa Club” incident at the “Downtown Pub” stands in contradiction. Culture is more than a domestic experience, it is a socially constructed phenomenon. While culture is shared, the reactions of the “Latinos” attending the “Salsa Club’s” party implied that others were allowed to embrace it, but at the same time, they should not neglect or ignore those who generate it. So why would attempts by Anglos to embrace or Americanize Salsa dancing elicit such defensiveness from our community?

Perhaps what may have prompted such a negative reaction towards the “Salsa Club” was because in comparison to African and Asian Americans, “Latinos” at Virginia Tech have always been an invisible constituency. They comprise less than two percent of the undergraduate population and any acknowledgment of their cultural traditions, without their presence could be perceived as subtractive. Moreover, until recently, this institution has interpreted diversity from the polarized perspectives of Black and White and thus, has marginalized other underrepresented minorities. Only since the recent formation of the “Latino” union, has this community begun to receive institutional recognition as being an integral part of the university’s governance.

In acquiring this recognition, “Latinos” have created cultural awareness through shared experiences within the campus community. By way of cultural shows, Salsa parties, dance lessons, food festivals, and film presentations they have opened the door for the fluid exchange of ideas, values, beliefs and traditions. But now that they have acquired recognition, what price are they willing pay for it? As Rosaldo (1989) suggests, when full citizenship (or in this case recognition) increases, cultural visibility inversely decreases. It may be that the fear among “Latinos” here is that the greater the acceptance of their culture, the more invisible they may become to the culture that they are associated with. While the “Salsa Club” undoubtedly embraced the tradition of Salsa, they did so without the community’s presence. This is quite the opposite effect “Latinos” had been striving for.

Since its emergence in the 1960s, Salsa has become the musical articulation of “Latino\a” aesthetics, values, and identity. It is the medium through which “Latino\a” communities affirm their ethnic and class identity in the face of socioeconomic and political marginalization (Manuel, 1994). It is the quintessential expression of a “Latino\a” pan-identity because of its appeal to a broad spectrum of Caribbean, Latin and Central American nationalities, social classes, gender, and age groups (Aparicio & Jaquez, 2003; Manuel, 1994; Morales, 2002).
Perhaps, the reaction to the “Salsa Club” also arises from the knowledge that when culture is appropriated, there is a process of reformulation that transforms it into a new symbol of acquisition and social identity for the appropriators (Manuel, 1994). Popular music, such as Salsa represents, simulates and at times underscores our sense of place, because it originates from concrete “experiences in places with clearly identifiable boundaries” (Lipsitz, 1994, p. 4). The mainstreaming of Salsa can be easily perceived as a violation of space, particularly since it does not necessarily translate into the recognition of “Latinos” by white Anglo-Americans. This indeed has significant impact on how “Latinos,” as a marginalized community, forge, articulate, and to some degree, preserve our cultural heritage.

**Gender and the Politics of Transfiguration**

Historically, “Latinas” hail from countries and cultures where patriarchal male dominance is a long standing tradition (De Genova & Ramos-Zaya, 2003). “Latino” males are described as “machistas” [male chauvinists] who are strong, in control, violent, insensitive, and providers of the family (Garza, 1994). “Latinas” on the other hand, are described as womanly, submissive, and lacking power and control (Garza, 1994; Heller, 1966). Assimilation into new societies sets in motion many circumstances that often create conflicts between traditional gender roles and those of the mainstream culture (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). For instance, economic hardships may force women (in many cases for the first time) to work outside the home or to seek vocational training (Segura, 1995). Consequently, for many “Latinas,” immigration is perceived as a potentially liberating experience because in the long run, they may enjoy greater social freedom, equitable gender relations, and educational access that ultimately, shatter the “myth of the passive female” (Miranda King, 1995, p. 105).

“Latinas” in the “New Diaspora” have learned to place greater value in education than their male counterparts. Notably, “Latina” women in the United States who are educated have greater opportunities for vocational and economic mobility than those who cling on to “old world” gendered traditions (Wortham, 2002). Moya (2001a) describes this as the “politics of transfiguration” a transformative exercise by which historically oppressed people engage in fostering “the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association” (p. 459), among themselves and those from dominant society.

In the scenarios that follow, I argue that some of our “Latina” students were engaging in such a transformative process. As community leaders they challenged myths of male dominance...
and female submissiveness. They were actively involved in forging new social relations among themselves, the “Latino\'a” campus community, and most importantly, the university at large.

“Latina’\’s Unidas [United]

Until the spring of 2004, leadership among our campus “Latino\'a” student organizations had been strategically held by a few “Latinas” in the community. Through their leadership, the community enjoyed a significant improvement in the programs and activities that were being sponsored. In particular, this improvement was reflected in the variety of educational and cultural programs that have been featured during Hispanic Heritage Month and throughout the year within their respective organizations. In addition to the routine culture shows, Salsa dance lessons, and movie nights; they sponsored an array of awareness programs on domestic violence, “Latino\'a” films and literature, Latin American history, workshops on achieving academic success, and much more. The quality of these programs resulted in drawing a diverse group of people and a few years of steady membership growth (Latin Link meetings generally hosted 25 to 40 participants on a regular basis; the same was true for Circulo Hispanico). The success of these new programs brought recognition to our community and at the same time, helped the “Latina” leaders earn the respect of the community.

Lucy, a doctoral student who had served on the Hispanic Heritage Month Steering committee for several years noted, “I am really impressed with the quality of programs the “Latinas” have been organizing for the past several years, they keep getting better each year.” Some of the other students acknowledged their leadership skills with comments such as “awesome,” or “brilliant.” Their vision and leadership skills helped foster an ethnic pride never seen before among “Latinos” on our campus. The strong leadership provided by the “Latinas” was a major factor in the success and growth of the campus “Latino\'a” student organizations and ultimately, the founding of the “Latino\'a” union.

Over the course of two years, I met with these ladies and carefully laid the ground work for the union. We met on a weekly basis to carefully craft a mission statement that would capture the purpose of this umbrella organization and to develop a draft of the constitution and by-laws for the union. Although we had encouraged others to assist us with this task, it was the dedicated ladies that helped me pioneer this venture.

In January of 2004, we convened a large caucus of graduate and undergraduate students from our community; many were members of the organizations that would ultimately sign on as
union members. We gathered in the campus Multicultural Center and with the room filled to capacity (with overflow out in the corridors) we presented the Constitution and Bylaws of the union. After several hours of deliberation, the Constitution was unanimously ratified. The “Latino\a” union had become a reality. Celia the vice president of Latin Link (a second generation “Latina” was the union’s first elected president. For Virginia Tech’s “Latino\a” community, this was a historical evening. Likewise, for the “Latinas” it also was a huge achievement (at least for the moment).

Over the spring semester, the union began taking steps to become a “University Chartered Student Organization,” (UCSO) this move would afford the union official recognition by the institution and the ability to participate in university governance commissions. This effort came to fruition, despite many obstacles from both within the community and a few administrators within the Division of Student Affairs. The “Latino\a” union’s involvement in university governance committees would change the diversity of its constituent members and subsequently, the politics of exclusion that has been inherent in university governance. There were many within the Division that sought to maintain the status quo and discouraging the “Latino\a” union from seeking “Charter” status would accomplish their motives. However, we pressed on and in fall of 2004 we became a UCSO.

During the end-of-year executive board elections, Celia lost her bid for re-election to the presidency by one vote. Alex, an executive officer of the fraternity had successfully unseated her incumbency. At the same time, a few other key executive positions in several of the other “Latino\a” organizations that had been historically held by “Latinas” were also taken over by fraternity brothers. In spite of their strong leadership within the community, there had been an unexpected shift in leadership away from the women. The resulting shift in leadership had an emotional impact on the community. There were quite a few of the organizations members who believed that this takeover was not beneficial for the community, but for the egocentric agenda of a few “Brothers.” The “Latinas” who had worked hard to establish the union expressed “no confidence” in the new leadership and discreetly warned others that this could potentially result in “the end of the union.” This change in leadership was one that ignited some deep friction between the ladies and the fraternity. Reflecting back on this event, later at the fall “Welcome Back Picnic,” Celia noted that she looked upon this shift in leadership with “bittersweet”
memories. She was bitter about her loss of the presidency and sweet about “watching the guys fail.”

Despite the loss of key leadership positions, the “Latinas” managed to maintain their grasp and influence on the “Latino\a” student organizations by either working behind the scenes with the membership or by taking alternate leadership positions such as vice president or treasurers of their respective organizations. Because they recognized that the fraternity brothers lacked leadership experience and knowledge of the organizations, they would use this as leverage to maintain strategic control and influence in the running of the organizations. Ultimately, they would reclaim leadership of the organizations and the community.

The Welcome Back Picnic

The “Welcome Back Picnic” is a tradition sponsored by the “Latino\a” organizations at the beginning of the fall semester. The event provides an opportunity to welcome back members, re-establish friendships, and recruit new members from the incoming freshmen class. In past years, the event consisted of a generous array of barbequed food (hot dogs and hamburgers), some ethnic dishes like “arroz con pollo” (rice with chicken), beverages, and plenty of Salsa for dancing outdoors. The picnic area by the campus duck pond had been the preferred place for this event, but for some reason, the event this year took place at the Henderson lawn, which is at the most eastern edge of the campus. No flyers or advertising were circulated or posted across the campus announcing the event. So if you were lucky to know about it, it was strictly through word of mouth. Unlike past years, the picnic was held on the second Saturday after the start of the semester because it was believed that more people would attend after they had settled into their new class schedules.

The Henderson lawn is a spacious grassy area that faces the Blacksburg downtown area. There is a concrete platform area at the southwestern side of the lawn that in the summer is used by local bands and entertainers during the Summer Arts festival. During the picnic two long tables were set up on this platform to accommodate food and drinks. However, when I arrived an hour after the picnic started, there was very little food left. I passed on the cold hot dogs and turned to see who else was there.

I noticed a few clusters of people lingering around. Although they had a portable boom box with Salsa playing loudly, no one was dancing or paying attention to the music. My first impression was that something was amiss.
There were distinct groups of students clustered together at different sections of the lawn. The first cluster that I approached was the new executive committee of one of the sponsoring organizations. They seemed pre-occupied to get whatever food was left on the table put away, as if to cue everyone that the picnic would soon be over. There was a terse exchange of greetings and I moved on to make my rounds with the other clusters. Several alumni were clustered around a group to the left of the table, so I moved in their direction. As I walked toward them my thoughts were about asking for donations for our Multicultural Center that was in state of ruin due to lack of financial support from the institution.

All of the “Latino\a” alumni clustered were either engineering or computer science majors and of course, they were fraternity brothers. Upon seeing me there, they all gathered around to gossip about their summer vacations and well paid jobs they had landed. Ramon had spent the summer in Italy and had been hired by the federal government as a software writer. Cameron had just started his own “dot com” business and was happy to report that his company “for the moment, was keeping solvent.” They were all finally living the American dream and felt deserving of it. They were quite pleased with the coup that their “brothers” had pulled off in the spring elections and they weren’t shy about expressing it. Since its founding a few years back, the “Latino” fraternity” had sought to be the leaders of the community, but had not yet quite succeeded in accomplishing this feat until the past spring semester. It seemed like the brothers had finally made their mark, but even they felt some trepidation about whether or not they could meet the expectations and standards that the community had become accustomed to. Alex, the new union president shared some thoughts about his new position.

Alex: Well, although we [the brothers] have taken the leadership from the women in the community, I hope that we can get them to support us. That is going to be an important factor that will determine if we are going to have a successful year. If we can still maintain the momentum the union created this year with all the groups, than we can say that we have done our jobs…but for now we just have to wait and see.

It was one thing to acquire power, but another to know how to use it wisely. Later the real cookout would be held at the fraternity house. All of the “brothers” were hosting a welcome back barbeque party at the fraternity house to celebrate the start of a new semester.

My next encounter was with the sorority ladies. Although they smiled cordially and gave me the customary welcome hug, they made sure that I picked up on their discomfort. Somehow, I sensed that they were not happy with the new leadership and more obviously, the outcome of
the picnic. The fact that it was “poorly planned;” that there had been poor advertising, attendance was sparse, and the quality of the food was less than desirable was enough to feed the ladies suspicions that the brothers “were destined to meet with failure this year.” Lisa who was a member of the new “Latina” sorority made sure to ask me, if “this was an example of what we are to expect from them [the brothers now leading the organizations] for the rest of the year?”

The friction between the men and the ladies in our community was slowly festering.

Many of the ladies were whispering among to one another about whether this new leadership from the fraternity “had the commitment to get the job done.” Would they know how to use their newly acquired positions to keep the community unified or would they squander it and risk all that we had worked hard to accomplish. “They took control of the leadership just to show us they could pull it off,” said Marta. “But I bet you things are going to fall apart a lot sooner than you think.” Among the ladies were comments about their concerns for the newly elected union president and his ability to lead.

There were concerns that his election was merely a power move by the “Latino” fraternity to show that they could take the leadership from the ladies at will, but even greater was the fear that they didn’t know or understood what they had gotten themselves into. Many of the ladies attending the picnic really believed that our community was in for trouble, but were afraid to admit it publicly. In quiet chats with me, they shared their concerns, frustrations, and anger. Past experiences with the “brothers” had left many of these ladies with skepticism about their ability to lead the community and they vowed early on to take back the leadership positions they had lost.

The picnic ended rather abruptly. People dispersed from their clusters and there were no hugs and goodbyes; we all just walked away. The strong sense of unity that had been felt this past January when we convened to establish the union was waning. It seemed as if hope had turned into despair and that our future as a unified community was in jeopardy. Some of the ladies mumbled threats of “impeachment,” along with their farewells. The escalating tension between the new and former leadership would be a test on the viability of the “union.” Whether or not the “Latinas” would return to passive coexistence with the males in the midst of what they perceived would be mediocre leadership was questionable. They had been accomplished leaders and were not willing to allow themselves to be dominated by “Latino” males after all the hard
work they invested in the community. Perhaps this may have precipitated their reactions to the sexist flyers that the “Latino” fraternity was in the habit of using to advertise their Salsa parties.

Salsa and Sexist Ideology

Although Salsa has emerged as an emblem of “Latino/a” identity (Padilla, 1990), it is also known for its misogynistic representation of “Latinas” (Aparicio, 1998). Prominent in Salsa’s lyrics are stereotypes and images of “Latinas” as promiscuous bandoleras (bandits or gold diggers) who love merely for economic survival (Waxer, 2002). Salsa has long been criticized for perpetuating a sexist discourse that many, particularly, in the women’s movement have condemned (Aparicio, 1998; Negron-Muntaner, 2004; Waxer, 2002). This form of sexism has also carried over in the advertisement of Salsa parties at Virginia Tech.

The popularity of Salsa parties at various local downtown bars has gained popularity among Virginia Tech students. This growth in popularity has encouraged partnerships between some of the downtown pub owners and student promoters. Because these ventures are lucrative sources of revenue for both pub owners and the student promoters, a major part of their success is contingent on advertising. Student organizers rely on university listservs, campus newspapers, email, and flyers as traditional forms of advertising. Since students are overwhelmed with a daily barrage of electronic messages, creativity and innovation are critical for the effectiveness of the medium. Hence, the success of one’s event is predicated by the intricacy and attractiveness of the promotion.

One of the most popular forms of advertising Salsa dance parties have been through the use of sex appeal vis-à-vis the use of scantily clad females in a variety of poses. Because of its denigrating representation of women, this form of advertising, although popular, has drawn much criticism and public outcry from both men and women within our campus community. Recently, promoters of a Salsa dance party came under heavy criticism and backlash resulting from the use of a flyer that exceeded the boundaries of respectability in the use of “women as sensual objects” motif.

The flyer which was circulated over several of the university electronic pathways solicited participation in what was deemed as a “Cielo e Infierno” (heaven and hell) Salsa dance party. The picture on the flyer consisted of a rear view of a partially naked white female angel standing in front of what one could assume was a male demon. Although this by itself may not necessarily have been offensive, the fact that the demon had partially pulled down the angel’s
underwear and exposed the slit of her buttocks, while his tail swung around her thigh and up in between her legs; may have been what made this flyer a bit risqué. The circulation of this flyer in a variety of listservs didn’t take long before it elicited reactions from the disenfranchised “Latinas.”

Their critique of this flyer can best be summarized as a “shameless representation of women as sexual objects.” The designers of the flyer who had been cornered by a few angry “Latinas” to explain their rationale for this flyer defended its content as “artistic license.” In spite of their defense, quite a few “Latinas” displayed their dissent by boycotting the party and filing complaints with university Student Life administrators. Although public apologies were sent over the listservs, a flurry of complaints from both male and female students continued to circulate. Complaints from the community ranged from “sexist” to “this flyer is yet another example of how women are grossly objectified as sexual objects” and “this must stop now.” In response to all of this activity, several students and faculty requested some form of public forum to discuss appropriate use of university electronic pathways for advertising, gender relations, and creating awareness about sexist practices. However, no one has volunteered to sponsor such an event.

In the preceding scenarios, the “Latina” students engaged in the politics of transfiguration (Moya, 2001a) as they sought to redefine their roles as minority female students within a predominantly white male campus and as leaders of their community. In spite of the opposition they encountered from the males, they worked hard to forge a new solidarity between themselves and among the “Latinos” on campus through strong leadership and role modeling.

In the latter scenario, they engaged in the process of transfiguration, by imagining and forging a new representation of all women not as sexual objects, but as respectable members of society who merit the same equity and access afforded to men. Their actions to boycott the Salsa party, was their stance against male dominance and the reduction of women as sexual objects. I believe that their action will have a profound impact on how promoters of Salsa parties will advertise their events in the future at this university.

Summary

The events of this chapter were meant to provide snapshots of the interactions between the participants’ and the campus environment. They illustrate how the social environment is set up in ways that exert pressures and constraints on the types of identities that can be maintained
and exhibited within its spatial boundaries. As a participant observer, I found several emergent perspectives that appear to shed some insight on the complex dynamics of “Latino\a” ethnic identity. Our inability to unify as one pan-ethnic group emanates from our ethnocentrism. The ethnic label “Latinos” constitutes an amalgamation of peoples from vastly diverse national and cultural backgrounds, all of which are maintained, despite many attempts of forced assimilation. Even within the community, “Latino\a” students themselves seem to be in conflict as to who “authentically” represents “Latino\a” culture.

In the case of the union, the problems encountered by the students in the course of establishing solidarity were suggestive of complex intertwining issues that presented an array of conflicts which hindered the formation of a “Latino\a” union for many years at this institution. Overarching their need to unify as means for collectively negotiating their marginalized existence in a predominantly white campus, the students simultaneously experienced resistance, participation, resentment, and competitive performance, from within both the community and the institution. However, in spite of the many complex issues that divided this community, the term “Latino\a” did seem to provide a mechanism for engaging in identity politics as a way of reclaiming identity, culture, and resisting oppression and social injustice. The fact that these students could resist unification for such a long time because of the potential homogenizing effects of the term “Latino\a,” and later discovering its utility for identity politics, speaks to the dilemma of establishing ethnic identity when using a pan-ethnic label.

Institutions can exert pressures and constraints on the types of identities that can be maintained and exhibited within them by the participants they recruit and nurture, and the interactional settings they create. As a predominantly white institution, the expectation of the type of students who enroll here are primarily those from white, middle class backgrounds. Over 68 percent of the students at this institution come from households whose median income exceeds seventy five thousand per year (Virginia Tech, Office of Academic Assessment. 2003). Consequently, members of underrepresented minorities are not only subtractively ignored, they become peripheral to institutional culture because of their lower socioeconomic status. While the “Salsa club” event was not entirely offensive in and of itself, it is however, representative of subtractive practices where although diversity and cultural traditions are publicly embraced, the very people who actually live these traditions are often divorced from them.
Lastly, as with other modern postcolonial societies, “Latinos” maintain an internal culture of domination of its women. Under the influence of feminism, “Latinas” are engaging in a “movimiento” (movement) that seeks to reform a new social order which ensures equity, respect, and social justice. The “Latinas” at this institution have in many ways engaged in transformative discourses that foster “qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association” (Moya, 2001a, p. 459) among themselves, their community, and the campus at large. This is yet another indication of the complex pathways and self-understandings, which influence the formation of “Latino\’a” identities.

“Latino\’a” identity represents a complex and fluid construction of transnational, transcultural, and hybrid self that is always in flux and constantly evolving. Thus, this notion of a collective “Latino\’a” identity appears to be questionable, at least from the standpoint that it fails to represent the rich diversity of people and culture that the term attempts to categorize.
Chapter 6
CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I examined the notion of “Latino\a” ethnic identity through the perspectives of a small group of ethnically diverse Latin American undergraduates. In examining the narratives of these informants, I noticed similarities and differences that centered around four distinguishing characteristics defined by place (country of birth), time (the length of time they had been living in their native or host country), affiliation to native or host country’s culture, language, and gender. Each of the students’ narrations provided substance to the complexities and diversity of the numerous people who either self-identify or who are labeled as “Latino\a” and therefore, begin to describe the dilemma of a “Latino\a” pan-ethnicity.

While the data from this study show that the term “Latino\a” fails to contextualize the specific histories, ethos and cultural values that define and distinguish the numerous people who hail from a variety of Latin American countries, Mexico, and the Caribbean, there were times that the participants noticeably identified with the term as a way of establishing solidarity within the campus community and to engage in identity politics. However, it is important to note that although the data for this study were derived from “Latino\a” undergraduates at Virginia Tech, it cannot be assumed that the findings of this study will be transferable to other “Latino\a” students at other universities. Likewise, the findings of this study are not necessarily intended to be representative of all “Latinos,” it is an understanding of the lived experiences of each participant, the meanings they construct from them, and the influences these have on the formation of identity.

In this closing chapter, I draw upon the findings from my two-year ethnographic investigation to explain how the lived experiences of students at a predominantly white university shaped the formation and affirmation of ethnic identity and in some cases, changed my own perspectives and understandings of “Latino\a” identity. The salient issues of “Latino\a” identity construction articulated by the informants provide important insight that can foster greater understanding of this rapidly growing ethnic population in U.S. mainstream society and institutions of higher learning.
Tying-Up Loose Ends

On Ethnic Identity

Some of the stories shared by the participants, especially those of the students who identified as first-generation, evoked memories of my own family’s immigration to mainland USA. Their narratives prompted me to recall how difficult it had been for me to adjust to living here and most of all, to learn a strange new language. After many of the interviews, I often found myself reminiscing back on my elementary school years and the difficulties I had transforming myself from the person that I had been (Puerto Rican) into what my school teachers forced me to become - an American.

Although my own ethnic identity has shifted and changed throughout most of my life from periods of total suppression (mainly during Kindergarten through secondary school years) to overt affirmation of my Puerto Rican identity (during my college years), as an adult, I have come to the understanding that “Latino\a” is merely a label by which Anglos categorize me and others like myself, even though the term does not make any distinctions about where my national origin is from or what language I speak. I could easily have hailed from Peru or Columbia, or even Brazil for that matter, or I could have spoken Quetchuan, or Portuguese. The fact of the matter is that as long as Anglos categorize me (and us) as “Latino(s),” none of these distinctions mean absolutely anything. Over the years, I had naively assumed that all U.S. Latin Americans identify (as I had learned to) with this label. However, the narrations of the participants in this study changed that assumption for me.

What this study confirmed for me was that for the participants in this study, identity formation was readily influenced by one’s national origin, family history, and cultural experiences. Regardless of the length of time the students had lived in the United States, these elements seemed to have some influence in the identities they constructed. While this was not much different from my own perspectives, what was striking about these participants was the certainty and eloquence with which they articulated their own identities. I, on the other hand, did not always have the same certainty, having struggled most of my life to reclaim my own Puerto Rican identity. The students’ candor and conviction about who they are strengthened my own convictions; that identity for me is about my Puerto Rican heritage and not from a hegemonic label that attempts to homogenize that essence. This is a key element for understanding this
greatly misunderstood ethnic population. We are a population of vastly diverse people with very distinct backgrounds and who simply do not subscribe to the popular notion of the “melting pot.”

In this study, the students who identified as first generation immigrants explicitly identified themselves as Colombian, Bolivian, Panamanian, Costa Rican, or from whatever countries they had arrived from. Although not explicitly stated, it was apparent to me that the term “Latino\a” was recognized by these students as a way to distinguish themselves apart from “Hispanics” who are those people with direct ancestral roots from Spain (Oboler, 1995); it was never used a marker of race or representative of some coherent homogenized collective. Furthermore, participants who identified as second-generation, on the other hand, forged identities that reflected both parental origins and their U.S. citizenship; these are often referred to as hyphenated Americans. They identify as Puerto Rican-Americans, Costa Rican-American, and so on. Their use of the term “Latino\a” emanates from a growing awareness of social injustice and is primarily associated with the use of identity politics as a strategy for securing political rights in the United States (Alcoff, 2000). However, they remain cognizant of the diverse nationalities and cultural experiences that the term undermines.

What these findings suggest is that contrary to Phinney’s (1993) ethnic identity stage development model, for these students there were never periods of “Diffusion.” There was never a need for these students to “explore feelings and attitudes of ethnic identity” to develop a sense of self (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 80), because they had always been aware of and accepted their nationalities and cultural experiences. Given this self-awareness, it appears that “Diffusion” is a mainstream American phenomenon, because it is they who lack knowledge and understanding of who “Latinos” actually are. They fail to recognize the diversity of people that are homogenized by the term “Latino,” and instead attempt to lump us into one racialized, overly homogenized category “that tends to eclipse the many different nationalities, cultural experiences, and histories shared by the individual groups” (Acosta-Belen & Santiago, 1998, p. 31).

Perhaps the confusion that exists among mainstream Americans could be eliminated if they would used the term “Latino\a” in the same fashion as the term “international student.” Although the latter term refers to a segment of the college attending population, the term does not elicit images of any specific nationally, race, ethnicity, culture, or language. It does however, accurately represent a large population of students who attend American universities that hail
from a large variety of countries and who have distinctly different cultural practices, values, and beliefs. Never, have I ever heard the term “international student” intended to signify a specific racial category, genetic phenotype, or language spoken by anyone categorized under this term. Hence, if Anglos ascribed similar meaning to the term “Latino,” perhaps it would diminish the confusion that exists about who “Latinos” are and why we are so misunderstood. Although participants in this study overwhelmingly articulated awareness of how they identified and were certain of the terms by which they wanted to integrate into American mainstream society, they encountered many barriers arising from the lack of understanding mainstream Americans have about this diverse ethnic group.

In the vignettes presented in chapter 5, the students attempted to become an integral part of the campus community, but only on certain terms. While they sought integration into the social and academic systems of the university, they actively resisted abandonment of national and cultural identities. Reminiscing back on my own experiences at this institution, it seemed that minority students were expected to quietly assimilate into the predominantly white Anglo culture and those who resisted or loudly articulate their differences were pushed out or mysteriously fell through the cracks. I, on many occasions encountered censorship from quite a few of my professors, whenever I articulated opinions that were contrary to what was being taught or that questioned the status quo. The students in this study, however, clearly engaged in some form of resistance through the “accommodation without assimilation” strategy that Gibson (1997) spoke about.

As an adaptive stance, these students embraced the predominant Anglo campus culture, while at the same time preserving their own ethnic identities. Jorge referred to this process as “toning down” ethnicity, as a way of blending in with Anglos on campus. However, as new Diaspora “Latinos” these students sought integration as bilinguals with linguistic command for both Spanish and English and openly affirming their cultural experiences. For these students, relinquishing native language and culture was not an option for assimilation; instead, assimilation had to be inclusive of preserving native language and culture.

These characteristics suggest the formation of transnational identities that are multiple and adaptive to a variety of situations and contexts, rather than fixed and constant as Phinney (1993) maintains. In the schools these students “act white” conforming to mainstream Anglo expectations, while at home or with same-ethnic peers they preserved their cultural identities by
speaking Spanish or Spanglish and celebrating their transcultural traditions, alongside those celebrated by other underrepresented groups and mainstream students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Perhaps, this may be one of the reasons why these students have had the ability to persist and achieve academic success, as compared to other “Latinos” who become statistics of failure.

In my own experiences, I have found that success was always easier for me to acquire, whenever I maintained conscious recognition of my own ethnicity or at least, when I was aware that I was a Puerto Rican within a larger society whose values, beliefs, and traditions were different from my own. Oyserman et al. (2003) suggests that having this “dual identity” provides an effective buffer from the effects of negative ethnic stereotypes and it enhances the ability to successfully engage in academics. However, as the findings of this study show, when “Latino\a” students enter and move through American school systems, their determinations to preserve cultural and linguistic capital are constantly challenged by subtractive institutional policies and practices.

*Fitting the Square Peg in the Round Hole*

Although most of the students’ schooling narratives had striking resemblance to my own, it was Marisa’s account of being labeled as “slow” and having a “learning disability,” that sent my memories back to a time and place, where I too had been assessed in the same manner. But there were some differences and similarities between Marisa’s situation and mine. While, it was quite apparent from the narrative that Marisa and her parents recognized that she was being treated as having a deficiency, like my own parents, they could neither understand nor explain why this assessment was being made. While her parents “fought it,” mine silently acquiesced with my teacher’s assessment of me, because they simply could neither understand what they were being told, nor could they fathom how this assessment would impact my schooling. It was encouraging to see from several of the some of the students’ accounts that more parents today are actively involved with their children’s education in a variety of ways that range from “taking time to talk with teachers” to “checking homework” to make sure that “it was done correctly.” This idea stands in contradiction to the argument expressed by many teachers and administrators who argue that part of the reason for “Latino\a” school underachievement is attributed to the lack of parental involvement with their children’s education (Calabrese Barton et al, 2004; Valdes, 1996).
In my case, because my parents did not have the knowledge to challenge my teachers, I knew that it would have to be up to me to change this assessment, and I did so by acquiring English proficiency. My dysfunction had not been that I could not learn what I was being taught, but rather, that nothing I was being taught seem to correlate with anything that I had already learn prior to starting school. Neither the language they spoke nor the subjects that were being taught connected with my life outside the classroom. For me, what was happening in the classroom was like trying to put a square peg in a round hole; it just did not fit. Children acquire knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that are appropriated from the culture they are brought up with. When a child’s culture is ignored or stripped away from the learning process, their ability to learn is greatly impaired (Kozulin & Presseisen, 1995).

Within the confines of academic institutions, “Latino\a” students are forced to construct identities in spaces where the goals of the schools are to subtractively divert them from native culture and language. In adjusting to these subtractive learning environments, the “Latino\a” students in this study encountered deficit thinking, discrimination, racism, and stereotypes that compelled them into making choices between forging identities that reflected either native or mainstream culture, and their willingness to either engage or disengage academically as a means for academic and career achievement. Although these students encountered deficit thinking from peers and educators, as Jay eloquently stated, these experiences motivated him “to work harder and believe in his abilities to do anything that they [Anglo students] can do.” Unlike research on elementary and secondary education, little of the research examining the prevalence of "Latino\a" school underachievement in higher education locates the sources of underachievement in the institutions themselves (Astin, 1982, 1985; Bean, 1980; Braxton, 2000; Fry, 2002, 2003, 2004; Ganderton & Santos, 1995; Immerwahr, 2003; Sosa, 2002; Tinto, 1987, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Instead, they attribute “Latino” academic underachievement on a variety of issues discussed in this study, which single-handedly places blame on the students themselves. Instead of incessantly reporting that “Latinos” are the most undereducated (Fry, 2002, 2003; Mendieta, 2000), perhaps it is time for researchers to focus on why “Latinos” overwhelmingly underachieve in American schools, particularly higher education. There must be reasons why such a large percentage of the country’s largest ethnic minority is reportedly the nation’s academic underachievers.
Academic Success

Academic success for the students in this study meant becoming part of a culture that would require social capital and strong academic self-concept. As the students navigated through the rigors of academic majors, they learned early on that survival meant learning to rely on one another as capital for maximizing each other’s success. Cass referred to his network of friends as a “system” of sharing class notebooks with other “Latino/a” students to help each other get “through the weed out classes” in engineering. Other students echoed Cass’ strategy of identifying peers within their academic majors “to get through” the rigors of coursework. The students’ ability to rely on each other for achieving success for themselves and their “close friends” resembles what Enrique Trueba (1999) describes as “a new collective identity” (p. 9), which is one that is “structured to advance the cause of Latinos” (p. 9) as a collective and not just the individual. Although I could not discern any noticeable differences along gender lines, I did find that the value for social capital differed among students who had received most or all of their education in the United States. In contrast to students who had received some education outside the U.S., these students preferred autonomy and self-reliance to negotiate the rigors of college.

Although educational research has shown that “Latinos” and other ethnic minority youths experience greater academic success in cooperative learning environments (Cohen, 1994; Duran, 1992), educational praxis among mainstream American teachers inherently embrace individualism and competitive learning and achievement in the classroom, rather than facilitating socially constructed and collaborative learning (Bredo, 2000; Kohn, 1998; Nieto, 1999). Hence, for students in this study who had been primarily educated in American elementary and secondary schools, reliance on peers for academic capital was not readily valued, “I can do that on my own” was the general consensus among these students. They did, however, rely on friends for “emotional” or “social support,” which for these students were equally important for adjusting and surviving within a campus environment where they experienced alienation, loneliness, and differentness. In spite of the differences placed on social capital, the students’ ability to persist and successfully navigate through the academic rigors of college may have also been mediated by their strong academic self-concept.

One of the most important predictors of academic success for students of color is having a strong academic self-concept (Sedlacek, 1989a). In my analysis, I found that most of the
students’ narratives personified attributes of “academic self-concept” and self-assuredness in their ability to succeed at this institution. This was articulated primarily through their level of “comfort” and ability to “fit in” at Virginia Tech. The students expressed confidence in their academic ability and their willingness to “work hard to get good grades.” As noted in chapter 4, because these students possessed strong academic self-concept, their motivation for academic achievement was exemplary.

For most of these students success meant uplifting their status for both self and family, and most importantly, for their ethnic community. In chapter 4, the students’ narrations overwhelmingly articulated the desire to serve as positive “role models” for “family,” “my people,” and most importantly, “Americans.” They firmly believed that their success could “trash” the “myth that Latinos are lazy and do not care about education or success.” In fact, it seemed quite apparent to these students that the only way that negative ethnic stereotypes could be debunked was through “[continued] success in education and by acquiring jobs that [would] change the low status of our community.” Their education had taught them that success was the vehicle for acquiring and enhancing economic, cultural, and political capital - the keys to the American dream.

*Campus Climate*

“It’s strange, but I think that people here [Virginia Tech] tend to be more accepting of Gay people than they are of ethnic minorities” – Geraldo.

While most of the “Latino/a” students in this study were not as explicit about the racial tensions on campus, Geraldo’s comment in chapter 4, echoed their perceptions about the climate for race and ethnicity encountered here. The implied message in his statement suggests that at least for undergraduates at this institution, there is less tolerance for ethnic minorities than there is for Gays and Lesbians (who are also predominantly white at this campus).

Higher education institutions must assume their responsibility to create inclusive learning environments that welcome students from all backgrounds. Unlike Kindergarten, elementary, and secondary schools, colleges and universities have greater autonomy to be more deliberate in challenging their faculty and students to improve their understanding of and ability to interact with people of other racial and ethnic groups (Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003). Geraldo’s statement is a testament to the lack of understanding and unwillingness among campus mainstream students to cross racial boundaries.
Although Virginia Tech does not subtractively engage in suppressing the native language or cultural experiences of racial and ethnic minority students, it does however, engage in fostering an exclusive learning environment that fails to recognize cultural diversity in its curriculum, research interests, and its faculty, staff and administrators. It was apparent from the vignettes in chapter 5, that “Latino\'a” students at this institution had to overcome many barriers to become an integral part of a campus community that had historically excluded “Latinos” from actively participating in its infrastructure. In spite of the students’ efforts to promote awareness of “Latino\'a” culture, they were often excluded from participating in the celebration of their own traditions. This too speaks loudly to the problem of marginalization that “Latinos” endure at this institution. Yet, in spite of the “chilly” climate encountered by “Latino\'a” students at this institution, their need for visibility and inclusion was somehow tempered by their determination for achieving academic success.

Most of the participants’ narratives indicated willingness to overlook the lack of “Latino\'a” presence on the campus as long as they had equal access to continued enrollment and the ability to earn a degree. However, when equal access was perceived to be in jeopardy, the students attempted to unify their community to engage in identity politics, in hope of joining other minority communities to challenge the politics of exclusion commonly practiced at this institution. As noted in the vignettes, solidarity was difficult to achieve because of differences arising from gender roles and expectations that are inherent in “Latino\'a” culture (Garza, 1994; Heller, 1966).

**Leadership and the Politics of Gender**

Leadership within this “Latino\'a” community fractured along lines of gender. Although the women in the community held organizational leadership positions and were instrumental in the founding of the “Latino\'a” campus union, their leadership was challenged and overtaken by the fraternity brothers. This shift in leadership impacted the community in several ways. First, it weakened the solidarity within the “Latino\'a” campus community, and several years of unification efforts were almost lost, had not the ladies remained involved within their organizations either behind the scenes or through the subordinate positions they were forced to settle for. Secondly, these ladies learned to maintain their influence in the community and at the same time transform their gendered roles as passive members of the community (Aparicio, 1998; Garza, 1994; Heller, 1966; Negron-Muntaner, 2004).
The “Latinas” here engaged in the “politics of transfiguration” (Moya, 2001a) as they sought to redefine their roles as minority female students within a predominantly white male campus and as leaders of their community. In spite of the opposition they encountered from the males, they worked hard to forge a new solidarity between themselves and among the “Latinos” on campus through strong leadership and community building. Moreover, they learned to use their redefined roles to challenge male dominance and the sexist representation of women as sexual objects to solicit interest and participation in sponsored activities. This transformative experience was how they reclaimed their leadership positions within the “Latino’a” campus community.

Unexplained Loose Ends

There were two emergent findings from my data that bear separate mention mainly because I could not find any explanations for them within the wide scope of literature that provided the theoretical framework for this investigation. One of these finding was related to the tensions between students who identified as domestic first and second generation and those who attend this institution as international students. The friction between these two factions emanate from the perspectives of international students on the authentic representation of culture. The second was relative to the studies on “Latinos” in higher education and the “major” reasons why they “do not go to college or fail to finish college if they start” (see Fry, 2002, 2004, p. 12). On the former issue, Ed Morales’ (2002) book, Living in Spanglish, alludes to the friction between native and domestic Latin Americans as one’s “regret over the emptiness of the new world and the rejection by the old one” (p.99). I selected two of the students’ narrations to capture the “unspoken prejudice” that exists between these two groups.

I don’t know but I guess the international students have this unspoken prejudice against domestic [Latino] students. They insist that domestic Latinos “no son Latinos” [are not really Latino]. Ellos no hablan espanol [they do not speak Spanish]; ellos no son verdadero Latinos [they are not authentically Latino]. That is the idea; I don’t know what their sentiments are about this. So while they don’t talk about it there is a certain degree of animosity between the two groups. – Julia, first-generation from Panama

Latino international students…treat us as if we are not as Latino as they are. Maybe it’s because we grew up here and since we speak English really well, we probably don’t speak Spanish as well as they do. – Marcelo, second-generation

These comments from Julia (first generation) and Marcelo (second generation) are representative of a conflict that seems to undermine solidarity between the two factions. Despite
their identification with native culture, students who identified as first generation immigrants who had immigrated at a very young age, and second generation youths born in the U.S. struggle with the stigma of being considered “less Latino” by their native counterparts when their lives intersect either here on campus or even when they return to their native countries for visits. Throughout most of my review of the literature on “Latino\a” culture and identity, I could not find any theoretical or anecdotal information as to why this problem exists between the two factions. Although there is an abundance of knowledge about the impact of transnationalism on identity formation, I have found little discussion on the ethnocentric interactions between native “Latinos” and those who immigrate. Likewise, although much time and resources have been dedicated to the statistical analyses of “Latinos” failure to “enroll in college or earn a bachelors degree, little information is offered as to why these and other problems with “Latino” college enrollment and success exist.

Although Fry (2004) reports that 33 percent of “Latinos” fail to enroll in college or complete a degree because they “prefer to stay close to their family instead of going away to school” (p. 12), Cass’ statement was both contrary and representative of many of the students in both my pilot study and the current one.

…I wanted to be away for college so that I wouldn’t have to deal with my parents and that kind of stuff. I had to get away from home at all cost. I was like no offense, but I need some time off away from the family.

Cass’ intent on moving away from home for college is contrary to what is commonly reported by both the literature and most four year institutions on the reasons why “Latinos” students fail to enroll or complete college. Although there is a value in reporting statistical analyses about this phenomenon, its prevalence necessitates greater investigation why these conditions exist or what are the personal reasons why “Latinos” students fail to enroll or complete a college degree. Both of these problems deserve closer investigation from the perspectives of the individuals themselves, rather than from institutional or government databases.

Epilogue

*Final Thoughts*

Through their life histories and narrations, the “Latino\a” students in this study are representative of the rich diversity that exists among members of this ethnic group. Their stories
overwhelmingly show that they actively engaged in resisting assimilation into the mainstream culture of the schools they attended, while at the same time maintaining cultural identities. As a community they have grown together in solidarity, but this newfound unity did not entail the dissolution of their national origins, family histories, linguistic preferences, and cultural experiences, instead it was about continued affirmation, even as they transformed their lives in the midst of a predominantly white campus (Flores, 1993).

It is from the vantage point of this “cultural convergence” that these students have learned to be resilient in confronting the many barriers encountered at the hands of subtractive schools. If they are to continue to succeed, there has to be some conscientious commitment by this university to acknowledge, recognize, and value the contributions that these students bring to the learning environment. Such a commitment is one that must allow “personal growth and opportunity, personal integrity, mutual respect, and a lifelong commitment to learning and contributing to society” (Virginia Tech, 2005). But, these institutional core values may only be rhetoric if they are not supported with programmatic efforts that diminish the cultural distance between students of color and the university at-large. Only through accurate knowledge and understanding of “Latinos” can our students ever expect to gain acceptance, build community among themselves and with others, and ultimately, take their place in a global society.

As Virginia Tech moves toward building an inclusive learning environment, it is important that administrators, faculty, and staff recognize and understand who their “Latino\a” stakeholders are and what capital they bring to the learning community. It is imperative for this institution to recognize that as we become a visible and integral component of this academic community, we must have a hand in shaping the way we are represented by the institution and how this representation evolves over time. In developing strategic plans for inclusion, it is important to note that “Latinos” are not generic; we do not see ourselves as one racially homogenized coherent group that responds to generic representations of ethnicity. Each of our constituent groups bring their own histories and cultural experiences to the institution that is specific to each individual nationality, therefore, the university should appeal to these differences not from a generic perspective, but rather, from the differences that each individual nationality brings to the environment. Thus, recognizing the many complex and diverse nationalities that comprise this growing population of students is only the first step in creating an inclusive environment for this community.
Steps should be taken that will allow this community to have an active voice in developing programs and services, culturally responsive curriculum, and strategic initiatives for the recruitment and retention of “Latinos” at all levels of the university infrastructure. Furthermore, the need for “Latino/a” faculty, staff, service providers, and administrators is very critical for creating both an inclusive learning community and maximizing the recruitment and retention of “Latinos” students. While we have always found solidarity within the African American community here, it is vital that just as there has been an institutional investment to achieve a visible presence of Black administrators, faculty, and service providers, “Latinos” at this institution should also have similar resources.

Perhaps, the best example of inclusion that this institution can concretely learn from is the campus’ “Cranwell International Center.” Their mission statement distinctly captures an effective strategy for the inclusion of “Latinos” within the campus infrastructure. One of the elements of the Center’s mission is to “foster an understanding of the international community within the greater University community, and to celebrate the richness of diversity available to our campus” (Cranwell International Center, 2005). The many constituent groups that comprise the “Latino/a” community here, by itself provide a “richness of diversity available to our campus” and local community. Attempts by the university to represent us as a generic homogenized group can be perceived as counterproductive and undermines the “richness of diversity” that we, too bring to this university.

Consciously or not, Virginia Tech has embarked on a mission of transformation that seems to parallel an “intercultural model” (for a review see Tanaka, 2005). In fall 2004, a Commission on Equal Opportunity and Diversity was convened and charged to study, formulate, and recommend polices with respect to equity and diversity. This Commission has been instrumental in generating a critical document, which will serve as a blueprint for institutional diversity that transcends cultural separatism through the affirmation of diversity and rejection of prejudice and discrimination at all levels of the university (Virginia Tech, Office of Multicultural Affairs, 2005). These “Principles of Community” are indicative of an institution that at least in principle, seeks to transform itself, but there still remains much to do here before it can be said that Virginia Tech is truly a diverse, inclusive university.

As for the “Latino/a” students, much has transpired since the writing of my vignettes in chapter 5. The “Latinas” have strategically taken back their leadership positions and have pushed
the fraternity brothers out. Through the politics of transfiguration they have redefined their roles as women in our community who will not accept passive roles (Moya, 2001a). The “union” under the leadership of these ladies promises to strengthen our community through cross-cultural collaborations with both our “Latino\a” organizations and other campus groups. Finally, the “Salsa Club” is now defunct. Shortly after its president left to commence a career in Washington, DC the group began to collapse. Although the leadership of the club had been entrusted to a “Latino\a,” it did not survive. Many of the Anglo students, who had been involved with the club since its inception, chose not to maintain their membership with the group after its founder had left. Given their passion to embrace and learn “Latino\a” traditions, it surprises me that they would not want to keep the group intact under a “Latino” leader who can authentically teach them the culture.

The future for students of color and most importantly, “Latinos” at this institution seems hopeful, but only if there is continual progress towards creating a diverse and inclusive environment that is embraced not just by senior administrators, but also by the entire university infrastructure. That by itself will be the toughest challenge for Virginia Tech in years to come.

**Future Research**

This ethnographic investigation was an attempt to explore “Latino\a” ethnic identity. The term “Latino\a” by its own merit is problematic because it ascribes to a population of vastly diverse people an essentialist perspective of identity that is grounded in a fixed set of shared characteristics (Henze, 2001). However, the narrations from this study provide contradicting evidence through an array of complex issues and experiences arising from diverse national origins, cultural affiliations, linguistic preferences, and distinct ways identities were articulated and affirmed by the informants in this study. The narrations in previous chapters, overwhelmingly suggest identity formation as fluid, multiple, and dynamic, rather than fixed and static. Thus, this study provides the basis for greater in-depth research on the many issues that were only discussed superficially in this body of research. For instance, a further examination of the impact age has on the acculturation and adjustment of immigrants in new environments remains a fertile topic of inquiry. I thought that Julia’s traumatic experiences adjusting to her new life in American high schools was worthy of further examination.

Another issue that begs further exploration is the problem of “Latino\a” school underachievement, at all levels, but more importantly, at the higher education level. Although a
plethora of studies have paid excessive attention to our lack of academic achievement, researchers have not given due diligence to the reasons why this problem is so prevalent among such a large portion of the academy’s consumers. What is needed is more qualitative research that explains why this problem exists, rather than more statistical analyses that merely quantify the problem.

If we are to truly understand who “Latinos” really are, further inquiry into each of the individual nationalities which comprises this vastly diverse ethnic population should be undertaken. The findings in this investigation overwhelmingly show distinct patterns of national origins, cultural affiliations, linguistic preferences, and expressions of ethnicity, all of which provide fertile opportunities for ethnographic research.

In closing, it is important for me to acknowledge the fine work that many of our senior and uprisng “Latino\a” colleagues have contributed to the research on “Latinos.” However, more research is greatly needed because as our community continues its rapid expansion in the United States, the demand for information about “Latinos” will be greater than what is available. Greater knowledge of how “Latinos” assimilate, learn in schools, the values we embrace, and the cultures we preserve will foster greater understanding about of “Latinos” among mainstream Americans.