

“THAT’S WHAT THEY SEE ON TV, THAT’S HOW THEY VIEW OUR CULTURE.”  
EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION AND  
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF LATINA/OS AND LATINO STUDENTS EXPERIENCES,  
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY THEY  
ATTEND

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## ABSTRACT

JOSEPH ERBA: “That’s what they see on TV, that’s how they view our culture.” Exploring the relationship between cultural identification and media representations of Latina/os, and Latino students’ experiences, identity development and relationship with the university they attend  
(Under the direction of Lucila Vargas)

This dissertation connects media’s racialization of Latinos and the educational challenges of Latino students in the U.S. by focusing on how undergraduate Latino students perceive the role media play in shaping their college experiences. It uses a symbolic interactionism framework to explore the influence that Latino students with different levels of cultural identification ascribe to media representations of their racial/ethnic group. The dissertation also addresses Latino students’ identity development and the relationship they develop with the university they attend. Twelve Latino students (6 high-identifiers and 6 low-identifiers) attending a predominantly white public university took part in a series of in-depth interviews. High-identifying Latino students perceived media to negatively affect their experiences and interactions with other students, especially white students, while low-identifying Latino students were not as sensitive to Latina/o media representations. Similarly, most high-identifying Latino students developed coping mechanisms to protect their self-esteem from media’s dominant representations of Latina/os as criminals and uneducated immigrants. All Latino students reported having developed a positive relationship with the university, although high-identifying students were more critical of certain university initiatives geared toward Latina/os. Theoretical implications and recommendations for improving Latino students’ college experience are discussed.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

We used to rank number one in college graduates. Now we are in the middle of the pack. And since we are seeing more and more African American and Latino youth in our population, if we are leaving them behind we cannot achieve our goal, and America will fall further behind—and that is not a future that I accept (President Barack Obama, keynote speech for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, July 16, 2009).

### *A few media anecdotes*

In May 2012, Vice-President Joe Biden announced his support of same-sex marriage stating that *Will and Grace*, the first prime-time television show to feature openly-gay lead characters, “probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody’s ever done so far” (Stein, 2012, para. 7). Biden’s comment illustrates the influence media representations have on audiences’ perceptions of groups of people and societal matters. Media representations are thought to be so powerful that in December 2011, the conservative group Florida Family Association petitioned to cancel a television reality show portraying Muslims living in the U.S. The group claimed that the reality show, *All-American Muslim*, would show a “positive” image of U.S. Muslims and change viewers’ perceptions of and attitudes towards Muslims. Florida Family Association’s president justified his position saying that “this program [*All-American Muslim*] was constructed to deliberately present Muslims in America as one flavor,” and compared it to reporting on snakes as “good family pets without mentioning that

there are four in Florida that are venomous” (Stacy, 2011, para. 6). In other words, the group wanted to prevent media from representing U.S. Muslims as “normal” people.

These two brief examples cast light on how media affect not only our perceptions of others but also of ourselves and the groups we identify with. Many young viewers consider certain media figures, real or fictive, as role models. Unfortunately, media role models often fit the U.S. norm and are predominantly white, male and heterosexual. In January 2012, renowned producer George Lucas released the movie *Red Tails*, chronicling the true story of the Tuskegee soldiers, the first African-American air force pilots, who served during WWII in a then segregated U.S. military. Lucas financed the entire movie, which took him more than 20 years to finish because no one in Hollywood was interested in investing in a predominantly black movie. In an interview with *The Daily Show* host Jon Stewart, Lucas said one of his main motivations in producing the movie was “to make it inspirational for teenage boys.” He “wanted to show that they [African-American boys] have heroes, they [Tuskegee soldiers] are real American heroes, they are patriots, they helped make the country what it is today” (The Daily Show, 2012). Lucas’ comments illustrate the dearth of positive role models in the media for young African Americans.

*Red Tails* offers a portrayal of African Americans and other racial/ethnic minorities that is counter to the mostly stereotypical media representations of these groups. Of all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S., African Americans and Latina/os are overwhelmingly depicted in media as perpetrators of crimes (Mastro, 2009; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2007; Oliver, 1994). As I describe at length in this dissertation, U.S. media representations of Latina/os are also dominated by stereotypical images; only recently have media started to portray more complex



and realistic images of Latina/os. This means that today's college students grew up mostly exposed to stereotypical representations of African Americans and Latina/os in the U.S.

Media researchers have extensively studied the effects of stereotypical media representations on white audiences' perceptions of people belonging to these stereotyped groups. For this dissertation, I was particularly interested in the effects these same images have on college students belonging to racial/ethnic groups that are stereotyped in the media. I focused on Latino male students because they have the highest attrition rates of all college students and interviewed 12 Latino students at a large, four-year, predominantly white public university in North Carolina to explore how media representations of Latina/os have affected their college experiences.

In Spanish, the term "Latinos" may refer to a group of men only, or to a group of people that includes at least one man. In this dissertation, I use the plural, gender-inclusive noun "Latina/os" instead of "Latinos" or "Hispanics" to refer to people of Central American, South American and Caribbean heritage. Hence, I use the term "Latinos" when referring to men only and the term "Latinas" when referring to women only. The same rule applies when these terms are used as adjectives. In my interviews with participants, I used the expression "Latinos and Latinas" to emphasize that I was talking about Latina/os in general, as opposed to focusing on either men or women. Participants, on the contrary, used the terms "Latinos" and "Hispanics" interchangeably. They also used these terms to refer to Latina/os in general. Based on the context of our discussions, it was usually clear whether participants' were referring to "Latinos" (men only) or "Latina/os" (men and women).

### *Latina/o students' challenges in higher education*

U.S. Latina/os represent 16.3 % of the current U.S. population, a 43% increase from 10 years ago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). While the country's population is increasingly racially diverse, students in most U.S. universities are predominantly white (Worthington et al., 2008). Latina/o undergraduate college students represent 12% of all students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education, with more Latina/o students enrolled in public two-year institutions (17%) than in public four-year institutions (10%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b). The North Carolina university where I conducted this research reflects the low enrollment of Latina/o students. Only 5.4% of the school's undergraduate student body is Latina/o, the second lowest percentage of a non-white undergraduate student racial group after Native Americans. The university's admissions policy, which favors in-state applicants, represents an obstacle for Latina/o students' enrollment. Indeed, the university limits the number of out-of-state students to 18% of every freshman class. In addition, the university's website states that out-of-state "legacy applicants enjoy roughly twice the acceptance rate as those who do not have a parent who attended Carolina." Latina/os represent only 8.4% of North Carolina's population, and many Latina/o applicants, in- or out-of-state, are first generation college students (Fischer, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b).

Many Latina/o students' journey to higher education is hindered by policies stemming from a hostile political climate toward undocumented children who immigrated to the U.S. with their parents at a very young age. For instance, while these children might have spent most of their lives in North Carolina, attended public schools and graduated from high school, North Carolina law requires these students to pay out-of-state tuition at any of its 17 universities (World View, 2008). The North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA) has been considering passing a bill that would ban any undocumented student from attending a university or

community college in North Carolina (NCGA, 2011). Three other Southern states, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, have already passed such laws (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012).

While these laws concern only first-generation immigrants, as children of immigrants born in the U.S. are granted American citizenship, the path to higher education for U.S.-born Latina/os can nevertheless be just as complicated. Indeed, many Latina/o students face “structural barriers” at all stages of their education (Campa, 2010, p.430). Latina/o students are often victims of racial discrimination from teachers who believe they simply cannot succeed in school (Núñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Some educators believe that Latina/os do not value education and do not encourage Latina/o students to do well in school (Auerbach, 2006; Cavazos et al., 2009).

Many Latina/os attending institutions of higher education are first-generation college students. Therefore, their families often lack the resources to help them apply for colleges and scholarships (Zalaquett, 2006). In addition, if they belong to a lower social class and are not fluent in English, many Latina/o families are reluctant to meet with their children’s teachers and find out more about educational opportunities (Strayhorn, 2008). Family pressures may also hinder Latina/os’ academic journey, as some of them are expected to assist with their families’ financial support. Indeed, pursuing education may delay this expected support, which may in turn create conflict, “especially for men from families of lower socioeconomic status (SES) who might be expected to contribute the most support to their families” (Flores Niemann et al., 2000, p.49).

Latina/o students who persevere on their educational path and enroll in an institution of higher education need to feel that their university supports their academic success, which can be

materialized in the form of social interactions with professors and other students (Gordon, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Tinto, 2006). Latina/o students perceive that feeling of being welcomed and belonging to a university is more important in their decision to stay in or drop out of college than their academic performance (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005). Indeed, obtaining good grades alone is not enough to ensure Latina/o students' retention if they do not feel welcome on campus (McLaughlin González & Ting, 2008).

General perceptions of campus climate can affect Latina/o students' experiences, specifically, how Latina/os perceive other students, faculty and staff as viewing them (Gloria et al., 2005; Schneider & Ward, 2003). In other words, do Latina/o students think they fit in or belong to a particular university culture? Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (1996) refer to this internal struggle as "culture incongruity," which occurs when Latina/o students perceive that their culture and the university culture "are different in values, beliefs, and expectations for behaviors" (p.535). Latina/o students are much more likely to feel isolated from the university community if they feel they have to constantly question their ethnic identity and choose between their Latino culture and the U.S. mainstream culture (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996).

Other students' actions can make Latina/o students feel disrespected and unwelcome on campus, thus increasing Latina/o students' isolation. For instance, similar events at the University of Delaware and at Santa Clara University revealed the stereotypical and racist ways in which some white students perceive Latina/os. In 2007, members of a white fraternity at the University of Delaware organized a Cinco de Mayo party themed "South of the Border," for which they dressed as gardeners and construction workers with Latina/o names and ethnic slurs on their costumes (The Campus Alliance de la Raza, 2007). That same year, white students at Santa Clara University organized a private birthday party also themed "South of the Border" and

dressed as “janitors, gardeners, gangbangers and pregnant teens” (Associated Press, 2007, para. 1). In November 2006, white students had already organized a “Fresh off the Boat” themed party, for which attendees were encouraged to dress as Latina/o immigrants (Georgevich, 2007). Latina/o students condemned these actions for, among other things, reinforcing stereotypes about Latina/os (Georgevich, 2007).

As I discuss at length in the next chapter, entertainment and news media cast Latina/os in a predominantly unflattering light, but research on students’ college experiences has not considered the role of media. Education researchers have explored many variables that contribute to Latina/o students’ retention and attrition rates in institutions of higher education, from immigration generation (Dennis et al., 2010; Holleran, 2003; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007), acculturation level (Gibson, 1995; Parra et al., 2004; Valentine & Mosley, 2000), ethnic identity (Flores et al., 2000; Roehling et al., 2010; Valentine, 2001), and racial discrimination (Núñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008; Zalaquett et al., 2007), to psychological condition (Gloria et al., 2005; Iturbide et al., 2009; Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009), but I did not find any published research examining the media variable.

Some researchers comment on the stereotypes certain educators may have about Latina/os but do not mention the potential relationship between perceptions of Latina/os and media representations of Latina/os (Cavazos et al., 2010; Gloria et al., 2009; Holleran, 2003; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). While a wealth of research has been published on media portrayals of Latina/os (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Larson, 2006; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005), how these portrayals might affect Latina/os’ identity (Mastro, 2009; Vargas, 2009) and audiences’ perceptions of Latina/os (Mastro, 2003; Mastro et al., 2007; Mastro et al., 2009; Ramasubramanian, 2010), there seems to be no research specifically examining the relationship

between media representations and Latina/o students' college experiences. Valdivia (2010) does argue that media representation of Latina/os, or the lack thereof, has had educational consequences for Latina/o students, who were subjected to "particular forms of treatment in schools, as well as no inclusion of Latina/o history and issues in the curriculum" (p.71). However, this point does not address how Latina/o students understand the role media play in their academic experiences.

### *Present study and research questions*

In this dissertation, I use a qualitative methodological approach to explore how Latino undergraduate students perceive the role that media portrayal of Latina/os plays in their experiences at a predominantly white institution of higher education. I focus on Latino students because they currently have the lowest college graduation rates in the U.S. based on gender and race/ethnicity (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a, 2011c). I also explore how media portrayals of Latina/os, coupled with the low representation of Latina/os in higher education, affect Latino students' identity. To this end, I use symbolic interactionism as a framework to investigate how Latino students make sense of their identities. Symbolic interactionism, which I thoroughly explain in chapter 2, focuses on social interactions to explore how people understand their social experiences (Goffman, 1982; Smith, 1999). Social interactions, as Charon (2010) notes represent "the context within which identities are created, recognized, negotiated, and lost" (p.144). I investigate the role media play in the lived subjectivity of Latino students and examine mainstream English-language media construction of a racialized Latino identity. I therefore look at Latino college students as racialized individuals evolving in a predominantly and historically white environment.

How do media representations of Latina/os influence Latino students' college experiences? I explore the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and Latino undergraduate students' campus experiences at a predominantly white university. Specifically, I investigate (1) how Latino students subjectively understand their presence on campus and experience their social and academic interactions with students and professors, (2) how Latino students perceive and make sense of their identity in a society where the dominant representations of Latina/os involve negative connotations, and (3) how Latino students perceive their relationship with the university they attend. I thus link two phenomena that have been extensively dealt with separately in previous research: media's racialization of Latina/os and Latina/o students' educational challenges in the U.S. To explore the third research question, I view Latino students as an internal public to the university they attend. Similarly, I view the university as an organization involved in maintaining a positive relationship with its publics. I thus focus on the university–Latino undergraduate student relationship. More specifically, I explore how Latino students perceive their relationship with the university and how they perceive media representations of Latina/os as affecting that relationship.

*Why is there a need to keep talking about racial/ethnic diversity?*

U.S. universities have been increasing their efforts to recruit racial minority students and faculty. A cursory look at various university recruitment materials suggests that universities display images of racial minority students with the intent to paint a diverse and inclusive picture of their campuses. However, the racial composition of university brochures often does not match the actual student body diversity. Indeed, researchers have recently started to question the potential ethical dilemmas of universities' use of public relations professionals to carefully craft

promotional images that will appeal to a racially diverse applicant pool (Boyer, Brunner, Charles & Coleman, 2006; Harris, 2009; Hartley & Morpew, 2008; Sung & Yang, 2008).

Universities' promotional images help them effectively brand themselves and begin to establish a relationship with important stakeholders (Harris, 2009). Portraying racial minority students in promotional imagery represents a way for institutions to "foster the ethnic identification process of minority students" with a particular school or program (Boyer et al., 2006, p. 140). Most university promotional images depict a racially diverse student body where students appear to interact in a warm, inviting environment (Hartley & Morpew, 2008; Hite & Yearwood, 2001). Although numerous institutions use images of racial minority students to demonstrate a commitment to diversity, promotional materials usually fall short of clearly addressing diversity matters, such as by indicating resources available for minority students on campus as well as in the local community (Boyer et al., 2006; Hartley & Morpew, 2008).

While we can applaud universities' efforts to increase minority student enrollment, it is also important to look at how minority students are received once they arrive on campus. Many studies looking at African-American and Latina/o students' experiences at predominantly white institutions of higher education suggest that minority students often feel alienated and isolated (Frank, 2003; Washburn-Moses, 2007), believe they have to prove themselves intellectually worthy of attending college (Hurtado, 2005; Worthington et al., 2008) and perceive certain comments from their white peers and professors as condescending (Davis et al., 2004; Scheurich & Young, 2002; Wallace & Bell, 1999). These experiences sharply contrast with the image universities promote about their campus.

Racial minority students usually feel they are expected to be spokespersons of people of their race/ethnicity and that their presence in classrooms makes them exceptions to the



stereotypical views their white peers and professors have of people of their race (Davis et al., 2004; Frank, 2003; Washburn-Moses, 2007). These negative interracial interactions can heighten social identity differences, which in turn can lead to a greater feeling of isolation (Hurtado, 2005). On the other hand, minority students who experience positive interracial interactions are less likely to perceive themselves as different from other racial groups, more likely to express high levels of self-confidence and believe that conflict enhances democracy (Hurtado, 2005). The majority of studies focusing on minority students' experiences in predominantly white universities deal with African-American students. Tanno (2003) denounced a significant lack of studies on Latino/a students in higher education and stated that more "research is required on the successes, failures, and worldviews of Latino/a students in higher education" (Tanno, 2003, p.43). While many studies have been published about Latina/os' experiences in higher education, the field is still in its nascent stage as many education studies often overlook Latina/os (Santiago & Reindl, 2009).

From a strategic communication perspective, current minority students can directly or indirectly be part of a university's communication strategy. Minority students discuss their experiences on campus with friends and family, who form an image of the university based on these accounts. If minority students have a positive experience and image of their university, they will likely share it with their friends and might encourage them to apply. Universities should therefore concentrate as much effort, if not more, on building positive relationships with minority students as they do on promoting a diverse campus. While there is a wealth of research exploring relationships between organizations and their internal publics in corporate environments, there is a dearth of studies exploring such relationships in an educational environment (Sung & Yang, 2009).

The demographic changes of the U.S. Latina/o population, coupled with the low college graduation rates mentioned above, suggest that universities will have to build strong relationships with potential and current Latina/o students to reverse the tide of low academic achievement. The literature reveals that positive relationships are the basis of well-being and productivity (for examples, see works in Grunig, 1992, and Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Universities that actively recruit minority students could benefit from lessons learned from the public relations literature in terms of relationship building based on the organization (university)–public (Latino students) relationship model (DeSanto & Garner, 2001; Sung & Yang, 2009).

In the following chapter, I outline the theoretical framework of the dissertation and address its two main concepts: identity and representation. I explore the relationship between media representation and identity development and describe media representations of Latina/os and how these representations can affect audience perceptions of Latina/os, as well as Latina/os' perceptions of themselves. Lastly, I explain the organization-public relationship model and its importance for this dissertation.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Media representations can influence how we perceive ourselves and make sense of everyday life, which in turn can influence our identity, experiences, and interactions (Ford, 1997; Grossberg et al., 2006; Mastro, 2009). I approach this dissertation from a symbolic interactionism perspective in which Latino students are active participants in the university environment. Charon (2010) offers a concise explanation of the main premises of a symbolic interactionism perspective: “To understand human action, we must focus on social interaction, human thinking, definition of the situation, the present, and the active nature of the human being” (p.29). Two of the main tenets of symbolic interactionism are its focus on interaction as the basic unit of study and its use of symbols to communicate to others and to ourselves (Charon, 2010).

### *Symbolic interactionism: Interactions, symbols & words*

Symbolic interactionism posits that people rely on symbols to communicate and understand each other, and that society consists of people interacting with each other (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010). A symbolic interactionism perspective assumes that individuals and society are both created through social interactions: “What we do depends on *interaction* with others earlier in our lifetimes, and it depends on our *interaction* right now. *Social interaction* is

central to what we do” (Charon, 2010, p.28, italics in original). As Goffman (1982) states, “every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him [/her] either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants” (p.5). Our interactions take place in social environments that influence them (Goffman, 1982). From a symbolic interactionism approach, “the interactional mediation of symbolic resources of both verbal and nonverbal kinds” represents the key to understanding social experiences (Smith, 1999, p.5). Symbolic interactionism is thus a useful framework for this dissertation as it explores how Latino students’ interactions on campus shape their subjective experiences.

A symbolic interactionism perspective also sees the world as “overwhelmingly symbolic at its very core,” a perspective in which human beings rely on symbols to communicate with and understand each other (Charon, 2010, p.59). Symbols change over time; they are socially established for the purpose of representation and are used in everyday interactions (Charon, 2010). People learn the meanings of symbols and use them to organize both their world and that of others (Holland et al., 1998). For instance, even if one has never interacted with members of other racial groups, one has nevertheless been exposed to images of these groups and is aware of the meanings attached to these images (Collins, 2008). As I further discuss in this chapter, media’s representations of racial minorities have provided audiences with specific symbols to associate with members of non-white racial groups. Both dominant and minority groups are aware of these symbols when interacting with each other.

Another central tenet of symbolic interactionism of importance to this study is its focus on individuals’ definitions of the situations they are in (Goffman, 1982). These definitions are important because they are the results of ongoing social interactions and reflections (Goffman, 1982). By the time Latino students reach college, they have already personally experienced being

racialized subjects. Therefore, they might also have taken the time to reflect on these experiences and how they have affected their sense of identity. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, I assume that these past experiences affect how Latino students' define their present situation.

People construct each other through their social interactions, which are often the result of ritualized norms and self-control, both necessary elements for the continuation of society (Goffman, 1982). Indeed, Goffman (1971, 1982) argues that social interactions not only create but also perpetuate society; therefore, human beings cannot be understood outside of their interactions. Charon (2010) explains that symbolic interactionism is a useful lens for viewing college experiences because the interactions that take place on campus and in classrooms change students' world perspectives. Symbolic interactionism is also useful in exploring the experiences of racial minorities by focusing on how these groups understand their reality and interactions with the dominant society (Charon, 2010).

Symbolic interactionism has been used to look at organizations' strategic communication efforts because of the importance organizations place on their interactions with society in general and with their different publics in particular (Gordon, 1997; Zhang, 2006). By creating and communicating messages to their various publics through different media channels, organizations take an active role in the social construction of meaning: "The organization, rather than being a dominant player capable of assigning meaning for others, is more realistically cast as one player among many in a larger social dynamic that continually forms meanings" (Gordon, 1997, p.64). Thus, universities may want to send positive and welcoming messages to students, but the institution's actions and interactions affect how such messages are interpreted and how students perceive themselves in relation to the university and its other publics. One focus of this dissertation is exploring how Latino students perceive their relationship with the university they

attend, which will undoubtedly be based on Latino students' interpretations of symbols they perceive as emanating from the institution.

Prior to discussing media representations of Latina/os, I describe the main concepts of this dissertation and how I use them to guide the research questions in the following sections. I start by explaining how I understand identity and racial identity as they apply to racial minorities in general and Latina/os in particular. I then introduce the concepts of ethnic identity and of ethnorace as an alternative to explore Latino students' identity.

*Identity: development, performativity & lived subjectivity*

While some people think they have a clear image of who they are, others might still go back and forth between the person they would like to be, the person they think they are, and the person people perceive them to be. Still others continue to explore different personae and try to make sense of who they are, of what their identity is. Identity has been associated with “an individual's sense of uniqueness” (Harris, 1995, p.1), “visible marks on the body” (Alcoff, 2006, p.86), “the relation to what is not” (Stephen, 2001, p.66), “life story” (Chaitin, 2004, p.11), “social histories” (Strauss, 1995, p.4) as well as a “quest” and a “search” (Erikson, 1968, p.19). Simply stated, identity refers to “knowing who one is, and who one is not” (Harris, 1995, p.1).

The concept of identity is not only related to how we perceive ourselves but also to how we perceive and judge others as well as how we are perceived and judged by them (Alcoff, 2006; Erikson, 1968). For instance, Merskin (2011) posits that a person can be classified as a Latina by the way she dresses and acts, and by the food she eats. A person's self-image is thus dependent on how he/she is seen by others in various social contexts. Accordingly, if a person identifies him/herself as belonging to a particular group but is not recognized by others as belonging to the group, either visually or culturally, that person will not be treated as a member of the group with

which he/she claims to identify (Dávila, 2008). Therefore, one person's identity is also dependent on others validating that identity. Identity thus illustrates the "dense interconnections between the intimate and public venues of social practice" (Holland et al., 1998, p.270). We meet "different significant others" in our life course who "both influence and are influenced by us," and we develop our identity through our interactions with them (Chaitin, 2004, p.5).

Goffman (1963) claims that in our interactions with others, we are both performers and an audience for the performances of others. Goffman (1963) uses the metaphor of a performance to explain that people behave in public as actors would on a stage, performing for others. Goffman (1982) explains that our social interactions, or performances, are best understood in terms of "*line*" and "*face*." He defines *line* as "a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts" and *face* as "an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (Goffman, 1982, p.5).

One of the most quoted identity theories is Erik Erikson's theory of identity development. Erikson (1968) proposes that identity development is the result of a long process that usually takes place during adolescence, mostly during the high school and college years, and leads to adulthood. Initially, at the "diffuse status," a person does not commit to any particular identity or has not explored any possible identity. A person can then enter a "foreclosed status" and/or a "moratorium status." The former refers to a person committing to an identity without having thought too much about it. For instance, one can uncritically accept an identity derived from family values. On the contrary, the "moratorium status" refers to an engaged identity exploration where one has not settled on any particular identity. The last stage of identity development according to Erikson is that of "achieved identity," which occurs when a person has developed a firm sense of identity.

While Erikson was developing his identity theory, William E. Cross Jr. was focusing his research on Black identity. Cross was the first scholar to formally conceptualize a theory of racial identity development. His 1971 “nigrescence theory is considered one of the seminal Black racial identity theories” (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell & Fhagen-Smith, 2002, p.71). Cross’ theory aims to explain the different stages, or “statuses,” one goes through to “become Black,” that is, the process in which race becomes a more salient aspect of one’s identity (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1994). He revised his original theory in the early 1990s and expanded it in the early 2000s to adapt it to changing socio-cultural factors, to better reflect the fluid aspect of identity, and to place more emphasis on the difference between individual and group identity (Davis, Aronson & Salinas, 2006; Vandiver et al., 2002).

Cross’ revised and expanded nigrescence theory includes four statuses, “Pre-Encounter,” “Encounter,” “Immersion-Emersion” and “Internalization” (Cross, 1991; Cross & Vandiver, 2001). The Pre-Encounter status is characterized by three identities, “assimilation,” “miseducation” and “self-hatred.” People with an assimilation identity express pro-American sentiments and do not consider race salient. People with a miseducation identity perceive Blacks as a whole stereotypically, whereas people with a self-hatred identity focus on themselves and display self-loathing attitudes due to their race (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Fhagen-Smith, Vandiver, Worrell & Cross, 2010).

People enter the Encounter status after a particular experience or series of events leads them to reconsider their perceptions about Blacks or about themselves (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1994; Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Taking action upon this racial “encounter” leads people to the Immersion–Emersion status, which includes two identities: “intense Black involvement” and “anti-White.” Vandiver, Cross and their colleagues (2002) succinctly explained the two



identities, stating that “Intense Black Involvement describes a Black person’s overromanticized immersion into the Black experience [while] individuals manifesting the Anti-White identity reject everything White, to the point of demonizing Whites and their culture” (p.72). In other words, “everything Black or Afrocentric is good” and “everything White or Eurocentric is evil” (Vandiver et al., 2001, p.177).

The last status of the nigrescence theory is “Internalization,” which emphasizes acceptance and pride of being Black. “Moving into the Internalization stage resulted in ‘self-healing’ (Cross, 1995, p.96), with feelings of inferiority and insecurity replaced by ‘Black pride’ and ‘self-love’ (Cross, 1991, p.159). However, Cross (1991, 1995) cautioned that while reaching the Internalization status may improve self-esteem, it does not automatically result in psychological well-being. Similarly, some Blacks who do not reach the Internalization status may nevertheless display high levels of self-esteem. The Internalization status includes four identities: “Afrocentric,” “bicultural,” “multiculturalist-racial” and “multiculturalist-inclusive.” Fhagen-Smith, Vandiver, Worrell and Cross (2010) offer the following definitions of these four identities:

Afrocentric identity attitudes center on Black empowerment and the use of African-derived principles of living and interpretation of one’s environment. The bicultural racial identity highlights being both Black and an emphasis on being a member of some other cultural group(s) such as nationality, religion, or gender. A multiculturalist-racial identity is both pro-Black and respectful of other racial/ethnic groups including White people and European Americans. A multiculturalist-inclusive identity is pro-Black, respectful of other racial/ethnic groups, and puts an emphasis on building relationships with people from a multitude of cultural backgrounds including varying sexual orientations” (pp. 166-168).

These four identities reflect the level of engagement people choose to undertake in their achieved internalized identity as Black. Although these statuses appear to be linear, people may

move back and forth between statuses, and between identities within statuses, based on personal experiences and/or external factors (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Cross' nigrescence theory is useful to this dissertation as it could help us understand the differences in racial identity among Latinos. Indeed, the four statuses "Pre-Encounter," "Encounter," "Immersion-Emersion" and "Internalization" are conceptually broad enough to apply to any racial/ethnic group in the U.S. Vandiver, Cross and their colleagues (2002) explained that the four statuses emphasize the salience and valence people attribute to their race. They argue that people can view the role race plays in their lives as "(a) of no importance (low race salience) with neutral valence, (b) of singular importance (high race salience) with a positive valence, or (c) of singular importance (high race salience) with a negative valence" (p.72). Therefore, Latinos who do not consider their race/ethnicity to play an important role in lives would belong to category (a). On the contrary, Latinos who view their race/ethnicity as an important part of their lives could either belong to category (b) if they hold favorable views of Latina/os, or belong to category (c) if they hold unfavorable views of Latina/os.

At any stage of the identity development process, life experiences have a strong impact on how people perceive themselves. Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) contend that the "familial and cultural context one is born into sets the initial parameters for one's identity," which is then further influenced by school and new messages a person receives about the group he/she sees him/herself as part of (p.45). Identities are shared and shaped by people's interactions with others (Strauss, 1995). For these reasons, Alcoff (2006) maintains that "identity comes into our consciousness through a second-person invocation rather than from our first-person experience of ourselves" (p.75).

This “invocation” can come from media, which represent a powerful tool to construct categories of identity (Alcoff, 2006; Grossberg et al., 2006; Kellner, 2011) and “interpellate audiences who decide to take up, or not,” a particular identity (Grossberg et al., 2006, p.246). Indeed, media provide “the materials for constructing views of the world, behavior, and even identities” (Kellner, 2011, p.8). These categories of identity are contrasted to a norm, a dominant image within a culture, which is also the product of media and/or government entities (Alcoff, 2006; Grossberg et al., 2006). Ascribing to a particular identity is therefore to contrast the “codes” of that identity to the norm’s “cultural codes” (Grossberg et al., 2006, p.243).

To fully understand a person’s identity, we have to take into account historical, social and cultural contexts (Chaitin, 2004; Strauss, 1995). In this sense, identities are more than personal histories as they are interwoven with social histories: “Every social world produces its own histories, which may profoundly affect the lives and identities of its members—and possibly also of people pulled into argumentation or other contact with them” (Strauss, 1995, p.5). Identities change, “always forming and re-forming” based on personal and collective life experiences as well as the socio-historical context in which these experiences occur (Holland et al., 1998, p.284). Holland and her colleagues (1998) state that “one can never inhabit a world without at least the figural presence of others, of a social history in person” (p.282). In this sense, one’s identity is better understood as being “composed of multiple identities” (Chaitin, 2004, p.5).

This view of identity as the relationship between personal histories and social histories illuminates the “fluctuating nature of identity” (Chaitin, 2004, p.5). As previously mentioned, contact with others, either physical or via media, as well as external factors such as current economic and political climates, contribute to one’s sense of identity. Because most of the identity formation process takes place during adolescence, one’s high school and college

experiences may represent a key turning point in one's identity exploration when one is in the "moratorium status," to use Erikson's (1968) terminology, leading to one's "achieved identity." Chávez-Reyes (2010) illuminates this point for Latina/os in her interview study with the Fuenteses, 18 third- and fourth-generation Mexican Americans who recount how they became aware of their racial identity during their teenage years. According to Cross' (1991) identity theory, the Fuenteses' experiences in high school represent an "encounter" with their race/ethnicity.

Chávez-Reyes (2010) explains how a combination of family socialization and middle and high school experiences affected the identity of all family members. She states that later-generation parents instilled in their children egalitarian values but did not prepare them for the racism they might encounter outside of their home. Therefore, the Fuentes children never considered themselves the offspring of immigrants or as being anything but Americans until they reached an "encounter" stage, that is, until they were placed in a situation to enter a "moratorium status." Prior to that, racial differences were not made salient to them. Indeed, the Fuentes children said they first experienced racism in school, especially in middle and high school when they started thinking about dating and were ostracized due to their difference, which initiated a "moratorium on ethnic identity" (Chávez-Reyes, 2010, p.508).

As was the case with the Fuenteses, people usually develop their personal identity based on their level of identification with particular social groups, or collective identities, defined in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexuality, country of origin and so forth (Chaitin, 2004). Any of these factors can become salient marks of identification at different times in a person's life or in different ways during the same time frame (Chaitin, 2004). For instance, Ladson-Billings (1998) explains how the context in which she finds herself influences how she is

perceived: “As an African American female academic, I can be and am sometimes positioned as conceptually White in relation to, perhaps, a Latino, Spanish-speaking gardener. In that instance, my class and social position override my racial identification and for that moment I become ‘White’” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.5). This is an excellent example of how one person’s identity can have multiple facets and how one’s identity can be performed differently based on the context in which social interactions take place (Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 2010).

Erikson’s (1968) and Cross’ (1991) theories of identity development are useful for this dissertation because Latino college students might have undergone or might be undergoing their own identity development in high school or in college. It would be interesting to see if Latino college students could isolate specific encounters that made them conscious of their identity development.

Another important notion of identity, which shares many of the philosophical tenets of symbolic interactionism, is that of performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993). Focusing her work on gender identity, Butler (1990) reasons that there “is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p.25). Butler (1990) argues that identity is a series of performances we express in our daily interactions. The performances themselves represent the different facets of our identity, which vary depending on the context in which our performances take place (Butler, 1990). To emphasize how performativity equals identity, Butler (1990) refers to Nietzsche’s idea that “‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (p.25). For Butler, when it comes to identity, performativity is everything, as the performative acts constitute reality; without these acts, there would be no identity at all.

Butler (1993) associates performativity with society's norms, which not only constrain the limits of one's performativity but also make these constraints part of one's performativity. In other words, Butler argues that "performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (p.95). She refutes the idea that identity is determined in advance, as might be suggested by the term "repetition." She maintains that the production of one's performativity might be a repetition of an existing norm because of the fear associated with performing outside of the norm (Butler, 1993). To re-emphasize the dominance of performativity (deed) on the subject (doer), Butler contends that "this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject" (p.95, italics in original).

It is also important to explore the case of Latino college students in terms of identity because, similar to Ladson-Billings' (1998) experience in academic settings, Latino students might also be perceived as "conceptually White" regardless of their level of identification with white culture. In addition, as Alcoff (2006) claims, because "identity implies recognition of bodily differences" (p.102), phenotype features can reinforce the perception of certain Latinos as whites. This might create incoherence in white students' perceptions of Latinos who do not conform to the "norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined" (Butler, 1990, p.17). Bonilla-Silva (2004) posits that certain Latina/os perceive themselves as "honorary Whites" for two main reasons: "honorary whites may be classifying themselves as 'white' or believing they are better than the 'collective black'" (p.937). Race scholars hypothesized that upper-class and/or light-skinned Latina/os would be more likely to think of themselves as honorary Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Murguia & Saenz, 2002). This concept is important because it may affect not only how Latina/os perceive themselves, but also how others perceive

them as well as their interactions with other Latina/os and non-Latina/os. Latina/os who perceive themselves and/or are treated as honorary Whites are also more likely to develop “white-like racial attitudes” (Bonilla-Silva, 2004, p.937). Similarly, Whites are more likely to better treat Latina/os they perceive as honorary Whites than others. However, as Bonilla-Silva explains, regardless of how Latina/os perceive themselves, “‘honorary’ means they will remain secondary, will face discrimination, and will not receive equal treatment” (p.944).

Alcoff (2006) describes the distinction between “public identity” and “lived subjectivity.” She defines “public identity” as “how we are socially located in public” and “lived subjectivity” as “how we understand ourselves” to be (pp. 92-93). This distinction is crucial not only to this study, but to other studies exploring people’s identity, because it implies that a person’s identity does not depend solely on that person’s self-perception. Therefore, in order to understand how a person perceives him/herself, we also need to understand how this person thinks other people perceive him/her.

For minorities, awareness about others’ perceptions of them can affect their academic performances. About 30 years ago, social psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson explored the achievement gap between white American and African-American students. They refused to believe that the latter had a learning deficiency and hypothesized that under pressure to perform well on a test, African-American students would be so anxious to confirm stereotypes about their group that it would affect their results. When they presented African-American students with a test stating that results would serve as a “diagnostic of intellectual ability,” African-American students performed significantly worse than when presented with a test stating that results would serve to investigate the “psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems.” Steele and Aronson named this phenomenon “stereotype threat” (Steele & Aronson,

1995). They explained the potential effects of “widely-known negative stereotypes about one’s group” as follows: “the existence of such a stereotype means that anything one does or any of one’s features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others” (p.797).

Members of a stereotyped group experience situations of stereotype threat when they are aware that others might perceive them as reinforcing negative group stereotypes (Steele, 1997). Indeed, members of groups subjected to negative stereotyping “are under the risk of no longer being seen as individuals but only as prototypical members of a group” (Croizet et al., 2001, p.302). People can experience stereotype threat even if they know a particular stereotype is inaccurate or if they believe it does not apply to them; they only need to be aware of the stereotype (Fischer, 2010; Ployhart et al., 2003; Steele, 1997). As Fischer (2010) explains, “the ‘threat’ of the stereotype stems from the anxiety the person feels to *not* confirm this negative stereotype” (p.21, italics in original). The “threat” of confirming the stereotype leads to performance and/or behavior change.

Researchers have explored how stereotype threat specifically applies to Latina/o students. About 10 years ago, Gonzales and her colleagues (2002) conducted the first stereotype threat study involving Latina/o students and compared their test performances to that of white students. Similar to Steele and Aronson’s (1995) initial study, they found that “Latinos exhibited depressed test performance in the diagnostic condition relative to controls” (Gonzales et al., 2002, p.666). Other studies replicated these results and concluded that stereotype threat affects African Americans and Latina/os in the same way (Nadler & Clark, 2011; Schmader & Johns, 2003). Stereotype threat, however, does not affect all members of one group in similar ways. Those who strongly identify with their group are more likely to display stereotype threat



behavior than others belonging to the same group (Armenta, 2010; Ho & Sidanius, 2010; Ployhart et al., 2003). Ployhart and his colleagues (2003) demonstrated that “racial identity is the primary driver of perceptions of stereotype threat” (p.253).

### *Racial/Ethnic identity & ethnorace*

One of my main assumptions in this dissertation is that the “basic level perception of events and of people (identity, credibility, evidence, explanation) can be affected by race and gender” (Alcoff, 2006, p.128). I also assume that media can “produce people’s social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference” (Grossberg et al., 2006, p.220). Media not only have the power to construct identities but also to “construct meanings and expectations associated with particular social identities” (Grossberg et al., 2006, p.247).

In terms of identity and perceptions, Latina/os in the United States challenge traditional racial categories. For instance, Ladson-Billings (1998) notes that in the early days of the census, Mexican Americans were originally considered “White” before being forced out of the White category in response to political, economic, social and cultural changes. Indeed, according to U.S. Census archives, “White” or “black” were the only two options available to categorize people in terms of race until 1850, when “mulatto” was added. In 1860, these non-white descriptors were capitalized, and from 1900 to 1940, the “Color or race” question on the Census was left open-ended. In 1970, Latina/os could categorize their origin or descent as “Mexican,” “Puerto Rican,” “Cuban,” “Central or South American” or “Other Spanish.” The “Central or South American” option was deleted in 1980 and “Mexican-Amer.” and “Chicano” were added. From 1990 on, Latina/os have been given the option to write their “origin” if they consider themselves “other Spanish/Hispanic” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

The Census' way of dealing with Latina/os' racial status illustrates the racialization of Latina/os by the U.S. government as well as the conundrum Latina/os pose to U.S. society in terms of racial categorization. Chávez (2008) argues that when the term race is applied to Latina/os, it does not refer to "genetic-based categories of race but, rather, labels that are socially and culturally constructed based on perceived innate or biological differences and imbued with meanings about relative social worth" (p.24). Simply stated, Latina/os do not fit conventional categories of race (Alcoff, 2006). Stavans (1995) described Latina/o identity as a "labyrinth" that defies people's thoughts on racial identity (p.93). However, most people today often do not recognize Latina/os' heterogeneity and favor "simple answers" or "simple rules" when dealing with Latina/os in general (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p.33). Until recently, media portrayals of Latina/os have contributed to this trend by largely depicting all Latina/os as one homogeneous and undifferentiated group (Chávez, 2008; Ramírez-Berg, 2002; Santa Ana, 2002; Valdivia, 2010).

The difficulty of assigning Latina/os into a particular racial category stems from the black-white dichotomy that has dominated race relations in the U.S. (Alcoff, 2006; Dávila, 2008; Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This dichotomy "marginalizes or ignores other racial groups" (Alcoff, 2006, p.254) and reflects a "high degree of interracial tension and intolerance" (Harris, 1995, p.9). Similar to identity, race is viewed as socially constructed by media and cultural rituals. To use Alcoff's (2006) words, race is "historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices" (p.182), or, as Dávila (2008) states, "minorities are not born, they are made" (p.146).

People are classified as racial minorities when they are perceived as non-white (Alcoff, 2006; Obre & Harris, 2008). Furthermore, because race in the U.S. has been conceptualized in

terms of black versus white, this “dualism has long maintained that if a person is not totally white (whatever that can mean biologically), he or she must be considered black” (Andersen & Collins, 2010; Martinez, 2010, p.92). The binary racial classification holds historical roots in the U.S., where the one-drop rule long governed racial categorization. According to the rule, a single drop of black blood would make a person black or non-white (Obre & Harris, 2008). The rule’s legacy “led to the continued social separation between Black and White worlds, despite the blurring of these distinctions” (Obre & Harris, 2008, p.35).

While it would be hard to argue that today’s U.S. racial landscape is solely divided in terms of black and white, this binary framework is nevertheless sustained because of the “model minority” myth, which distances certain groups of people from black people based on their work ethic and willingness to obey the established order (Dávila, 2008; Martinez, 2010). As a result, if “people couldn’t be white, they could at least claim to be not-black” (Dávila, 2008, p.162). Thus, this binary framework considers people such as Asian Americans and Latina/os to be closer to Whites than to Blacks, and to eventually become white (Alcoff, 2006). In such a polarized racial context, where black and white are the only recognized forms of racial identities, non-black racial minorities such as Latina/os are not only “disempowered” to “define their own identity and social circumstances,” but also to explore and make sense of their racial identities (Alcoff, 2006, p.255).

Most members of minority groups face identity challenges earlier than members of the dominant group, especially in a society such as the U.S., which does not value minority status (Harris, 1995). Members of racial minority groups are contrasted with the dominant group and are seen as having their own racial identity, which Miville (2010) defines as “the collective identity of any group of people socialized to think of themselves as a racial group, as based on

common traits” (p.244). Racialized identity suggests inherent differences that cannot be transcended between racial minorities and members of the dominant group (Miville, 2010). Indeed, members of the dominant group do not think of themselves in terms of race and are thus exempt from carrying the burden associated with racial differences (Vargas, 2009). By classifying a group of people as a distinct race, members of the dominant group “mark them off as more profoundly and distinctively ‘other’” (Vargas, 2009, p.21). In other words, people’s visible racial identity influences how members of the dominant group perceive and interact with them.

Hall (2011) asserts that because “race appears to be ‘given’ by Nature, racism is one of the most profoundly ‘naturalized’ of existing ideologies” (p.82). Hall’s point highlights how biological claims about race can lead people to think in terms of “us” versus “them.” The U.S. is a racialized society where whiteness is positioned as normative and forms the basis to which all other racial groups are compared (Ladson-Billings, 1998). A person’s racial consciousness emanates from “learned practices and habits of visual discrimination” (Alcoff, 2006, p.196). In other words, personal experiences and media’s representations of racial minorities have shaped the racial consciousness of people who belong to racial minority groups. Many racial minorities thus develop a “collective psychological identity to protect their self-esteem and to fight feelings of subordination” (Rong & Brown, 2001, p.540). However, this can also reinforce minorities’ subordination if they refuse to take part in a system that, while racist, can nevertheless help minorities enhance their economic position. Rong and Brown (2001) and Cammarota (2004) explain that while racial minorities do face institutional racism in U.S. schools, rebelling against education and refusing to participate in the educational system only results in the reproduction of their subordinate status.

Similar to the concepts of identity and race, racial identity is also context dependent. Alcoff (2006) explains how a person's racial identity can change from *Cubano* to black for instance, or from Mexican to Latino. She reasons that a person's racial identity can change across communities, and a family's race can change across history. Alcoff uses the example of mixed-race people who constantly renegotiate their identities based on the context they find themselves in. Alcoff also states that because people in the U.S. are used to thinking in terms of distinct racial categories, racial identities that "are not readily visible create fear, consternation, and the sometimes hysterical determination to find their visible trace" (p.191). This is especially true of Latina/os, whose phenotypes and complexions may not be easily distinguishable from white Americans. Harris (1995) reminds us of the "obsession" people in the U.S. had and continue to have with skin complexion in terms of social class and privilege (p.10). Media have also reinforced this obsession in terms of appearance, associating lighter skin tone with ideals of beauty and promoting skin-lightening products (Maddox, 2004; Maddox & Chase, 2004).

The term "colorism" refers to how one's skin tone is used to "evaluate" a person (Blair et al., 2002). People with light skin tone are more likely to be evaluated as possessing positive traits than people with dark skin tone. For instance, Maddox and Chase (2004) found that people with darker skin tone were thought of as being less educated, prosperous and healthy than people with light skin tone. Along with complexion, other physical features also play an important role in how racial minorities are perceived by members of the dominant group (Maddox, 2004). Arguably, phenotype provides the basis of racial categorization and can also activate stereotypical perceptions (Blair et al., 2002). In the case of Latina/os, some of whom may appear physically white, colorism also includes accent, social class and cultural customs (Alcoff, 2006). The intense intersectionality of race and class in the case of Latina/os could suggest that because

education is synonymous with middle or upper class, educated Latina/os may be categorized as Whites (Alcoff, 2006).

The heterogeneity of Latina/os challenges traditional understanding of racial identity. Dávila (2008) and Miville (2010) state that many Latina/os label themselves as “white” or often refuse to identify with a particular racial category, preferring “no race” or “some other race” instead. Latina/os’ heterogeneity has not been recognized in the U.S. public discourse, in which a “pan-Latino identity” (Alcoff, 2006) or “Latino panethnicity” (Rodriguez, 1996) has emerged. Indeed, media have homogenized Latina/os’ identity in terms of race, ethnicity, country of origin, income level or immigration status (Dávila, 2008). Alcoff (2006) posits that Latina/os view identity in terms of culture and nationality, thus moving away from a racialized identity toward a more ethnic identity. Miville (2010) defines ethnic identity as “an enduring, fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings associated with that membership” (p.244). She claims that ethnic identity is dynamic and changes over time. While racial identity has mostly been associated with a visible identity in terms of phenotype, ethnic identity is more dependent on various ecological factors such as family upbringing and socialization (Miville, 2010). One’s ethnic identity has also been associated with high self-esteem, regardless of one’s physical appearance. Latina/os who embrace and identify with their culture are likely to feel more self-confident than Latina/os who are not as connected to their culture (Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009). Such findings are crucial to this dissertation because if Latino students’ ethnic identity positively influences their self-esteem, it should also affect their academic experiences.

Hall (1996) emphasizes the dynamic aspect of ethnic identity, affirming that we all express ourselves “from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular

experience, a particular culture” (p.447). Because personal and collective background play a central role in our identity, Hall says that we are all “ethnically located” and that “our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are” (p.447). The idea of being ethnically located suggests that when Latino students first enter college, they are most likely ethnically located in a different place than they are after two or three years into their college experience. Therefore, it is also likely that their college experiences will affect their ethnic identity.

Many authors contend that neither race nor ethnicity are appropriate terms to examine U.S. Latina/os’ identity. For instance, Miville (2010) uses the term “racial-ethnic” instead; a hybrid classification that she argues is more accurate for Latinos (p.243). Goldberg (1993) had previously introduced the term “ethnorace” to emphasize the self-creation aspect of racial and ethnic identity as “membership turns more or less straightforwardly on choice and self-affirmation” while recognizing that people are also identified by “the force of imposed classification” (p.75). Goldberg perceives race as “historically specific” and ethnicity as a “mode of cultural identification and distinction” (p.74). Given that I am conducting this dissertation during a historical moment in which Latina/os are being highly racialized, the concept of ethnorace is particularly relevant. This concept is also useful because it allows me to explore how Latino students’ levels of cultural identification affect how they perceive themselves in college, that is to say, how they perceive their experiences as distinct from that of non-Latina/o students.

The above discussion suggests that interactions with others do influence identity construction. While interactions mostly refer to physical, face-to-face encounters, they can also be mediated, that is, interactions with a person or group of people via the media. In the following section, I elaborate on the relationship between media and identity by looking at media

construction of “the Other” in general and of racial identity in particular. I explain how media have used stereotypes and more subtle practices to differentiate the dominant white group from racial minority groups.

### *Media construction of the “Other”*

Media influence not only one’s identity but also how one perceives the identity of others. Indeed, media’s most powerful role is to create social identities, both in terms of similarities and differences (Grossberg et al., 2006). Audiences can decide which culture they wish to associate with and which social identity they wish to adopt based on their consumer practices (Grossberg et al., 2006). For example, some Latina/os might decide to listen mostly to Latin music, such as reggaeton, salsa or merengue, to reinforce and make their Latina/o social identity visible.

Dominant media messages regarding every aspect of our lives, such as religion, education, social interactions, sexual behaviors and so forth, place us in a particular culture in which power relations are assessed by a supposedly neutral norm (Hall, 2011; hooks, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ramírez-Berg, 2002; Said, 1994). These media messages teach us who has power and who does not, as well as who can exercise power and who cannot. They teach us not only how to think about particular people but also how to think about ourselves (Hall, 2011; Kellner, 2011). Media images, from books to television, have been used by the dominant society to create an “Other” that would serve as a foil to the dominant group.

Perhaps no other author has more powerfully articulated how media construct “the Other” than Edward Said in his research on orientalism. Said (1994) contends that messages about the Orient created a culture of the Orient among the Occident, which in turn served as a pedagogical tool for Occidentals to learn about Orientals. For instance, stereotypical representations portrayed the Orient as an exotic place for Occidentals to fulfill their sexual fantasies (Said,



1994). As Said explains, each observation was made into a generalization, and each generalization represented an inherent quality of the Oriental. In addition, the Oriental's voice was never communicated to the Occidentals, who could construct the Orient and the Oriental as they wished. Therefore, the Oriental was constructed as inferior, justifying the domination of the Occident over the Orient. Occidentals thus learned that the Oriental was backwards, "first an Oriental and only second a man" (Said, 1994, p.231).

The "othering" of African Americans has been amply documented by scholars. (See, for example, the works of Travis Dixon, bell hooks, Jannette Dates and William Barlow.) This "othering" occurred through the misrepresentation of African-American culture by white media producers who imposed their fantasies about black images on their audiences (Dates & Barlow, 1993). bell hooks has made some particularly poignant arguments in her analysis of media portrayals of African-American women. She contends that media are responsible for having distorted and sexualized African-American bodies, thus increasing the otherness of African Americans (hooks, 1992). She argues that African-American women are mostly present in television to serve white males or satisfy their sexual fantasies. This has created a culture in which African-American women are seen as inferior. This same culture also taught men, regardless of their race or ethnicity, how to dominate African-American women (hooks, 1992). She gives the example of white men's fascination with colored women as a way to "experience and dominate the Other" (hooks, 1992, p.25). Media "othering" of racial minorities has not changed much over time. Grossberg and his colleagues (2006) point out that media representation of African Americans became more positive as a result of the civil rights movement, but as Hall (2011) and Ramírez-Berg (2002) argue, traces of stereotypes and racism in media are still visible today but are just more subtle. Said (1994) made a similar observation

when he talked about the political independence of the Orient in the mid-1950s. He maintained that new ways simply replaced old ways, which did not change the status of the Orientals (Said, 1994).

The term “race-bending racism” illustrates the covert forms in which media continue to represent racial minorities as inferior to white people (Vargas, 2009). The term refers to the use of characters whose race is ambiguous to create the illusion of diversity, but these characters are nevertheless the “bad guys” in the stories. Therefore, even though audiences may acclaim a movie for its inclusion of minority actors, a closer read would decipher the reproduction of interracial power relations. Similarly, hooks (1992) suggests that the inclusion of many pictures of African Americans in magazines is nothing but a façade of “white supremacist society.” She also posits that a closer read would reveal “distorted bodies” contrasted with perfect white bodies (hooks, 1992). Given the weight of media messages in influencing audiences’ perceptions of different groups of people, it is crucial to know not only how media have been portraying Latina/os but also how audiences respond to these portrayals. In the following section, I focus on the main representations, or lack thereof, of Latina/os in English-language entertainment and news media, how new representations have emerged with the recent demographical changes in the U.S., and how television shows produced by Latina/os have been offering a more complex and contemporary image of Latina/os.

#### *Latina/os in the media: From dirty Mexicans to Ugly Betty*

Media representations of Latina/os have mostly been dominated by the media stereotyping, subordinating and lacking understanding of Latina/os. Since the first representations of Latina/os in the early U.S. print media of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Latina/os, who in that particular era were mostly Mexicans living in today’s southwestern U.S.,

have been portrayed as lazy, dirty and inferior (Wilson et al., 2003). Mexicans, most of whom had indigenous features, were seen by U.S. colonizers as an inferior race, which justified the need to conquer their land (Wilson et al., 2003). While the image of Latina/os in the media has evolved, it nevertheless remains a predominantly unfavorable one, with similar but less overt arguments formulated to keep Latina/os in the U.S. in a subaltern position (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Indeed, old stereotypes have evolved into modern stereotypes based on societal changes. “El bandido,” for example, has been replaced by a gang member (Ramírez-Berg, 2002).

#### *News.*

When they are not stereotyped, Latina/os are mostly absent from the world as conceived by the media. Coverage of Latina/os in the news is far from reflecting Latina/os’ presence in the U.S. Indeed, studies from the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the *Brownout Reports*, established the near-invisible status of Latina/os in the news media. The most recent study (2006) analyzed the representations of Latina/os in ABC’s, CBS’s and NBC’s newscasts in 2005. The study found that stories about Latina/os and Latina/o matters constituted less than 1% of the total stories and were mostly reported by non-Latina/o journalists. A third of them did not cite any Latina/os, and most of the stories only reported one side of the story.

When Latina/os are visible in the news media, their representation is mostly associated with crime and immigration. For instance, Blacks and Latinos are more likely than Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime in television news, whereas Whites are more likely to be portrayed as defenders (Dixon & Linz, 2000; McConnell, 2011). One of the most prevalent representations of Latina/os in the news is that of the immigrant, an “illegal alien” or “illegal immigrant” generally threatening the U.S. (Chávez, 2008; Santa Ana, 2002; Steinberg, 2004). These representations suggest specifically that Latina/os represent a threat to the U.S. culture because they refuse to assimilate, forming their own linguistic and cultural enclaves instead, and

because of their high fertility rates, which not only jeopardize the state of education and medical care systems but also diminish the power of the dominant white group (Chávez, 2008).

Terms such as “illegal aliens” and “illegal immigrants” affect audiences’ perceptions of Latina/os and “create a negative political bias against Latino immigrants” (Steinberg, 2004, p.127). Indeed, by constantly associating the terms “Latino immigrants” and “illegal,” audiences may automatically think of the latter when hearing or reading about the former. In addition, news stories portray Latina/o immigrants as a homogeneous mass emigrating away from the same place. This misrepresentation ignores Latina/os’ culture and country of origin, as well as Latina/o immigrants’ human rights (Steinberg, 2004). Such misrepresentation can also disregard social issues and reinforce certain stereotypes. For instance, Vélez and her colleagues (2008) found that when Latina/o youth activists demonstrated to protest the national anti-immigrant sentiment, most news media reported that Latina/os’s actions stemmed from “a desire to skip class” (p.8).

In one of the most comprehensive studies regarding newspaper coverage of Latina/os, exploring the language used by *Los Angeles Times*’ journalists to cover three California anti-immigrant legislative propositions during the mid-1990s, Santa Ana (2002) reinforces the idea that Latina/os have been constructed by the news media as threatening “illegal aliens.” Santa Ana analyzed the metaphors used in the *Los Angeles Times* to explore how Latina/os were constructed in the news, which, according to him, reflects societal views of Latina/os. Santa Ana argues that human thoughts are made of images representing realities used to understand and make sense of everyday life. These images are metaphors human beings rely upon in their everyday activities (Santa Ana, 2002). When a particular representation or metaphor becomes the dominant one, it also becomes the way people think about a particular topic, or in this case, a group of people (Santa Ana, 2002).

Santa Ana (2002) found that the dominant metaphor of Latina/os in the *Los Angeles Times* was one of dangerous waters about to wash away the traditional U.S. society. In this sense, Latina/os are going against the mainstream, that is to say, against the white norm. Santa Ana claims that the water metaphor transforms individual people into an undifferentiated mass that needs to be controlled for safety purposes. The dominant image of Latina/o immigrants was that of animals that need to be hunted out of the U.S. or killed (Santa Ana, 2002). He reasons that associating Latina/os with animals denies them their human characteristics and justifies their inhumane treatment. On the contrary, these same *Los Angeles Times*' stories refer to the U.S. as possessing human qualities.

When the U.S. is depicted as a house, Latina/os are portrayed as criminals breaking into the house (Santa Ana, 2002). When the U.S. is a body, Latina/os are a pathogen; when the U.S. is a castle, Latina/os are invaders; when the U.S. is a ship, Latina/os are overcrowding it and making it sink. This repetition of negative metaphors is easily accessible in the minds of *Los Angeles Times*' readers, who then attribute to Latina/os the characteristics they associate with such metaphors (Santa Ana, 2002). Another important finding of Santa Ana's study is that while these metaphors arose in a climate of economic downturn for California, none of the metaphors had an economic stance. This echoes many other authors' claims about a disregard for the historical, social, economic and political contexts in which these stories are written.

Steinberg (2004) explains that media represent Latina/os in an unfavorable light because they are a "disenfranchised group" (p.125). In addition, she argues that "the majority of major networks and newspapers do not have Latino journalists as their CEO's and key decision-makers. As a result decisions about news and stories usually come from an Anglo, as opposed to Latino, perspective" (pp. 125-126). By selecting the same information deemed important to

audiences, news media coverage of Latina/os is limited in its breadth and depth (McConnell, 2011). McConnell (2011) argues that media misrepresentations of Latina/os could “create a widespread perception of racial and ethnic threat” and could lead to “public support for policies that disproportionately affect” Latina/os (p.191). News media decide what is considered newsworthy and can influence their audiences, especially when audiences are not very knowledgeable about a particular topic (Okamoto, Ebert & Violet, 2011). It is thus important to understand how news media portray Latina/os, as this will most likely reflect how most news media consumers perceive Latina/os in the U.S.

Despite the predominantly unfavorable frames, news media have recently been enhancing their representations of Latina/os by including more coverage of collective actions and community events (Okamoto et al., 2011). Okamoto and her colleagues (2011) compared representations of Latina/os in newspapers published in “traditional immigrant gateways” such as Los Angeles and Miami and in “new immigrant destinations” such as Denver and Atlanta (p.226). They found that overall, the majority of news articles about Latina/os dealt with events “to celebrate the Latino community through art events, commemorations, ceremonies, festivals and parades, or to improve community conditions through neighborhood projects, volunteer efforts and workshops” (p.229). They concluded that these newspapers portrayed Latina/os as active participants in the civic and political life of their communities. Such representations sharply contrast with those discussed earlier in this section, in which Latina/os in news media were either involved in illegal activities or simply invisible.

#### *Entertainment.*

The condition of Latina/os in the entertainment media is similar to their condition in the news media. Audiences are reminded of Latina/os’ immigrant status by Latina/o characters’ lack of English fluency, low levels of education and poor social background. Popular media have thus

constructed Latina/os as inferior to white people (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Latina/os were first denied a presence or voice in movies and were then stereotyped against the normative and dominant image of the intelligent and moral white American characters (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Latina/o characters were first played by white actors in “brown face” to look Latina/o (Ramírez-Berg, 2002, p.50). Latina/o actors’ presence in movies was usually part of the landscape, as silent extras with no lines to contribute to the narrative (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). According to Ramírez-Berg, (2002), when movie directors and producers did cast Latina/o actors as Latina/o characters, they were typically cast in six stereotypical roles: Latino actors were bandidos, buffoons or Latin lovers, while Latina actresses were harlots, clowns or dark ladies, “virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic” and erotically appealing because of their cool distance (p.76).

Rodríguez (2008) uses the example of “West Side Story” to illustrate how Puerto Ricans in particular and Latina/os in general were perceived by U.S. society. Latinas were either self-sacrificing, with virginal qualities, or were manipulative sexual temptresses. On the other hand, Latinos were hot-tempered, knife-carrying delinquents (Rodríguez, 2008). Rodríguez refers to this portrayal as the classic Hollywood “Latino cocktail” (p.121). Latina/os were, therefore, aliens who had to be sent “home.” Media also constructed Latinos as weak men who hated white American men and were unable to attain success by legal means (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Latino characters are often the least intelligent but the most hot-tempered (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). They are associated with criminal activities, both in their conversations and actions (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Therefore, instead of questioning “Latino stereotypes, television generally provides hegemonic messages about Latinos in the United States” (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005, p.124).

As for Latinas, media constructed a sensual image of them by focusing on their bodies and sexual appetite (Ramírez-Berg, 2002; Valdivia, 2010). Latinas in popular media became identifiable with their “spectacular bodies” that contrasted with the silhouette of other actresses (Valdivia, 2010, p.108). Latina characters, whether dancers or maids, were often reduced to one body part: the butt (Valdivia, 2010). According to Valdivia (2010), the Latina butt is different from other people’s butts: “The [Latina] spectacular booty is both different and disciplined – that is, it is bigger than the flat white booty but smaller than the African American booty” (p.109). Nevertheless, the butt “quickly became a powerful signifier of Latinidad in the contemporary U.S.” (Valdivia, 2010, p.126). The recent emergence of a few Latina/o superstars in the entertainment industry has provided Latina/o actors with roles that have more substance than their bodies, but this should not mask the fact that Latina/os are still the most underrepresented group in the media (Rodríguez, 2008; Valdivia, 2010). Indeed, African Americans and Latina/os are underrepresented in television shows, which continue to be dominated by white characters (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). When they are present, African-American and Latina/o actors are predominantly cast in secondary roles. Latino characters are depicted as criminals, lazier and less intelligent than white characters, and the main attribute of both Latina and Latino characters is their body (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Valdivia (2010) contends that the lack of presence of Latina/os in mainstream popular media implies that Latina/os are not important enough to be mentioned.

#### *Marketing.*

While the news media of the mid-1990s painted a grim picture of Latina/os, marketers were inspired by the increase in the Latina/o population in the U.S. to create an image that would appeal to advertisers (Dávila, 2008). The Latina/o population had doubled in 10 years from 1980 to 1990, and Latina/os became the largest minority in the U.S. in 2000 (U.S. Census, 2001). As



Latina/os became more upwardly mobile, marketers developed the concept of a “Hispanic market” for companies to buy into (Dávila, 2008, p.26). From a marketing perspective, it thus became crucial to counter the image of Latina/os as threatening immigrants and portray them as affluent consumers (Dávila, 2008).

Adhering to the idea of the “Hispanic market,” marketers have constructed an image of Latina/os on their way to assimilation into mainstream U.S. society (Dávila, 2008). Latina/os thus have been portrayed as a model minority, implicitly contrasted with African Americans, seen as still far from achieving this level of assimilation (Dávila, 2008). For instance, media’s focus on the individual achievements of successful Latino/as has created the idea of a “new profitable market” (Correra, 2010, p.425). However, Dávila (2008) points out that even though marketers are bending over backwards to create this “sanitized” version of Latina/os to appeal to advertisers, the main discourse remains unchanged, mainly to reinforce the dominance of a consumerism ideology and maintain white privileges in the U.S. Such portrayals convey the message that conforming to the white norm represents the only way to assimilate (Dávila, 2008). Indeed, portrayals of Latina/os as the ideal minority reflect the values of the U.S. society more than that of Latina/os (Dávila, 2008).

Dávila (2008) claims that while marketers and advertisers are “cheering for” Latina/os, the latter are only viewed as mere consumers and do not actively take part in the media industry, of which Latina/os own only a minuscule part. Furthermore, this emphasis on consumerism and class not only promotes meritocracy but also represents a way to avoid discussing racial issues and facing the fact that even though the Latina/o middle class does exist, and has always existed, Latina/os’ portrayals as successful immigrants represent an inaccessible dream for many Latina/os (Correra, 2010; Dávila, 2008). As a result, the current media landscape simultaneously

displays Latina/os as illegal immigrants threatening to overtake the U.S. (or at least to attack it economically with their welfare and criminal status), and Latina/os as middle-class people, embracing U.S. values such as conservatism and family.

*Latina/o-produced shows.*

Along with the new Latina/o image constructed by marketers, recent entertainment shows in English-language media have depicted a brighter image of Latina/os than the classic dim Latina/o stereotypes. The two main shows that offer counter images of Latina/os are *The George Lopez Show*<sup>1</sup> and *Ugly Betty*.<sup>2</sup> *The George Lopez Show*, created and produced by Mexican-American comedian George Lopez, was aired weekly from March 2002 to May 2007 on ABC, whereas *Ugly Betty*, created by Colombian screenwriter Fernando Gaitán and co-produced by Mexican-born actress Salma Hayek, was aired weekly from September 2006 to April 2010 on ABC. While both shows rely on more subtle stereotypes, they also challenge them to create a more favorable and complex image of Latina/os in the U.S. (Avila-Saavedra, 2010; Katzew, 2011; Markert, 2007).

*The George Lopez Show* is a comedy depicting mostly Mexican and Cuban characters. Critics like Markert (2007) argue that the show seems to ignore the heterogeneity of U.S. Latinos because it relies heavily on the “stereotype of unsophisticated immigrants who are basically lazy, reinforcing widely held stereotypes in the popular arena” (Markert, 2007, p.154). While *The George Lopez Show* emphasizes religion, especially Roman Catholicism, the show resists

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<sup>1</sup> In *The George Lopez Show*, George Lopez is a Mexican-American, blue-collar worker at a Los Angeles airplane parts factory who is promoted to the position of manager. Most of the comedy takes place at home among family conflicts and misunderstandings. George is married to a Cuban-American with whom he has a teenage son and daughter. George’s mother, an immigrant from Mexico, lives with them, and George’s father-in-law, a Cuban immigrant, lives next door and often visits the Lopez family.

<sup>2</sup> In *Ugly Betty*, Betty Suarez is a Mexican American from a working-class background and lives in a small house in Queens, N.Y., with her “illegal” father, her single-mother sister and her gay nephew. She graduated from Queens College and works as the assistant of Daniel Mead, the rich, handsome owner and editor-in-chief of *Mode*, a high-end fashion magazine. The show recounts the story of Betty’s rise in the white-dominated fashion industry.

stereotypes pertaining to language and food, such that George's family members rarely speak Spanish, none has a pronounced accent apart from George's father-in-law, and the family is never shown eating Mexican food (Markert, 2007). Other than the use of Latina/o actors as main Latina/o characters, the major difference between portrayal of Latina/os in *The George Lopez Show* and portrayals of Latina/os in other television shows is that it does not focus on a particular Latina/o image to sustain the humor of the show, thus creating a more realistic portrayal of U.S. Latina/os (Markert, 2007).

As in *The George Lopez Show*, the fact that *Ugly Betty*'s eponymous character is Latina represents a major shift in mainstream media's traditional treatment of Latina/os as stereotypical or background characters (Katzew, 2011). As Avila-Saavedra (2010) explains, *Ugly Betty* "articulates a tension between ethnic 'otherness' and cultural assimilation that symbolizes current negotiations of individual and collective identities among young, English-speaking Latinos in the United States" (p.134). While the show does rely on some cultural stereotypes (e.g., overabundant display of religious iconography, all Latina/os are good dancers, Latinas dress provocatively), certain stereotypes also contrast Latina/os' "collectivist family values" to the "conventional U.S. emphasis on individuality" (Avila-Saavedra, 2010, p.139). As opposed to most other shows in which Latina/os have no control over content or style, *Ugly Betty* was co-produced by Latina/os. Therefore, these stereotypes are not meant to make U.S. audiences laugh as much as they "comment on the ignorance of U.S. mainstream audiences about Latinos and serve to strengthen notions of Latino collectivity" (Avila-Saavedra, 2010, p.140).

As with the intersectionality of race and class in Latina/o identity previously discussed (Alcoff, 2006), the social class status of Betty reinforces her "Latinidad" and her otherness in comparison to her colleagues in the fashion world (Avila-Saavedra, 2010; Katzew, 2011). By

working in such an environment, Betty challenges traditional notions of Latina/o identity, which reflects the “tension between ethnic otherness and cultural assimilation” experienced by many Latina/o youth in the U.S. (Avila-Saavedra, 2010, p.142). Betty thus represents the notion of a more culturally assimilated U.S. Latina/o. In addition, Betty’s character also illustrates that “Latinas can be intelligent, self-confident, pursue their dreams and succeed despite obstacles,” a message rarely articulated in U.S. media (Katzew, 2011, p.304). Avila-Saavedra (2010) and Dávila (2008) contend that such representations of Latina/os as assimilated and successful can serve to appease U.S. audiences’ fear about current social issues such as immigration. Regardless of Betty’s level of assimilation, *Ugly Betty* also illustrates the major role one’s race plays in U.S. society (Katzew, 2011; Esposito, 2009). As previously mentioned, one of the most important aspects of television shows such as *The George Lopez Show* and *Ugly Betty* is that they provide counter images of Latina/os:

This generally positive portrait provides a glimpse of “normal” people with a sense of humor, who happen to be Hispanic, struggling with day-to-day routine activities. Such a portrait is likely to promote pride among fellow Latinos at the same time that it challenges some of the stereotypes about poor, rural, illegal immigrant Hispanics that are so pervasive within the wider society. (Markert, 2007, p.161)

This comment implies that Latina/os have not been portrayed as “normal” people in the media and that such a portrayal can only be seen as a first step toward more inter-ethnic tolerance. Indeed, this shift in media representation can act as a “media multi-cultural curriculum” even though viewers might be unaware “that they are learning from the media” (Katzew, 2011, p.302). However, it is important to keep in mind that even though *Ugly Betty* attracted millions of viewers, Betty’s character remains an exception for U.S. mainstream media. Indeed, the pervasive stereotypes Markert (2007) mentions can negatively impact interactions

between Latina/os and non-Latina/os in the U.S., as media can influence one's perceptions of others. This discussion focused on Latina/o representations in mainstream national media. However, as the research for this dissertation was performed in a North Carolina public university, it is also important to examine how Latina/os are portrayed in the local media.

*Latina/os in North Carolinian newspapers: Illegal immigrants or helpless victims?*

Few studies have specifically explored how media in North Carolina portray Latina/os. It is essential to be aware of these portrayals to understand how North Carolinians think about Latina/os. Because Latina/os constitute only a small proportion of North Carolina's population, many North Carolinians have only had a mediated relationship with Latina/os. This is important to this dissertation because more than 80% of the university's undergraduate students are North Carolina residents who were raised by families exposed to media portrayals of Latina/os in general and of Latina/os in North Carolina in particular.

Corbin (1998) and Vargas (2000) examined how local newspapers in one of the major urban areas of North Carolina represented Latina/os to their audiences in the mid-1990s. Overall findings indicated that Latina/os appeared as outsiders, separated from the newspapers' audiences. Almost all Latina/os mentioned in North Carolina newspapers were poor people, taking advantage of social services at the expense of and to the detriment of North Carolina residents (Corbin, 1998). When Latina/os were not straining the state's resources, they were the victims of criminals or immigration agents (Corbin, 1998; Vargas, 2000). Latina/os' contributions to North Carolina consisted of exotic foods and restaurants, and mysterious religious practices (Corbin, 1998), as well as cheap labor, mostly to farmers (Corbin, 1998; Vargas, 2000). Newspaper articles emphasized the undocumented status of most of these farmers, who were portrayed as passive victims of smugglers and crew leaders, "experiencing

situations rather than as performing actions” (Vargas, 2000, p.281). Indeed, the newspapers established a connection between Latina/os, immigration and illegal entry into the U.S. (Corbin, 1998). Latina/os’ portrayals in North Carolina newspapers in the mid-1990s emphasized the “otherness” of Latina/os, who were “immigrants” and “aliens,” compared to North Carolina residents. Newspaper articles were also dominated by a lack of Latina/o voices and an oversimplification of Latina/os’ conditions in North Carolina (Corbin, 1998; Vargas, 2000).

News media representations of Latina/os in North Carolina after the September 11 attacks have emphasized an “us” versus “them” discourse with a criminality undertone (Paulin, 2007, 2008). Legal documents, such as a driver’s license, have become the main criteria to categorize someone as “us.” This polarization has been reinforced by marginalizing Latina/o local leaders in stories pertaining to Latina/o matters and stressing the concerns associated with the presence of Latina/os in North Carolina (Paulin, 2008). Indeed, most Latina/os have been portrayed as undocumented immigrants, who have in turn been portrayed as criminals linked to terrorist activities, thus rationalizing the denial of their rights (Paulin, 2007, 2008). Paulin (2007) argues that North Carolina newspapers have drawn on the political context of the September 11 attacks to construct Latina/os in North Carolina “as a very distinct ‘other’ and linked to criminal practices” (p.225).

Latina/os are portrayed as “illegal” and “out of control,” taking over North Carolina by number and drinking habits (Paulin, 2004). Concomitantly, Latina/os are depicted as “victims” and “disadvantaged,” living in poor conditions and unable to take care of themselves mostly due to their lack of English and education (Paulin, 2004). These representations display an incomplete picture of the Latina/o community in North Carolina as poor, undocumented immigrants. However, Paulin (2004) points out that despite these unflattering portrayals, the

articles nevertheless “reflect concern about how law enforcement officials can protect them [Latina/os] and teach them to protect themselves; and how schools can incorporate and involve their Hispanic students in a way that genuinely strives to provide them with the best educational opportunities” (p.19).

Contradictory representations of Latina/os, ranging from portrayals as “illegals” to deport to victims to help, are reflected in the editorial pages of smaller North Carolina newspapers. Latina/os are portrayed as being taken advantage of by business owners in search of cheap labor (Szarek, 2008). Despite occasional signs of sympathy toward Latina/os, the dominant discourse articulated in opinion pieces of community newspapers remains similar to the “us” versus “them” discourse in larger North Carolina newspapers (Szarek, 2008). Latina/o immigration is perceived in terms of North Carolina residents fighting against the invasion of lawbreakers taking over the state (Szarek, 2008). Vargas (2000) contends that newspapers are a public sphere that (re)produces social relations of dominance and subordination and that the dominant portrayal of Latina/os in the news legitimizes and naturalizes their inferiority. Given the persistent ways in which North Carolina newspapers have been “othering” Latina/os as an inferior people for the last 20 years, with a strong emphasis on an “us” versus “them” mentality in the last 10 years, it is probable that these representations might influence North Carolinians’ perceptions of Latina/os. Indeed, if we were to judge Latina/os based on these newspaper accounts, would we not seriously question their capability to succeed in college? In the following section, I address how the proliferation of media devices, in conjunction with new media consumption habits, makes it almost impossible for young adults to ignore these stereotypical images. I also discuss the influence media representations may have on both non-Latina/o and Latina/o audiences.

### *Media matter: Omnipresence, cultivation & effects*

Arguably, it can be difficult to resist dominant media images when they are a ubiquitous part of our lives. As Kellner (2011) stated, we are all engrossed in media “from cradle to grave” (p.7). For instance, the average person in the U.S. is exposed to approximately 5,000 advertisements on a daily basis (Johnson, 2009). In other words, one cannot ignore the profusion of media messages taking place in our lives. News media have reported that when young Americans are not asleep or in school, they are using media such as a smart phone, computer, television or other electronic devices (Lewin, 2010). Media use is defined broadly, and this increase is largely due to the emergence of social media in the last few decades.

### *U.S. youth (stereotypical) media diet*

U.S. teenagers are not only spending more time watching entertainment media, such as movies and music videos (Nielsen, 2009), but are also reading news online (Pew Research Center, 2011). More time spent engaging with media devices means less time spent interacting with others in social settings. This is important because if Latina/os and non-Latina/os do not engage in meaningful interactions, they mostly learn about each other via the media (Atkins et al., 1983; Faber et al., 1987; Ford, 1997; Kellner, 2011). Media representations of racial minorities have been dominated by the use of stereotypes, which define some people’s expectations of how other groups in society are supposed to behave (Grossberg et al., 2006). Indeed, stereotypes are one of the main ways by which media educate and construct individuals and groups in U.S. society. However, stereotypes deny people their individuality and ascribe a one-dimensional identity to them, while the constant repetition of stereotypes can ‘cause the audience to forget that they are dealing with images (Grossberg et al., 2006; Ramírez-Berg, 2002).



If mainstream English-language media continue to portray Latina/os as one-dimensional and do not offer any counter messages, these often stereotypical portrayals will “take on the appearance of naturalness” and generate low expectations of Latina/os (Merskin, 2011, p.332). Merskin (2011) uses the example of Latina actress Eva Longoria and her role in “Desperate Housewives” to illustrate how media reinforce the representation of Latinas as manipulative and sexual objects. Chávez (2008) talks about “a set of taken-for-granted assumptions” regarding Latina/os that are not grounded in reality but in perceptions (p.15). He posits that these “myths have organic lives of their own. Once given birth, they grow and take on ever more elaborated and refined characteristics until they are able to stand on their own as taken-for-granted ‘truth’” (Chávez, 2008, p.15).

Media can influence mainstream white audiences’ perceptions and expectations of how Latina/os should look and behave, as well as make audiences doubt an individual’s group membership if the individual does not meet these expectations, thus contributing to the longevity of these myths. Alcoff (2006) clearly illustrates this point when she states, “Latinos who don’t look like Maria from Sesame Street or who don’t eat spicy food often encounter Anglo skepticism about their identity” (p.236). Repetitive exposure to these media images can blur the line between fiction and reality when evaluating a particular situation or group of people, especially when media represent audiences’ only experiences. Mass communication scholars have conducted studies for the last 50 years regarding the potential consequences of “growing up with television” (Morgan et al., 2009, p.34).

### *Cultivation Theory*

Communication scholar George Gerbner coined the term “cultivation” in the late 1960s to refer to the cultural and social consequences that prolonged television viewing has on audiences. Cultivation theory posits that audiences’ repeated exposure to mediated images

shapes their attitudes and influences them to perceive the world in a certain manner (Gerbner, 1969, 1998; Gerbner et al., 1980, 1982). Indeed, as Gerbner (1969) stated, “common conceptions of reality are cultivated by the overall pattern of programming to which communities are exposed regularly over long periods of time” (p.138). Gerbner and his colleagues (1982) argue that because television represents a “centralized system of storytelling,” it has become the primary source of everyday culture, “transcending historic barriers of literacy and mobility” (p.102).

Morgan and his colleagues (2009) provide a clear explanation of the cultivation process, which occurs when television viewing “cultivates ways of seeing the world—those who spend more time ‘living’ in the world of television are more likely to see the ‘real world’ in terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television” (p.35). Because some types of portrayals on television are so often repeated, viewers come to believe that the real world operates in the same way as the world constantly portrayed on television does (Gerbner et al., 1978).

While these scholars initially focused on how violent television content affected viewers, they broadened their investigations to explore if television viewing contributed to audiences’ conceptions and actions in areas such as gender, minority and age-role stereotypes, health, educational achievement, politics and religion (Gerbner, 1998). Gerbner (1998) believes it is impossible to escape the influence of television in a world where most people grow up with television’s version of the world, as most “waking hours” are filled by “mass-produced stories” (p.176).

From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, various researchers conducted a series of studies supporting cultivation theory. In classic cultivation studies, heavy soap opera viewers were found to report larger numbers of doctors, lawyers, divorced people, illegitimate children, and criminals

than actually existed (Beuf, 1974; Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes, 1981). Cultivation theory was also used in studies dealing with racism (Gerbner et al., 1982; Morgan, 1986), gender stereotypes (Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Gross & Jeffries-Fox, 1978), as well as general beliefs and interpretations of the world (Allen & Hatchett, 1986).

Gerbner (1998) recognizes that television viewing cannot be solely responsible for people's views of the world. Direct experience with a particular topic moderates the effects of cultivation. He refers to this phenomenon as "resonance," which means that when people's real life experiences match television content, they receive "a "double dose" of messages that "resonate" and amplify cultivation effects (Gerbner, 1998, p.182). Likewise, Gerbner recognizes that the effects of television viewing also depend on audiences' cultural, social and political background. However, his research found that these demographic and psychographic differences almost disappear for heavy television viewers, an effect referred to as "mainstreaming" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 183). According to the concept of mainstreaming, "television viewing has the greatest effect on the judgments of those [heavy viewers] whose direct experience may differ dramatically from the world of television" (Shrum & Bischak, 2001, p.190).

In their efforts to refine cultivation theory, Shrum and O'Guinn (1993) focused their research on how recent and frequent television exposure affected viewers' perceptions on various societal topics. They found that cultivation effects are related to the accessibility of information in one's memory. Shrum and O'Guinn contend that unless people have had direct experience with a particular societal issue, "accessible information from other sources, such as television, is most likely to be consulted and used in formulating a judgment" (p.461). When it comes to race, as well as gender, social class and age, frequent portrayals of negative situations might affect social perceptions and attitudes because "people make heuristic judgments all the time" (Shrum,

2001, p.115). In conjunction with Gerbner's work, Shrum's research has shown that television viewing increases image accessibility, which in turn increases the probability that television images will be used as a basis for judgments that people make based on memory through mental shortcuts (Shrum, 2009). In other words, cultivation effects occur when people make judgments by retrieving only information that is most readily accessible from memory (Shrum, 2009).

### *Media Effects & Audience Reception*

For more than 30 years, communication scholars have demonstrated how media teach us about people we know little or nothing about. For instance, white heavy television consumers are more likely than Latina/o and African-American heavy television consumers to perceive racial minorities as being portrayed fairly in the media (Faber et al., 1987). On the contrary, Latina/o and African-American heavy television consumers are more likely than their white counterparts to identify stereotypical representations of Latina/o and African-American characters (Faber et al., 1987). These results suggest that while media portrayals influence white audiences unfavorably, these same portrayals also make Latina/o and African-American viewers aware of media representation of racial minorities.

The amount of television consumption for white audiences has also been found to be positively related to stereotypical perceptions of Latinos in terms of criminality, intelligence and work ethic (Mastro et al., 2007). Heavy television viewers perceive Latinos as more violent, less intelligent and lazier than light television viewers do (Mastro et al., 2007). In addition, the more white audiences hold stereotypical beliefs about criminality and/or laziness, the more they hold prejudicial feelings towards Latinos (Ramasubramanian, 2010). Misrepresentation of Latina/os, coupled with a lack of representation in English-language media, not only increases discrimination levels against Latina/os but also denies Latina/os a voice in the U.S. public discourse (Valdivia, 2010).

While media representations can educate white mainstream audiences about minorities with whom they have no or little contact, media can also educate minorities about mainstream values and practices (Faber et al., 1987). However, stereotypical media images about racial minorities could result in a “lose-lose” situation for white and minority viewers. Indeed, if white audiences’ contact with minority groups is limited to media images, the prevalence of negative media portrayals of minorities may hinder white people’s desire to physically meet members of racial minority groups. Similarly, these same negative portrayals may discourage racial minorities to seek assimilation and be part of a white world that views them as criminals and as an economic burden (Faber et al., 1987).

Consumption of English-language mainstream media by Latina/o adolescents can influence how they perceive themselves (Rivadeneyra et al., 2007). Latina/o adolescents’ high exposure to soap operas and music videos is associated both with lower self-esteem and with a desire to change one or more aspects of their physical appearance (Rivadeneyra et al., 2007). In addition, the more Latina/o viewers identify with their favorite character on television, the more likely they are to change their physical appearance (Rivadeneyra et al., 2007). These results may be due to Latina/o adolescents “comparing themselves to the characters on TV, people who are typically Caucasian and attractive, with a full social life, and who can produce witty dialogue at a moment’s notice” (Rivadeneyra et al., 2007, p.272).

In her study on the role popular culture plays in transnational Latina teens’ identity, Vargas (2009) describes how media portrayals of Latinas influenced not only how Latina teens perceived themselves but also how they understood Latina womanhood. Vargas explains how the “stereotypical representations of Latinas found their way into the teens’ subjectivity” and how the teens were willing “to ‘naturally’ conform to Latina womanhood.” (p.171). The teens’ desire

to reproduce media's portrayals of Latinas sheds light on how media influence one's sense of identity with a particular group; it also exhibits how media set the expectations on how one should behave based on his/her group membership (Vargas, 2009). To illustrate her point, Vargas talks about how Latina teens perceived their love of music and dancing as expressing their Latina identity. However, by dancing to Latin music, the teens were also conforming to audiences' "normative expectations" of them, thus contributing to their "racialized identity" (Vargas, 2009). Similar to hooks' (1992) argument on media's construction of black womanhood, Vargas (2009) contends that media have constructed a particular image of Latinas and have influenced how audiences interact with Latinas.

In sum, the research suggests that media representations of Latina/os can influence both how non-Latina/os perceive Latina/os and how Latina/os perceive themselves. These representations are rooted in audiences' minds and affect how people from different groups interact with each other. In other words, when interacting with a person we do not consider as belonging to our group, it would be hard to ignore the media representations we have been repeatedly exposed to throughout our lives. Interestingly, most of the studies on racial minority students in higher education have ignored the role media representation of racial minorities plays in racial minorities' college experiences. In order to better understand how Latino students perceive their experiences and their relationship with their university, I use the organization-public relationship model developed by public relations researchers.

#### *University-Student relationship*

As previously mentioned, I view Latino students as an internal public to the university, and I view the university as an organization involved in maintaining a positive relationship with its publics. While numerous studies have examined the organization-public relationship in

various contexts, a much smaller number of studies have examined the concept of organization–public relationship in the context of academic institutions in higher education (DeSanto & Garner, 2001; Sung & Yang, 2009). From a public relations perspective, the quality of a public’s experiences with an organization influences organization–public relationships (Sung & Yang, 2009). Similar to identity, organization-public relationships are dynamic and change over time (Ledingham, 2003). Excellent organization-public relationships positively affect an organization’s reputation as well as overall evaluations of an organization’s performances (Yang & Grunig, 2005). Concomitantly, organizations’ understanding of diversity matters has also been shown to positively affect their profit (Waymer, 2010). Ledingham (2003) contends that analysis of organization–public relationships “is grounded in interpersonal relationship building” and that these relationships can be both symbolic and behavioral (p.188). Therefore, Latino students’ campus experiences should influence their perceived relationship with the university. If media do influence Latino students’ campus experiences, we could assume that media should also influence Latino students’ relationship with the university.

Building mutually beneficial relationships is one of the important outcomes of public relations activities (Bruning, 2002). In higher education, students who had positive campus experiences supported their university after graduating, not only with financial donations but also by promoting the university to prospective students (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). As mentioned in chapter 1, universities have been increasing their efforts to recruit minority students, and cultivating a positive relationship with minority students can not only enhance their campus experiences but also provide universities with a recruiting ally. Similar to universities, many “organizations are actively seeking to value diversity, usually with race as a high priority, due to

the population projections about increasing numbers of racial minorities; in fact, visit most major companies' Web sites, and one will find statements about diversity" (Waymer, 2010, p.240).

Universities perceive relationship building with students as an important activity that may also positively impact retention (Bruning, 2002). The importance of positive campus experiences for both minority students and universities, in conjunction with the prevalence of media stereotypical images of racial minorities, makes it crucial to understand how media influence minority students' campus experiences and relationship with universities. Hon and Grunig (1999) developed a scale to measure the relationship between an organization and its publics. The scale, which is helpful for defining the organization-public relationship concept, contains the following six dimensions:

*Control mutuality*: "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another."

*Trust*: "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party."

*Satisfaction*: "the extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced."

*Commitment*: "the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote."

*Exchange relationship*: when "one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future."

*Communal relationship*: when "both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3).

This scale was developed to measure relationships in a corporate context, but Hon and Brunner (2001) adapted it to measure resident students' perceptions of their relationship with the University of Florida. They found that students characterized their relationship with the university as one of trust and satisfaction, with the latter being the strongest indicator of relationship quality (Hon & Brunner, 2001). Students were also more likely to perceive their



relationship as one of exchange rather than a communal relationship (Hon & Brunner, 2001). A few years later, Jo and his colleagues (2004) tested the scale to measure students' relationship with their university and concluded the scale was a valid and reliable instrument to measure such a relationship. I use the organization-public relationship model to understand how Latino students perceive their relationship with their university and the role media play in this relationship.

### CHAPTER III: METHODS

This dissertation is an in-depth interview study of 12 U.S.-born Latino students attending a large, four-year, predominantly white public university in North Carolina, which I refer to as South Eastern Public University (SEPU). The interviews were individual, face-to-face, semi-structured and audio-recorded. The students were divided into two groups based on their level of identification with Latina/o culture: low and high identifiers. The interviews took place in two phases and approval from the Institutional Review Board was obtained for both. In this chapter, I address how I approach the dissertation and the design of a two-phase study to explore the questions mentioned in chapter 1: (1) How do Latino students subjectively understand their presence on campus and experience their social and academic interactions with students and professors? (2) How do Latino students perceive and make sense of their identity in a society where the dominant representations of Latina/os have negative connotations? (3) How do Latino students perceive their relationship with the university?

#### *Grounded Theory*

In this dissertation, I rely on a grounded theory methodological approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory was born out of a triple marginalization in social sciences research: a methodological marginalization that favored large samples and statistical procedures; a theoretical marginalization that favored the use of grand theories; and a marginalization from

other qualitative researchers who denigrated grounded theorists for what they considered being non-systematic and atheoretical practices (Tavory & Timmermans, 2009). Grounded theory has been used to create theory pertaining to a particular phenomenon under study, in this case the role of media representations in Latino students' college experiences. It is based on two main assumptions: one, that phenomena are not static but change depending on conditions and, therefore, people's experiences change as well, and two, that people can control their destinies based on how they respond to their conditions, although they are not always responsive (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These premises are in accordance with symbolic interactionism, which also views phenomena as dynamic and assumes that people are actively involved in their environment. Furthermore, as Corbin (2009) states, grounded theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism.

A grounded theory approach assumes the existence of multiple realities (Corbin, 2009). Thus, "collecting and analyzing data require capturing and taking into account those multiple viewpoints" (Corbin, 2009, p.38). Grounded theory is congruent with the use of symbolic interactionism in this study; both focus on how people experience events and respond to them (Corbin, 2009). Grounded theory mostly relies on field observations and participant interviews to collect data and better understand the phenomenon under study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These data collection methods make voice a central element of the analysis. While emphasizing participants' voice may be seen as a shortcoming by some who may say that voice is too subjective or too dependent on interpretation, others have argued that voice is actually a strength of qualitative research and grounded theory (Maynes et al., 2008). I used audio-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviewing as the primary method of my data collection.

### *Interviewing*

Interviewing is one of the most common methods of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Data collected from in-depth interviews are based on “participants’ interpretations of their experiences and is expressed in their own words, using the jargon and speech style meaningful to them” (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p.167). For these reasons, I used interviews to help give a voice to Latino students, a marginalized population in the U.S., and to obtain a complex and detailed understanding of the role media representations play in Latino students’ college experiences and identity development (Creswell, 2007). As Miville (2010) notes, few studies have used qualitative methods to explore matters pertaining to Latina/o identity. She suggested that qualitative methods “can be used successfully to provide more nuanced understanding of the interplay of racial-ethnic and other critical contextual components in Latina/o identity development” (p.248).

As mentioned in chapter 1, Tanno (2003) denounced the significant lack of studies on Latina/o students in higher education. This shortage appears to have been enduring—the literature on minorities and education has been so dominated by the dichotomous relationship between Blacks and Whites that “conversations in higher education rarely mention Latina/os” (Santiago & Reindl, 2009, p.6). Interviews with Latino students help redress this situation, as qualitative research methods provide a medium of expression to “silenced voices” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40) and “make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Interviews with Latino students also enrich our understanding of organization/university-public/student relationships, which has been dominated by quantitative surveys despite calls to adopt a qualitative approach (Bromley, 2001; Henderson, 2001).

In-depth interviews represent “the primary strategy to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participant’s own words” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.93). The emphasis on

Latino students' definitions of their college experiences in their own words is a key tenet of the symbolic interactionism perspective. Interviews also allow Latino students to describe how they perceive their interactions with other publics of the university, another key tenet of symbolic interactionism. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) define interviewing as a "conversation, the art of asking questions and listening" (p.36). I adopted this view of interviewing because I wanted participants to feel at ease while talking with me despite my note-taking and the presence of an audio recorder. To this end, I initiated interviews either with general questions about the participant's background or about a recent event in order to minimize any inhibitions that might have been caused by self-consciousness due to presence of the audio-recorder or by the typically uninviting atmosphere of the study rooms in which the interviews took place (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002).

To stay faithful to the interview-as-conversation approach, I used semi-structured interviews. While semi-structured interviews contain a series of pre-established questions, they do not include a limited set of response categories (Fontana & Frey, 1998). In other words, if one were to think of interviews as a continuum with structured interviews on one end and unstructured interviews on the other end, my use of semi-structured interviews is closer to the unstructured end of the continuum because I answered the few questions participants asked me and cannot guarantee that my personal feelings did not influence my responses (Davies, 1999; Fontana & Frey, 1998).

The richness of the data collected in semi-structured and unstructured interviews depends on the level of trust and rapport established between researcher and participants (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Trust refers to maintaining good relationships with participants, taking into account a wide range of matters from "respecting norms of reciprocity"

to “professional clothing and demeanor” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.118). Rapport constitutes the researcher’s ability to “put him- or herself in the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their perspective” (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p.60). I believe that my culture is similar to my participants’ culture in terms of having mutual respect for one another, especially when compared to the more individualistic, self-centered U.S. culture. In addition, I think that my status as an immigrant to the U.S. and as a speaker of English as a second language helped me establish trust and rapport with Latino students, whose parents were immigrants themselves.

As with most qualitative projects, in order to be able to articulate the ideas for this dissertation, I conducted an exploratory study, which allowed “issues particular to the situation to be revealed” (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p.169). I conducted the exploratory study in the spring of 2011 to better comprehend the role media play in Latino students’ college experiences and to use the preliminary findings as a guide for the second phase of my research. Grounded theory gives “priority to developing rather than to verifying analytic propositions” (Emerson et al., 1995, p.143). Consequently, I conceptualized the exploratory study as phase one of my dissertation research, which represents the foundation necessary to support the theoretical framework I used to collect and analyze subsequent data. I obtained approval for the study from the university’s Institutional Review Board, and all the participants signed an informed consent form. Each participant received a \$30 gift card for participating in two one-hour, in-depth interviews.

### *Phase One*

In phase one of the research project, I used audio-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to explore the following topics: (1) general questions pertaining to Latino students' backgrounds and why they enrolled at SEPU, (2) the types of media they consumed growing up and their current media diet, (3) their general thoughts about being a Latino in college and how this experience affected their sense of identity, and (4) their perceptions of media representation of Latinos (see Appendix: Interview Guide #1). I was also interested in more specific questions dealing with Latino students' thoughts on how media representations might influence other people's (e.g., general audience, white students and professors, etc.), perceptions of Latina/os in general and of Latina/o students in particular. I then asked Latino students similar questions regarding the influence of media representation on a more personal level, such as their self-esteem, academic goals and relationships with white students and professors (see Appendix: Interview Guide #2).

I conducted phase one of the study with students actively involved with a Latino student organization because I assumed they would be interested in the study's topic and would be willing to share their stories with me, given that one of this student organization's goals is to encourage academic achievement among Latinos. I also assumed that Latino students belonging to a Latino student organization would highly identify with and embrace their culture, which would make them more aware and critical about their experiences in a predominantly white university. In other words, I perceived these Latino students as "savvy social actors" with regard to interracial relations on campus (Lindof & Taylor, 2002, p.177) and thought that they would provide me with data rich enough to identify the key themes necessary to conduct phase two of the dissertation, which, as I discuss later, involved collecting additional data from a more heterogeneous group of Latino students.

Eleven Latino students took part in phase one. I recruited them using a convenient purposive sample, sending an email to one of the main Latino student organizations on campus. I personally met with the organization's president and explained my study to him, asked him if he had any questions or concerns, and if he would be willing to mention it to the organization's members. He invited me to one of the organization's meetings to briefly describe the study and gauge members' interest in it. At the meeting I distributed a sign-up sheet for any of the 12 members present who were interested in the study to write their names and contact information. I was very enthusiastic about this study, and it showed at the meeting; I believe this enthusiasm helped me gain entry to this Latino organization. Indeed, as Marshall and Rossman (2011) state, "the energy that comes from a researcher's high level of personal interest (called bias in traditional research) is infectious and quite useful for gaining access" (p.114). I conducted phase one with males because they are the most at risk to drop out of college and I wanted a fairly homogeneous group of participants for the exploratory phase of the dissertation.

Participants were all Latino undergraduate male students between 20 and 22 years old who shared a strong level of identification with Latina/o culture. However, participants varied in terms of place of birth, family situation, social class, skin tone and personal experiences. Hence, there was "demographic homogeneity" and "phenomenal variation" in the sample (Sandelowski, 1995, p.182). Four participants were born in Latin American countries and seven in the U.S.; of those U.S.-born, two were born and raised in North Carolina (see Table 1). All participants who were born outside of the U.S. immigrated to the country before their teenage years. Only one participant spoke with a clearly distinguishable accent.

After having contacted the consenting organization's members via individual email, I conducted the interviews in private study rooms in the main campus library or in the Student



Union. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Some of the first interviews went on for approximately 80 minutes, and in three instances, I had to stop the interview because participants could not stay any longer. In these instances, we met again within the week to finish the interview. The first interview tended to be longer than the second one because I asked participants to tell me about themselves. I wanted to know what they thought was important for me to know without asking any specific questions at this point. Some participants answered this question at greater length than others.

Table 1: *Participants' repartition by age, birth and years in the U.S.*

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Birth (Ancestry)</b>	<b>Years in the U.S.</b>
Arturo	20	NY (El Salvador)	20
Eduardo	21	CA (Mexico)	21
Federico	21	NC (Cuba, Dominican Republic)	21
Hernando	22	Puerto Rico	22
Julio	21	NC (Puerto Rico, African American)	21
Mario	20	Colombia	11
Mauricio	20	TX (Mexico)	20
Miguel	21	NY (Dominican Republic)	21
Rafael	22	Costa Rica	14
Raúl	20	Mexico	16
Víctor	20	Colombia	9

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*\*All names are pseudonyms.*

I conducted the first series of interviews from March 3, 2011, to March 25, 2011, and the second series of interviews from April 14, 2011, to April 21, 2011. The core questions for each interview remained the same, but I often reworked questions based on my notes from the previous interviews. I also made notes on follow-up questions to ask in the second series of interviews. Two people helped me transcribe the audio-recorded interviews. Most of the first series of interviews were transcribed during the same time frame I used to conduct the interviews, whereas the second series of interviews were transcribed after I conducted the interviews. We used pseudonyms in the transcripts. The first series of interviews resulted in a total of 13 hours and 50 minutes of audio recording, and the second series of interviews resulted in a total of 10 hours and 46 minutes of audio recording. The transcriptions resulted in a total of 507 double-spaced pages for the first interviews and 318 double-spaced pages for the second interviews. Transcripts also included a time reference every five minutes to allow me to easily locate specific points of participants' responses in the audio recording (Williams, 2001). I spent approximately two hours with each student for phase one of the study.

To analyze the transcripts, I mostly relied on “open coding” to create thematic categories for data analysis and to better understand the properties of these categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Emerson et al., 1995).<sup>3</sup> Through open coding, I identified the concepts that form the theorizing presented in this dissertation. I relied on these concepts for phase two using “theoretical sampling,” that is, to not only direct my subsequent data collection on the basis of these concepts but also re-analyze previously collected data in light of these concepts (Corbin, 2009). Below is a discussion of some of the main themes identified in the exploratory study (phase one), which pertain to identity, media representation and university image. These themes

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<sup>3</sup> Corbin and Strauss (1990) defined the process of open coding as follows: “events/actions/interactions are compared with others for similarities and differences. They are also given conceptual labels. In this way, conceptually similar events/actions/interactions are grouped together to form categories and subcategories” (p.12).

are only briefly discussed here because interviews with six of the 11 phase one students were analyzed with all the phase two interviews and are thoroughly discussed in the findings and analysis chapters (chapters 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9). In addition, interviews from the five other phase one students are not included except in the following section to show that the answers of high-identifying participants with Latina/o parents did not differ based on their place of birth.

Students' identity construction and development varied based on their backgrounds and high school experiences. Most students said their families raised them with a particular Latino identity that was based on the traditions of their countries of origin. However, some students talked about the pressure they felt in their predominantly white high schools to avoid public displays of their Latino identity. A few of these students conformed to "white activities" while others isolated themselves, focusing solely on their academic record. Two students stated that they were "whitewashed" in high school, that is, they adopted behavior typically associated with white American students. These students, who felt emotionally suppressed in high school, expressed their relief in getting to college because they felt free to interact with other Latina/o students and openly engage in activities consistent with their Latina/o identity and could learn more about Latina/o culture from their Latina/o peers.

Students who did not feel emotionally suppressed in high school also claimed that attending college made them more knowledgeable about Latina/o culture, which increased their sense of identity as Latinos. They said that prior to enrolling in college, the only Latina/o culture they knew about was that of their family and friends. However, interacting with Latina/os from different countries made them appreciate the richness of the Latina/o culture. They also learned how to speak "proper" Spanish, as opposed to the Spanish they had been raised with, which also positively affected their Latina/o identity. Overall, students said their college experiences made

them reaffirm their Latina/o identity because of their social interactions with other Latina/o students and their involvement in different Latina/o student organizations.

Preliminary findings from phase one supported my assumption that media influence Latina/o students' college experiences. Overall, students felt that while media may not have directly influenced their academic goals and careers, media representations of Latinos made them adopt a "prove them wrong" attitude toward their white peers, who might have thought that Latina/o students were only able to attend college as a result of affirmative action policies, rather than because of their intellectual capabilities. Students also felt that media stereotypes of Latina/os were pervasive in all students' minds, which mostly affected their social interactions with white students and feared they would reinforce these stereotypes when interacting with white students. Therefore, most Latino students did not feel at ease in their interactions with white students, especially when first meeting them. They were of the opinion that most white students probably perceived them the way media portray Latina/os, so they seemed to always keep this in mind when interacting with non-Latina/os.

Some of the students also noted that their professors, regardless of their background or personal experiences, might not be as influenced by these media representations as the average U.S. person would be because of their high level of education. In fact, some students believed that some of their professors assumed that if a Latina/o student made it to college, he/she must have already overcome certain challenges; therefore, these Latino students felt that their professors actually encouraged them more. Overall, students did not feel physically threatened by overt racism on campus. They acknowledged that it is normal for people who do not know or have any contact with Latina/os to form their images of Latina/os based on media representations.

Despite some tense interracial relationships, students reported having a very positive image of and relationship with the university. They appeared to differentiate the students attending SEPU from the university itself and expressed their gratitude to SEPU for giving them the opportunity to pursue their education and for preparing them for successful careers. Many of them mentioned their appreciation of SEPU's efforts to actively recruit Latina/o students and provide them with financial packages "beyond belief." They felt a sense of belonging to the university because of the many Latina/o student organizations and resources directed specifically toward Latina/o students. They also felt that SEPU was encouraging their efforts to organize events to celebrate Latina/o culture and counter the images of Latina/os from the media.

The research design for phase one had been intended to include two group discussions, both addressing the same themes but dividing participants in two groups to facilitate our discussion. I had planned to expose the students to particular media images that were selected based on the themes emerging from our one-on-one interviews and have them interactively discuss how they perceived these media to have influenced their college experiences. I conducted one group discussion with five students, and overall, they tended to repeat comments they had made during our one-on-one interviews, with no additional information being revealed. I therefore decided to discontinue this format going forward with phase two of the study.

### *Phase Two*

For phase two of the study, I also recruited Latino students who do not strongly identify with their Latina/o heritage. As previously described, participants from phase one varied by year in school, socioeconomics and country of birth. However, all strongly identified with Latina/o culture, as demonstrated by their membership in the Latino organization. One of the main conclusions from phase one was that place of birth (in the U.S. or outside the U.S.) did not have

a major influence on how Latino students perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences.

Education researchers have investigated several variables to better understand the academic experiences of Latina/o students in U.S. schools. Most studies found no significant differences in Latina/o students' academic experiences based solely on immigrant generation or skin complexion (Phinney et al., 1992). When researchers did find differences, the differences were usually moderated by participants' ethnic identity levels (Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009) or by participants' family support (Garriott et al., 2010; Schneider & Ward, 2003). High levels of ethnic identity have also been related to high levels of acculturation, which in turn have been related to better educational experiences and outcomes (Gloria et al., 2005; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007; Yang et al., 2009).

Acculturation refers to minority groups' ability to navigate effectively in both their culture of origin and the dominant culture they live in. Acculturated Latina/os usually have a high level of ethnic identity that does not prevent them from effectively functioning in the U.S. mainstream culture (Gibson, 1995; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007; Parra et al., 2004).

Acculturation contrasts with assimilation, which implies low levels of ethnic identification and high levels of identification with the dominant culture (Phinney et al., 1992; Rong & Brown, 2001).

Researchers have also found differences in Latina/o students' academic experiences based on gender, especially in high school. For instance, Latina students may experience greater levels of stress than Latinos, and feel more obligated to help with family chores, thus limiting the time they dedicate to school work (Lopez, 1995; Quintana et al., 1991). Sy and Romero (2008) explored the value of "marianismo," the self-sacrificing role of women for the well-being of their

families, to explain the difference in academic experiences between Latina and Latino students. Latinas are also less likely to enroll in four-year colleges immediately after their high school graduation (Sy & Romero, 2008). However, Latinas enrolled in college report more positive perceptions of the university environment than do Latino students (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005), who feel greater academic discouragement and racial discrimination (Lopez, 1995).

Briefly, studies have suggested that differences in Latina/o students' academic experiences may be explained by their level of ethnic identification (Iturbide et al., 2009; Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009) and/or their gender, mostly because of the different expectations some families place on men and women (Lopez, 1995; Sy, 2006; Sy & Romero, 2008). As previously mentioned, I am not aware of any studies investigating the role media representations of Latina/os play in Latina/o students' academic experiences. To explore this topic, I decided to focus on differences in ethnic identification among Latino students for three main reasons: findings from education studies suggest that Latina/o students' ethnic identification has more of an effect on their overall college experiences than does their gender, media scholars have mostly overlooked potential media effects on Latino students' academic experiences, and time constraints did not allow me to explore how Latina/o students perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences based on both ethnic identification and gender. Therefore, participants for phase two consisted of Latino students who strongly identify with their Latina/o culture and Latino students who identify more with U.S. culture.

As with gender, time limitations did not allow me to explore potential differences among participants due to their place of birth if born outside the U.S. In addition, participants who were born in the U.S. are American citizens and are thus eligible for scholarships and financial aid, which may not be the case with participants who were not born in the U.S. The status of non

U.S.-born Latinos might affect their college experiences, and I did not feel comfortable asking them about their residency or citizenship status. Furthermore, from a participant recruiting standpoint, I anticipated some level of difficulty in finding and recruiting low ethnic identifying Latino students. Similarly, I assumed it would be even harder to find low ethnic identifying Latino students who were not born in the U.S.

Two phase one participants who were born in the U.S., Hernando and Julio, graduated before I started collecting phase two data. The other five phase one participants who were born in the U.S. consented to taking part in phase two, and I included their first two interviews in the final dataset. I also included the interviews with Hernando in the final dataset, as he was born in the U.S., but discarded Julio's interviews from the final analysis because he was the only participant whose parents were not both Latina/os (his mother was African-American). Julio was also the only Black Latino participant, and his college experiences were clearly different from that of all other high-identifying Latino participants. Therefore, Julio would have been an outlier in the sample because I did not find any other Black Latinos.

Apart from Julio, all participants from phase one (high-identifying) had Latina/o parents. Therefore, I wanted to recruit low-identifying participants who also had Latina/o parents because I did not want the racial/ethnic background of participants' parents to confound my findings. Indeed, if some low-identifying participants' parents were not Latina/os, it would have affected the quality of my findings, as the comparisons I would have drawn would not have been based solely on ethnic identification differences. Again, the time constraints of the dissertation prevented me from exploring such differences. I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board to conduct phase two.



### *Recruitment*

After the five high-identifying U.S-born Latino students from phase one agreed to participate in phase two, I recruited low-identifying Latino students from non-ethnically oriented student organizations, such as historically white fraternities (see Figure 1). I also used a snowball sampling approach, asking the phase one participants the names of Latino students whom they knew and considered to identify more with American culture than with Latina/o culture. I contacted all potential participants via email, clearly stating that I was looking for U.S.-born Latinos. As anticipated, it was much harder to identify and recruit low-identifying Latino students than high-identifying ones because apart from historically white fraternities, there are no specific associations for low ethnic-identifying students.

High-identifying participants provided me with a list of 16 students they considered to be low-identifiers. I found information about each of them on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and contacted 11 of them who did not list any engagement with Latina/o-related associations on their Facebook profiles. Three of them did not reply to my emails (I sent a second email a week after the first one). Two of them responded they were too busy to participate in the interviews, and two others said they were not born in the U.S. Four, however, agreed to be interviewed. I recruited two additional participants from two historically white fraternities via the fraternities' websites (see Figure 1).

### *Data collection*

The data collection for phase two was similar to that of phase one: audio-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Phase two participants consisted of five high-identifying Latino students from phase one and six low-identifying Latino students. As previously mentioned, I also included the two interviews with Hernando, a U.S.-born, high-identifying Latino who graduated in December 2012, in the data analysis for phase two. I

conducted one additional interview with high-identifying participants and two interviews with low-identifying participants. Therefore, this dissertation compares the college experiences of six high-identifying and six low-identifying U.S.-born Latino students with Latina/o parents.

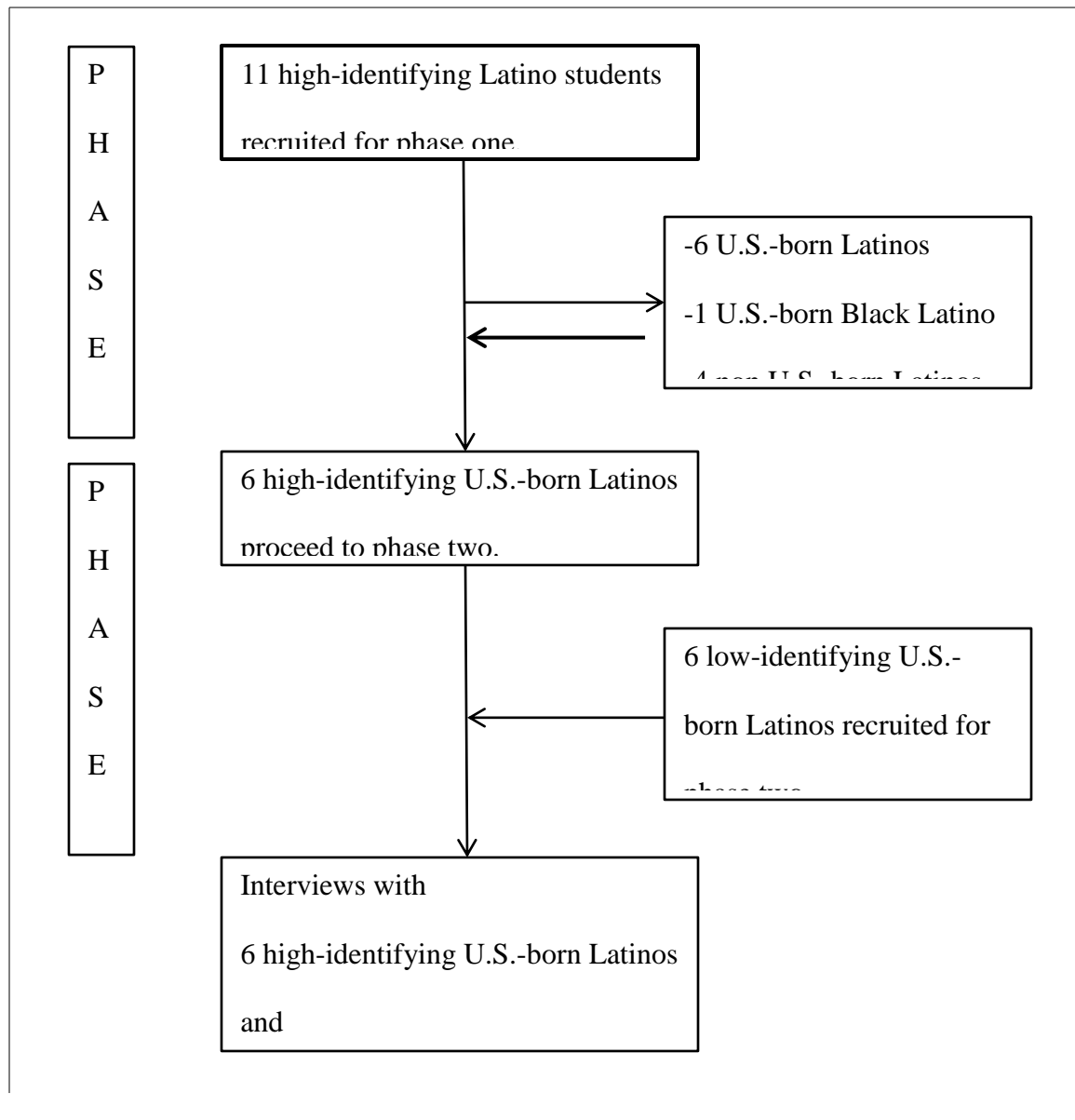


Figure 1: Participant selection and recruitment for the study

To further explore certain themes revealed in phase one, which mostly dealt with identity, media representation and social interactions on campus, and focus more on the university-student relationship, I created an interview guide based on the organization-public relationship scale developed by Hon and Grunig (1999) and tested in the context of the university-student relationship by Jo and colleagues (2004) (see Appendix: Interview Guide #3). I used this interview guide for the additional interview with high-identifying participants and for the second interview with low-identifying participants. I also created a new interview guide for the first interview with low-identifying participants that was based on the original two phase one interviews, to which I added a few more questions that were based on themes that emerged from interviewing phase one participants (see Appendix: Interview Guide #4).

Thus, in phase two, high-identifying participants took part in one interview and low-identifying participants took part in two interviews. I anticipated that the first interview with low-identifying participants would last approximately 90 minutes while the interview focusing on the university-student relationship for all participants would last approximately 60 minutes. As in phase one, all participants received a gift card, the amount of the gift card varied based on the pre-established length of the interviews. Low-identifying participants received a \$25 gift card for the 90-minute interview and all participants received a \$15 gift card for the 60-minute interview.

In total, I conducted 17 in-depth interviews in phase two: one interview with the five US-born, high-identifying participants from phase one who had not yet graduated and two interviews with six US-born, low-identifying participants. I conducted the additional series of interviews with high-identifying participants and the first series of interviews with low-identifying participants during the same period, from January 20, 2012, to February 9, 2012. As in phase

one, we used pseudonyms in the transcripts. I then conducted the second series of interviews with low-identifying participants between February 23, 2012, and March 23, 2012. The interviews with high-identifying participants resulted in a total of 7 hours and 42 minutes of audio recording, which were transcribed and combined with the transcripts of the first two interviews with U.S.-born participants from phase one. The transcriptions resulted in a total of 229 double-spaced pages, which was also added to the transcriptions from phase one. The total interview time for high-identifying participants was 21 hours and 41 minutes (see table 2).

Table 2: *Interview time for high-identifiers by participant and interview*

<b>High-Identifiers</b>	<b>Interview I</b>	<b>Interview II</b>	<b>Interview III</b>	<b>Total</b>
Arturo	1h08	1h13	2h00	4h21
Eduardo	1h04	0h54	1h26	3h24
Federico	1h17*	1h00	1h37	3h54
Hernando	0h54	1h19	NA	2h13
Mauricio	1h49*	1h03	1h23	4h15
Miguel	1h24	0h55	1h16	3h35
<b>Total HIs:</b>	7h36	6h24	7h42	<b>21h42</b>

*\*The interview took place in two sessions*

The first series of interviews with low-identifying participants resulted in a total of 12 hours and 11 minutes of audio recording, and the second series of interviews resulted in a total of 6 hours and 53 minutes of audio recording, for a grand total of 19 hours and 4 minutes. The transcriptions resulted in a total of 425 double-spaced pages for the first interviews and 248 double-spaced pages for the second interviews (see table 3).

Findings presented in this dissertation are thus the results of the 17 phase two interviews combined with the 12 phase one interviews of six participants. The data amount to 40 hours and 46 minutes of audio-recording and 1,358 double-spaced pages of transcript (see table 4). I used these data to explore the role media play in U.S.-born Latino students' college experiences based on their levels of ethnic identification. I present all participants' characteristics in the following chapter.

Table 3: *Interview time for low-identifiers by participant and interview*

<b>Low-Identifiers</b>	<b>Interview I</b>	<b>Interview II</b>	<b>Total</b>
Alejandro	1h27	1h07	2h34
Cristian	2h39	1h19	3h58
Enrique	2h20*	1h06	3h26
Javier	1h34	1h11	2h45
Leonardo	1h33	1h06	2h39
Ricardo	2h38*	1h04*	3h42
<b>Total LIs:</b>	<b>12h11</b>	<b>6h53</b>	<b>19h04</b>

*\*The interview took place in two sessions*

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis was aided by the computer software ATLAS.ti (version 6.2), which provides tools to organize and make sense of large qualitative datasets. I started the analysis while conducting the interviews, coding data “incident by incident” for each participant’s answers (Charmaz, 2006). As I coded more transcripts, I constantly compared different participants’ answers to the same questions or their comments to similar phenomena. As new

codes emerged, I often renamed a previous code from older transcripts or merged two codes into one. While coding, I wrote memos about a follow-up question I should ask a participant or about a comment that seemed to contradict a previous one. I also wrote memos to record my initial thoughts about a situation and the potential implications of participants' answers.

Table 4: *Total interview time by participant and ethnic identification*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Identification</b>	<b>Total interview time</b>
Arturo	HI	4h21
Mauricio	HI	4h15
Cristian	LI	3h58
Federico	HI	3h54
Ricardo	LI	3h42
Miguel	HI	3h35
Enrique	LI	3h26
Eduardo	HI	3h24
Javier	LI	2h45
Leonardo	LI	2h39
Alejandro	LI	2h34
Hernando	HI	2h13
<b>Total HIs + LIs:</b>		<b>40h46</b>

As I imported new transcripts into ATLAS.ti, I used a combination of “open coding” and “focused coding” (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson et al., 1995). I continued to code incident by

incident, but I also specifically searched for the most important codes that had emerged from previous analysis. This allowed me to create initial categories of codes to explore relationships among codes. Comparing different transcripts from similar interviews helped me with focused coding, as I could better evaluate the significance of certain codes over others. My coding process during the first interviews was very basic and resulted in mostly descriptive codes. However, it helped me better understand the data and prepare for subsequent interviews with participants. After completing all the interviews, I re-read the transcripts in ATLAS.ti to enhance my previous coding and code the last interviews. At this point, I analyzed the data participant by participant, rather than by chronological order interview by interview. I alternated between open and focused coding, especially for the new transcripts, but also used “theoretical coding” for all data (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson et al., 1995). Such codes were more analytical than the previous ones and offered more insight in understanding the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and participants’ college experiences.

During the analysis, I kept renaming and/or merging codes, while arranging them in categories that would tell a coherent story about participants’ experiences. When I had coded all the transcripts at least once, I had 107 codes and 12 categories. I subsequently merged codes and categories, ending with 64 codes and 7 categories. These codes and categories are presented in the following chapters, as I analyze how participants perceive the role media play in their college experiences, identity formation and relationship with the university. Beyond my systematic data collection and analysis, the credibility and transferability of the dissertation’s results are strengthened by my conceptual framework. Indeed, the interdisciplinary nature of my conceptual framework represents a useful tool to reach theoretical triangulation, which consists of

examining the phenomenon under study with various theoretical frameworks, testing other hypotheses and making constant comparisons across the data set (Decrop, 1999).

### *Reflexivity*

Before continuing with the dissertation's results and analysis, I would like to share part of my background and explain how I developed my interest in racial minority students' academic experiences. This will, I hope, clarify the perspective I bring to the research, which has unconsciously affected my interactions with participants. I was born in Corsica, a French-owned island in the Mediterranean Sea, and raised by Sicilian grandparents, an American mother and a Corsican father. After the Second World War, my grandparents emigrated from Sicily to Corsica, where my grandfather had fought with the resistance movement against Mussolini and the Fascists. My father was the first person in my family to be born in Corsica; I was the fourth. My family raised me with an immigrant's mentality; they recounted stories about our Sicilian roots and culture, made me aware of racism against other immigrants, and emphasized the rewards of education and hard work. Even though my mother was also an immigrant, she immigrated to Corsica after having married my father in the U.S., she never discussed her immigrant experiences as much as my paternal grandparents did. I was, however, very aware of my mother's immigrant status because of her accent and her misuse of French's gender-specific pronouns. Due to my family's immigrant status, I have always been interested in learning about "otherness": the other person, the other culture, and the other way of doing. I believe that a lack of understanding of the "other" is the 'cause of many conflicts and injustices in today's society.

Most Corsicans are white southern Europeans, who are very proud of their islander status and have a limited understanding of other cultures and religions. I had hoped for an opportunity to study in an American university to be surrounded by people from different races/ethnicities,



religions and social backgrounds. I was able to do so with the help of an American host family who sponsored me to live with them for one academic year while attending school. My coming to the U.S. was made much easier by my status as a U.S. citizen born abroad. I first came to the U.S. in the summer of 2003 to attend the University of Kansas (KU) as a visiting student from the University of Corsica. I had been exposed to many American movies and television shows, which made me expect a U.S. campus to be an ethnic melting pot. However, all my years in Corsica had not prepared me for what I was about to experience. Even though my family members were immigrants, we at least looked like Corsicans. All my friends and most people I knew looked and spoke like me. This was certainly not the case in the U.S. as I could only try to imagine what racial/ethnic minority students must have been experiencing at a predominantly white university in the Midwest.

Walking on campus, I could not help but notice the segregation of social gatherings by race/ethnicity. There were specific congregations of African-American students and of Asian students, while everywhere else there were groups of white students. There were not enough Latina/o or Native-American students to stand out as much as the other racial/ethnic groups. While I was disappointed by this social segregation, I was even more disappointed to see the low numbers of racial/ethnic minority students attending college. When I expressed my feelings to white Americans, they usually responded that Kansas did not have much racial diversity to start with. Demographic data, however, painted a different picture, as there were more than twice as many African Americans and Latina/os living in Kansas than there were African-American and Latina/o students attending KU. In addition, I encountered many college-aged African Americans and Latina/os off campus.

This lack of diversity at the college level troubled me. One white professor told me that college tuition had significantly increased in the last ten years and that many racial/ethnic minorities could not afford college. If that was the case, I wondered why racial/ethnic minority students were not receiving scholarships. While such questions preoccupied my thoughts, I started to develop friendships with people from different racial/ethnic and religious backgrounds. I have often found myself in situations where I was the only non-Latino, non-African American, non-Native American or non-Muslim. These friendships and experiences led me to a reality different from the one depicted by my white American friends, one that had less to do with demographic data than with institutional racism and other forms of covert racism. My current research interests arose from my experiences at KU and the inequalities I witnessed in terms of access to higher education. I developed an interest in strategic communication, hoping to help universities better understand, communicate and build stronger relationships with minority students. I was especially concerned with the ethical implications of universities' practices portraying their campuses as racially diverse to attract potential racial minority students.

Universities have doubled their efforts to increase the diversity of their student bodies, but these efforts should not stop once minority students set foot on campus. University administrators and faculty have a responsibility to ensure that minority students feel welcome on campus and are given the resources necessary for their personal fulfillment and academic success. Given the unflattering media representations of racial minorities and the impact these images can have on audiences, it is important to explore the relationship between media images and minority students' experiences and concerns, such as identity development and interracial relations. Indeed, if media might in any way contribute to minority students' academic experiences, we need to understand the relationship between media portrayal of racial minorities

and minority students' academic experiences in order to create a positive learning environment. Findings from such research could help university administrators and faculty members better understand racial minority students' concerns and perhaps inspire faculty to develop new pedagogical approaches. Racial minority students have unfortunately been left out of the main academic and pedagogical discourses; I hope that my research will provide them with a voice in these discourses. I perceive equal access to education as the *sine qua non* for a more just and equitable society. On a more practical level, I perceive findings from my research as tools for people involved in higher education and strategic communication to strengthen the framework they have been building for minority students' access to and success in institutions of higher education.

#### *Interview and analysis terms*

In the following chapters, I present my findings and offer my analysis of how Latino students perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences. Before going further, I would like to clarify a few terms from the interviews and the analysis that I use hereafter.

#### *“Media”*

During the interviews, I first mentioned media to my participants when asking them about the various types of media they consume. I asked each participant to describe what their week looked like in terms of media consumption, and I entered their response in a media calendar, a three-by-seven table in which each day of the week was divided into morning, afternoon and evening. I defined media to participants as follows: “And media you know, cell phone, video games, newspapers, books, TV, radio, magazines, all of this is media.” If a participant did not comment on a particular medium mentioned, I specifically asked him about it.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “media” very broadly. The purpose of this research was not to focus on any specific medium but rather to approach the topic of Latina/o representations in the media in a very general fashion and to let participants talk about the types of media salient to them. Participants mostly referred to television images of Latina/os. Similarly, I did not ask participants to comment on specific television shows or genres, although some did on their own initiative to illustrate certain representations they were describing. However, when I felt that participants were giving very broad answers regarding media representations of Latina/os and/or potential effects of such representations, I did ask participants if they were referring to news or entertainment media, as well as how their answer would differ in each case.

#### *“Americans”*

Participants used the term “Americans” on its own as a synonym for “white Americans.” In my questions to participants, I used either “Whites” or “white Americans” to emphasize that I wanted them to focus their answers on white Americans as opposed to African Americans or Asian Americans. While some participants replied using the exact terms I used in my questions, others simply used “Americans” to refer to white Americans. The context in which they used “Americans” clearly indicates that they were referring to white Americans. Indeed, when referring to non-white Americans, participants clearly indicated which racial/ethnic groups they were talking about. Participants therefore used “Americans” to refer to the dominant group in the U.S., that is to say white people. This association between the two terms “Americans” and “Whites” is best illustrated when some participants discussed Latina/os who became “Americanized,” that is to say that they abandoned their Latina/o culture for the white American one. For instance, Arturo, a high-identifying Latino, wanted to make sure I knew that not all Latina/os were like him:

I don't know if you know about that, but a lot of Latinos um, I don't know if you heard 'whitewashed' or, or you know, 'they're too Americanized' um, they, a lot of Latino people, you know, like they outcast themselves from being Latino, like, you know, you're too white.

According to Arturo, "whitewashed," or acting white, is synonymous with "Americanized." In other words, "whitewashed" or "Americanized" Latina/os act more like white Americans than like Latina/os. According to Arturo, this is a choice Latina/os make as they "outcast themselves from being Latino." Javier, a low-identifying Latino, used the example of his father to illustrate how one becomes "Americanized." Javier's father is Puerto Rican but of the first generation born in mainland U.S.

He [Javier's father] grew up in Brooklyn and he had Hispanic friends and black friends but when he went to high school, he went to a private high school in Queens so his, his school was mainly, um, mainly like kind of like white preppie kids. So he was kind of, a little more Americanized than my Mom [...] My mother's side of the family was very, very into the whole Puerto Rican culture.

Javier's comment indicates that his father did not become "Americanized" until he attended a private high school with "white preppie kids." According to Javier, his father had "Hispanic friends and black friends" until then. Javier said that he grew up in a neighborhood with many Puerto Ricans and African Americans. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Javier's father's "Hispanic friends and black friends" were American citizens, that is, Americans. However, Javier's father was not considered "Americanized" when he was among his non-white friends. Javier also contrasted his "more Americanized" father with his mother who was not "Americanized" because her family was "very into the whole Puerto Rican culture." Javier's comment echoes Arturo's claim that being "Americanized" equates with being "whitewashed."

As these quotes demonstrate, participants used the term “Americans” to refer to white Americans. Cristian, a low-identifying Latino, clearly articulated this when he said, “when people reference like Americanized, it’s always referencing to white, like that is always the reference like, if it’s Blacks, it’s said so, even though they’re also Americans.” This brings to mind a quote from Toni Morrison, a female African-American novelist and Nobel Prize recipient, who said in an interview with *The Guardian*: “In this country [the U.S.], American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate” (Herbert, 1992, para. 3). Morrison’s quote and Cristian’s comment also illuminate the problematic nature of using “Americans” to refer to white Americans, as if non-white Americans were not as American or as worthy of being labeled “American” as their white peers.

#### *“Participants”*

Throughout the analysis, I use the term “participant” to refer to the 12 Latino students who took part in the interviews for this dissertation. Even though this term is associated with positivism, I nevertheless use it to differentiate these 12 Latino students from other Latina/o and non-Latina/o students who are mentioned in the analysis. Indeed, the Latino students I interviewed talked at length about their interactions with other students as well as how they felt about these students in general. The use of the term “participant” thus aims to avoid any potential confusion that may arise in the analysis of the interviews between students whom I interviewed and students who were mentioned in the interviews.

#### *“HI” and “LI”*

As described in this chapter, participants were divided into two groups based on their level of identification with their Latina/o heritage. The abbreviations HI and LI refer to the high identifier and low identifier groups, respectively. I follow each first mention of a participant’s

name in a new paragraph with these abbreviations in parentheses to avoid any potential confusion regarding his level of identification.

Prior to discussing my findings, I introduce the dissertation's participants in the following chapter. I first briefly express how participants described their Latino or non-Latino "looks," and how I perceived their visible identity, that is, how I might have racially/ethnically categorized them based solely on their phenotypes. I then present a brief biography of each participant. I elaborate on participants' backgrounds and characteristics throughout the analysis chapters.

## CHAPTER IV: THE PARTICIPANTS

Alcoff (2006) asserts that “Latino identity is, with few exceptions, a visible identity” (p, 227). She rightly argues that “unless we pay close attention to the way in which Latino identity operates as a visible identity in public, social spaces, our analyses of its social meanings and political effects will be compromised” (p. 227). Therefore, one cannot overlook the important role Latina/os’ phenotypes may play in their everyday experiences. I therefore asked each participant if he thought he “looked Latino.” All apart from Federico (HI), Alejandro (LI) and Leonardo (LI) stated that they looked Latino. This suggests there is no direct relationship between phenotype and cultural identification. All participants said that “looking Latino” was mostly based on skin complexion, phenotypes, and hair color and texture. In this chapter, I report how participants described themselves and share my views on how I would racially/ethnically identify participants solely based on their physical features (see table 5). I then provide a brief biography of each participant.

*“Just my skin color, like being tan, I mean year around.”*

When discussing his phenotypes, Eduardo (HI) said, “I would say I look Latino, um, just ‘cause of my skin complexion, um, the brown, the black hair and the brown eyes,” and Miguel (HI) stated, “I would say predominantly the complexion, um, the hair, hum, [5-second pause] yeah I would say predominantly complexion, hair, and if you know about Latinos, like facial



structure and stuff like that.” Similarly, Cristian (LI) summarized why he thought he looked Latino: “I feel like a lot of it is just like the skin tone and the dark hair,” and Ricardo (LI) emphasized the importance of skin complexion for racial/ethnic perception based on looks: “I’m one of the lighter-skinned Latinos but I’m still like darker than the white complexion so um, just my skin color, like being tan, I mean year around.” These comments illustrate that participants evaluate their “Latino looks” by contrasting their skin complexion to that of Whites.

Alcoff (2006) stated that “identity implies recognition of bodily differences” (p.102). She explained that “race, unlike ethnicity, has historically worked through visible markers on the body which trump dress, speech, and cultural practices” (p.238). Participants thus based the color of their skin complexion on the white norm. People become aware of their identity by interacting with people who are different than them, a phenomenon labeled “second-person invocation” (Alcoff, p.75). Therefore, some Latina/os realize their skin is “dark” when they meet Latina/os with lighter skin. Similarly, some Latina/os become conscious they “look white” by seeing white people with the same skin complexion.

The three participants who stated they did not “look Latino” also referred to their skin complexion as a key indicator people use to racially/ethnically categorize others. Federico (HI) said, “I know I look white, um, lots of people have said I look Greek, um, or Mediterranean, um, but lots of Cubans are light-skinned.” He seemed to be looking for a justification that he could be both Latino and “light-skinned.” He then added, “I have darker features, like I have darker hair, darker eyes” than Whites do. Although he was confident in his Latino identity, he appeared a little bothered that he was not immediately identified as Latino. Federico, who is half-Cuban and half-Dominican, explained how his skin complexion challenged people’s beliefs about how Latina/os look: “people never believe I’m Dominican ‘cause everybody thinks Dominicans are

dark skinned, which is not true, I mean there are Dominicans that are dark skinned but there're other Dominicans that are light skinned." Federico seemed offended because people denied him his *Latinidad* because of his skin complexion. Physical characteristics can play an important role in one's identity, and others rely on them to classify a person's racial/ethnic background. As Alcoff (2006) stated, "identities can be imposed on people from the outside" (p.42). Federico's (HI) comment above illustrates this point and shows the discrepancy between how he perceived himself and how others perceived him.

The other two participants who stated they did not "look Latino" were Alejandro (LI) and Leonardo (LI). They also mentioned their skin complexion as contributing to people's perceptions that they did not "look Latino." Contrary to Federico (HI), they did not appear to be as upset regarding people's racial/ethnic perception of them. Leonardo (LI) simply stated that media give people an image of how Latina/os look, which is different from what he looks like:

The like typical Latino on, on, in like portrayed in the media, it's like, usually like, it's not a, a skinny 5'9 um, pale kid, you know, it's not like my demographics doesn't fit that, you know, like people might be able to tell that I'm Hispanic because I might as well not be anything else.

Leonardo's comment reaffirms the findings discussed in chapter 2 regarding how most non-Latina/os learn about Latina/os from the media. Especially for people who have never had a meaningful interaction with Latina/os, media representations dominate their perceptions of Latina/os. He also said that people thought he was "either white or Middle Eastern." Leonardo thus thought that because he did not see Latina/os who looked like him in the media, people would not perceive him as Latino solely based on his appearance. They might, however, classify him as Latino by eliminating him from the other main racial/ethnic groups.

Table 5: *Participants' phenotypic features*

Participants	Identification	Skin	Hair	Eyes	Facial hair	Height	Weight
Alejandro	LI	fair	short, brown	brown	none	tall	slim
Arturo	HI	brown	short, black, curly	black	none	tall	slim
Cristian	LI	brown	short, black	brown	none	average	average
Eduardo	HI	brown	very short, black	black	none	average	average
Enrique	LI	fair	short, black, curly	black	none	average	slim
Federico	HI	fair	very short, brown	brown	none	average	average
Hernando	HI	fair	short, black	brown	none	average	chubby
Javier	LI	fair	short, brown, curly	brown	none	short	slim
Leonardo	LI	light brown	short, black	black	none	average	slim
Mauricio	HI	fair	very short, black	brown	none	average	average
Miguel	HI	brown	very short, black	brown	shadow beard	short	chubby
Ricardo	LI	light brown	neck-length, black	black	none	average	average

Alejandro (LI) was unsure if others would categorize him as a Latino solely based on his appearance: “Some people say I do [look Latino] and then some people say that they can’t really tell. So I mean, I don’t really know.” He then added, talking about himself, “the skin and the hair [*he chuckles*] I have no idea.” The fact that he cannot affirm if he looks Latino or not suggests that he is not as concerned about people’s perception of his racial/ethnic background as Federico (HI) is. I personally would have categorized Alejandro as white American solely by looking at him, especially based on the criteria participants mentioned; he has pale skin and straight hair. However, I would have categorized Leonardo (LI) as Latino. Despite what he said above regarding his weight and height, he has black hair, black eyes and a light brown skin complexion, and I do not see how he or others think he does not look Latino.

Of all the other participants who said they “looked Latino,” I personally think that three of them could easily be perceived as Whites. Enrique (LI), Hernando (HI) and Mauricio (HI) have a white skin complexion, as well as black hair and eyes, and none has sharp features that would distinguish him from white Americans. Mauricio said that some people think he “looks Latino” while “other people don’t.” However, he immediately added that “a lot of people said um, thought that I was Colombian, just because like Colombians tend to be a little bit, um, like lighter tone.” Enrique and Hernando also said they “looked Latino.” Enrique mentioned that some people were surprised to hear about his Latina/o heritage, but he did not attribute this to his looks:

I have gotten comments, or like people would like find it surprising, ‘oh you’re Latino?’ like just because maybe I speak with almost no accent or, the way I talk, it’s just like, I feel like I just talk, I just talk as formally as possible sometimes.

Enrique (LI) seemed to imply that people have a stereotypical view of Latina/os as speaking informal English with an accent, and because he did not fit this view people were surprised he was Latino. This interpretation is coherent with Leonardo's (LI) comment above that media show people what Latina/os look like. Hernando (HI), who also has a light complexion, was adamant that he looked Latino, stating, "I don't look anything but Hispanic. I've never gathered evidence as anything other than that." When I asked him to explain why he was so confident in his Latina/o looks, he answered, "facial features, I would imagine so. I don't have blonde hair, I don't have blue eyes." As previously mentioned, Hernando's self-description could be that of a white person. In fact, I could describe myself using Hernando's exact words. I have brown hair, brown eyes and light skin. Although light, my skin is also slightly darker than Hernando's and that of some other participants, such as Federico's (HI) and Enrique's (LI).

Alcoff (2006) uses the term "visible identity" to refer to people's visible features that contribute to their assignment into racial and gender categories. She notes the importance of visible identity in our everyday experiences and perceptions of these experiences. She posits that "racialized identities affect not only one's public status but one's experienced selfhood as well" (Alcoff, 2006, p.183). In this dissertation, HIs have a stronger "racialized identity" than LIs. Throughout the dissertation's findings, I discuss how this difference in identity affects these Latino students' experiences at SEPU. However, it seems that these "racialized identities" are not based on bodily markers of "visible identities." Indeed, this brief discussion of how participants perceive their looks suggests that participants' level of cultural identification with their Latina/o heritage is not directly related to their physical features such as skin complexion, and hair and eye color. Indeed, four of the six LIs (Cristian, Enrique, Javier and Ricardo) were aware of their "Latina/o looks" but nevertheless did not strongly identify with their Latina/o

heritage. Similarly, three HIs (Federico, Hernando and Mauricio) had a white skin complexion but considered their Latina/o heritage to be a salient part of their identity.

*“What kind of company doesn’t want diversity?”*

In chapter 6, I discuss how participants, especially HIs, felt they were treated differently by white students and the instances in which they experienced racism. Despite these negative experiences, which they attributed to their race/ethnicity, two HIs (Federico and Miguel) and three LIs (Alejandro, Enrique and Ricardo) briefly discussed how they might professionally benefit from being or looking Latino. For instance, Enrique (LI) stated, “I’m cognizant of the fact that I am Latino and speak a second language and all that is something that I can leverage [...] I can take advantage of all that.” Others said they would bring much needed diversity to certain companies that have predominantly white employees. Alejandro (LI) explained how being Latino might help him secure a job interview:

Especially in a field like finance that you don’t really find too many Hispanic people going into it, so like a lot of the applications would have a spot that where, like what’s your ethnicity, and then it would pretty much say either you’re Hispanic or you’re not, and so in terms of the, in the, in the actual application I think being Hispanic helps.

Alejandro (LI) assumed that companies are actively trying to recruit more racially/ethnically diverse employees and that the race/ethnicity “spot” he would check on his application might give him an advantage over white applicants. Similarly, Ricardo (LI) rhetorically asked “what kind of company doesn’t want diversity?” while Miguel (LI) stated, “any company that wants to last long is gonna want to diversify their staff.” He then added that companies might be especially interested in hiring him because he spoke Spanish:

It's not even so much about the diversity of the staff but more so that I know Spanish. I think from a, from a just strictly business standpoint, whether you're white, Chinese or Hispanic, if you speak Spanish you're an asset to any company in the U.S.

Miguel (HI) echoed Enrique's (LI) comment about speaking "a second language" and moved away from Alejandro's (LI) comment regarding hiring Latina/os solely to increase diversity. Alejandro, who did not speak Spanish, nevertheless thought that his racial/ethnic background would help his career.

In the following section of this chapter, I introduce the 12 Latino students I interviewed for this dissertation (see tables 6 and 7). During our interviews, some participants shared more personal information than others did, and a few even shared more than I asked for, invoking personal family matters that I do not feel comfortable reporting here. The purpose of this section is to offer a short biography of each participant. In the following chapters, I use additional information about participants to contextualize certain quotes and support some of my arguments.

#### *A few common characteristics*

All participants were U.S.-born Latinos, and all their parents, except Javier's (LI) father, were born outside the mainland U.S. Apart from Alejandro (LI) and Javier (LI), all grew up bilingual (Spanish-English), and none of them had any accent when speaking English. Prior to enrolling at SEPU, all participants attended predominantly white high schools in which they were the only or one of the few high-achieving Latina/o student(s). All participants also said they were not close to other Latina/o students in their high schools because the latter did not seem interested in performing well academically. All grew up watching the same English cartoons on television and going online for their homework. As college students, they mostly watched

television, especially sports and talk shows as well as comedies, referring to ESPN and Comedy Central as their favorite television channels. They mainly used the Internet for school and social purposes. All were present on social network sites such as Facebook and listened to music either on their cell phones or on their mp3 players. It is important to note that all participants considered themselves Latino. While researchers have pointed out that many Latina/os report their race as “white,” this dissertation’s participants were proud of their Latina/o heritage. During the interviews, nobody implied that he was white or rejected his Latina/o heritage. The main difference between the two groups of participants (HIs and LIs) was the importance their Latina/o heritage played in their identity. HIs considered their racial/ethnic background to be a salient part of their identity, whereas LIs believed their identity was not defined by their race/ethnicity.

The following short biographies are mostly based on their answers to the first interview question, “Please tell me about you and how you came to study at [SEPU],” as well as on follow-up questions. While participants emphasized different aspects of their lives, I tried to ensure that they all talked about their parents, the neighborhoods they grew up in and the high schools they attended. Some biographies are longer than others, depending on how much personal information participants were willing to share with me. Mauricio (HI) and Cristian (LI), for example, talked much more about their family backgrounds and high school years than Hernando (HI) and Alejandro (LI) did.



Table 6: Participants' demographics

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Identification</b>	<b>Heritage</b>	<b>Birth Place</b>	<b>Birth Year</b>	<b>Social Class<sup>1</sup></b>
Alejandro	LI	Puerto Rican	GA	1990	Upper
Arturo	HI	Salvadoran	NY	1991	Working
Cristian	LI	Mexican	FL	1992	Working
Eduardo	HI	Mexican	CA	1990	Middle
Enrique	LI	Mexican	FL	1992	Upper
		Puerto Rican			
Federico	HI	& Cuban	NC	1990	Middle
Hernando	HI	Puerto Rican	PR	1989	Middle
Javier	LI	Puerto Rican	NY	1991	Middle
Leonardo	LI	Honduran	NJ	1992	Middle
Mauricio	HI	Mexican	TX	1991	Working
Miguel	HI	Dominican	NY	1990	Working
Ricardo	LI	Mexican	NC	1991	Working

<sup>1</sup>Participants' social class was based on their parents' education and professions.

Table 7: Participants' educational background and current status

Participants	Identification	Neighborhood	High school <sup>2</sup>	Year	First-generation
		growing up		at SEPU	college student
Alejandro <sup>1</sup>	LI	White	GA	Junior	No
Arturo	HI	Minority	NC	Junior	Yes
Cristian	LI	White	NC	Sophomore	Yes
Eduardo	HI	Minority	NC	Senior	Yes
Enrique	LI	White	NC	Sophomore	No
Federico	HI	White	NC	Junior	No
Hernando	HI	White	NC	Senior	No
Javier <sup>1</sup>	LI	Minority	NY	Junior	No
Leonardo	LI	Minority	NC	Sophomore	Yes
Mauricio	HI	Minority	TX	Junior	Yes
Miguel	HI	Minority	NY	Senior	Yes
Ricardo	LI	White	NC	Junior	Yes

<sup>1</sup> *Alejandro and Javier were the only participants who were not fluent in Spanish.*

<sup>2</sup> *All participants attended predominantly white high schools.*

### *High-identifiers' short biographies*

#### *Arturo (HI):*

Arturo was born and raised in a predominantly Latina/o and Black neighborhood in Long Island, New York, which he remembered as having “a lot of gang violence” and “a lot of drugs.” Despite this, he stated that he was always focused on school. Arturo had three siblings: an older and a younger brother, and a younger sister. His parents were Salvadorian and he stated that his “father immigrated to the U.S. in 1982, then brought my mother in 1986.”

When Arturo was in high school, his family moved to an urban, predominantly white town in North Carolina, which he said was mainly for “financial reasons” and because of the availability of “good schools.” The tall, slim 21-year-old with short, black, curly gelled hair, black eyes and brown skin described the change to a predominantly white school as “a big, big, big, big culture change,” adding that the transition was also difficult for his parents: “my Mom didn’t even know how to speak English that well; my Dad is, is a lot better but still lacking in a few areas.” He stated that his parents were willing to “get out of their comfort zone” because the new town had better public schools than Long Island did. Asked how his family selected North Carolina, he reported that “we searched online, and at the time, [name of high school] was top 100 in the nation, of all the schools, and so we chose that school off, off the bat.” An in-state college junior and first-generation college student, he spoke passionately about being Latino, gesticulating and leaning back and forth in his chair. His responses seemed well thought out.

Arturo explained that before moving to North Carolina, he thought that “white people were only bad people that were only good for bossing my parents around.” He said that he felt “isolated” and “outcast” in his new school until he “decided to speak with some of [his] white peers” and realized “they’re not that bad.” Arturo took honors classes and played on the soccer team. Despite excelling academically, he noted he “was always competing against [his] white

peers” and therefore never felt fully integrated and added that he only “hung out” with other Latina/o students in his high school “on the surface” because they “went to school just to go to school but were gonna drop out at the end.”

Arturo said he never discussed media images with his parents and even hypothesized that his parents were “not conscious of the things going on in the media” because “they mainly watch[ed] hum, Latino TV.” However, Arturo stated that his parents did try to limit his exposure to rap music videos because they “show a lot of women and cars and a lot of money.” He added that his parents also “wouldn’t really like me watching cartoons that had curse words in them.”

Arturo said he applied to SEPU to stay close to his parents. He was very involved with various Latina/o student organizations and volunteered with minority recruitment programs. After having lived in the dorms for three years, he planned to move into an off-campus house with six of his Latino friends his senior year.

*Eduardo (HI):*

A first-generation, in-state college senior, Eduardo was a 22-year-old of average height and weight, with very short black hair with gel, black eyes, and a brown skin complexion. He was the only participant with an indigenous-looking phenotype. He was very reserved, almost shy. He sat straight in his chair, answered questions thoroughly and did not gesticulate much.

Eduardo’s parents were Mexican, and he had two siblings: one older and one younger brother. His father immigrated to the U.S. in 1989, and his mother moved in 1994. Eduardo shared that he was born in California but moved with his family to Mexico “soon after,” returning to California when he was four years old. He explained that his father then worked on a California farm for about two years before his family moved to North Carolina to join relatives and “get a better job.”

Eduardo recalled his family moving in with some cousins before they could afford to rent a trailer, then an apartment and eventually bought a house in a predominantly Latina/o and Black neighborhood. He attended a predominantly white high school due to the busing system in place that took minority students from his neighborhood to public schools in predominantly white neighborhoods. While the busing system allowed Eduardo to attend a better school than the ones in his neighborhood, he recalled “waking up every morning like at 5, just to get ready for the bus at 6.”

Eduardo explained that because he was in honors classes he did not interact with many minority students in school. As he stated, “we took the bus from there to the high school but after we got off the bus I never saw anyone again um, while in high school.” Eduardo said he “found it hard to find where I fit in here” in his high school because most of his classmates were white Americans and the minority students from other classes “stuck to themselves.” Because Eduardo did not have any classes with the latter, he felt isolated from both majority and minority students.

Eduardo said he never discussed media images with his parents because “they watched more Spanish television” except for sports, which he watched with his father. Growing up, Eduardo stated he and his younger brother did not have any media restrictions because “both of my parents had to work so they really weren’t um there to oversee what we, we, how much television we watched or anything like that.”

Eduardo said he did not receive any help to apply for college and only applied to two universities in North Carolina. He enrolled in a small public university and then transferred to SEPU his sophomore year because it had a better pre-medical program. Before transferring to SEPU, Eduardo recalled participating in a SEPU recruitment program where he met many Latina/o students who made him feel more welcome than he had felt at his previous university.

*Federico (HI):*

As previously mentioned, Federico was aware that he “looks white,” mostly due to his skin complexion. He was of average height and a little stocky, with very short brown hair, brown eyes, and very fair skin. Both his parents were both Dominican and Cuban, and he had two older sisters. Arturo’s parents came to the U.S. at a young age and moved to North Carolina in the early 1990s, where the 21-year-old was born and raised in a predominantly white suburb. He said he spoke only Spanish until he started kindergarten, and while his parents continued to speak to him in Spanish, they told him to respond in English. Federico explained that his parents did this because they wanted him to speak English without an accent, as “they thought everybody in North Carolina was a redneck and would make fun of me if I had an accent growing up.” Federico added he and his parents now communicate in English and/or Spanish depending on their “mood.” He spoke at a regular cadence and provided ample explanations for his arguments. Federico appeared to be very relaxed and seemed to genuinely enjoy our discussions, judging by his smiling face and interest in the interview topics.

For Federico, the predominantly white North Carolina neighborhood he grew up in, where his was the only Latina/o family, contrasted deeply with the predominantly Latina/o neighborhood and rich Latina/o culture he experienced when visiting his father’s relatives in Miami “every single summer.” However, Federico recalled that he easily befriended his white neighbors, with whom he went to school, but did not interact much with the few Latina/o students who attended his high school because they “weren’t going anywhere” and “were just getting into trouble.” Instead, most of his friends were white Americans and African Americans. He stated he was always the only Latina/o in his group of friends.

Regarding the news media representations of Latinos and African Americans, Federico recalled conversations with his father about the portrayal of these groups as committing “murder,

rape, stealing something, like there are very few times that a Latino has been portrayed for something good on the news.” His father encouraged him to do well to counter these portrayals. Federico said that because he was always playing outside, his parents never applied any media restrictions.

An in-state college junior, Federico received a partial student-athlete scholarship for baseball at a small private North Carolina university about three hours away from his home. However, he explained that he decided to enroll at SEPU instead because “I could go to a public school and get a better education since I decided I probably won’t be playing baseball later on in my life.” He added that SEPU was much closer to home, so “I could be close to my parents if they ever need my help at home.” Federico bragged about the racial/ethnic diversity of his friends and said he has enjoyed meeting people from such diverse backgrounds and learning about their culture since he enrolled at SEPU. As he stated, “I try to get a little taste of different cultures with different friends.”

*Hernando (HI):*<sup>4</sup>

Hernando spoke very fast and was very assertive with his answers. He often raised his voice to make a point and knocked his fist on the table when recounting unpleasant episodes, usually involving some form of racial discrimination. He was of average height, a little overweight, with short black hair, brown eyes and a very fair skin complexion. As previously mentioned, he could easily pass for a white American due to his phenotype.

Hernando had an older sister and a younger brother, and his parents were Puerto Rican. He was born in Puerto Rico and moved with his family to North Carolina when he was “around 5

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<sup>4</sup> As noted in chapter 3, Hernando graduated before the end of the study and I was unable to ask him the media literacy questions.

or 6” for his father’s job. Since then, Hernando has been living in a predominantly white town. However, he recalled that the few other Latina/os in town were mostly Puerto Ricans and Mexicans and described the racial climate of the town as “people got along really well, like I don’t remember any instances where people were like, like racist moments.”

Hernando explained that he attended a new high school with “a lot of upper class white students” and that other Latina/o students were not motivated to pursue a higher education. He said he did not feel connected with his high school community, but attributed his isolation to personal factors, stating, “I was going through some tough times with, you know, relationships and family stuff.”

The 22-year-old, in-state college senior reported that he applied to only three in-state universities, one private and two public. Although he was accepted to all three universities, he decided to attend SEPU because of the “really good financial aid package” he received, which he explained “didn’t have [his] mom worrying about where [she was] gonna find the money to pay for college.” He added that he “was 13<sup>th</sup> in [his] class [...] out of 470 something, maybe 500” and that his peers attended MIT, Princeton, Yale and Harvard, but he had to think about tuition costs so did not apply to these Ivy League schools. Hernando said he visited SEPU and found students “a little more open, more welcoming” than at the other two universities.

*Mauricio (HI):*

Mauricio could easily pass for a white American, as previously mentioned. He had a fair skin complexion, very short black hair, brown eyes and was of average height and weight. He also tended to often use the word “like” in his speech, which he said sometimes led other Latina/os to comment that he was too “Americanized.”



Mauricio's parents were Mexicans who immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1980s. Mauricio was born and raised in an urban, predominantly minority neighborhood in Texas. Mauricio emphasized that his parents underwent a lot of hardship getting established in the U.S. He recalled that his parents, his two older siblings and he lived in a relative's garage until he was 6 years old, when his family was able to rent a small house. He explained that his father worked "at a country club, as a first, busboy, then he worked his way up to a waiter, and then eventually actually became the manager of the whole country club." He recalled all this with a soft voice, gesticulating a lot, with wide open eyes and a big smile. Although he sometimes started sentences with one thought and ended them with another, his responses were very well thought out.

Mauricio reported that he has been performing well academically since elementary school and received scholarships to attend private schools at almost no cost to his parents. He attended a predominantly white, all-boys high school, which he stated was "considered to be, like one of those best schools in Texas." He recalled at first feeling "out of place" but also realized that this school offered him the opportunity to "become, like, something that, um, that my family has never been able to do." He commented there were a few other high-achieving Latino students in his high school, with whom he got along well.

Mauricio talked about the socio-economic difference between his family and his white peers' families, mostly evident by the cars parents drove to pick up their children. However, he said white students made him feel welcome in the school and often invited him to professional basketball games because one of the white students' fathers often received free tickets. He stated, "the cool thing about [name of high school] though is that I felt like they [white students] never like discriminated, they never like, um, put you down [...] I never felt uncomfortable." He added

that “it’s a tough process to get in the school, it would be a shame to like, it’d be a waste, like for you not feeling comfortable because um, like the majority is white, and they made you feel uncomfortable.”

Mauricio also said he always played soccer, but because he lived relatively far away from his high school and practice fields, he would often get “home like around 10, I ate dinner, took a shower, had to do my homework.” He described these times as “a little bit more stressful,” but he emphasized how much he “loved playing soccer” and “would repeat it and do it again, all over again.”

Mauricio said he did not discuss media images with his parents. He recalled that the main rule his parents applied regarding media was to finish homework before any leisure activity. As Mauricio said, “my parents were just pretty much like get your work done and you can do whatever you want.”

Even though Mauricio reported that he was “extremely close to [his] parents,” he had wanted to attend college away from home “to become more independent and kind of start relying more on [his] own personal decision[s].” He explained that he applied to 14 schools and “pretty much got in to all the schools [he] applied for, except like one or two.” He added his parents supported his choice because they trusted him to make the right decision. This 21-year-old, out-of-state college junior was extremely proud of being a first-generation college student and of having been accepted as an out-of-state student to SEPU, which limits undergraduate out-of-state enrollment to 18 percent per freshman class.

*Miguel (HI):*

Although Miguel seemed laid back, talking while almost lying back in his chair, he clearly articulated his words and took the time to think his answers through. He spoke

assertively, often repeating the same points for different questions and gesticulated a lot. The 22-year-old was short and chubby, with very short black hair, brown eyes, and a well-kept three-day beard. He had a brown skin complexion and wore large glasses with a black frame.

Miguel's Dominican mother and father immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, respectively. He was born and raised in New York City with an older brother and sister in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood, which he described as being "lower-middle class" and his background as a "poor, poor background."

Miguel said his parents always supported his "higher education goals." He explained that his mother, who worked as a nanny, asked her employer if she could use the latter's address as her residence so that Miguel could attend good public schools. Miguel believed that his elementary school provided him with a "solid educational foundation" he would never have obtained in his neighborhood. Miguel recalled his first day of school, when he "walked into [his] elementary school [...] and realized [he] was one of a handful of minorities." A few years later, he became aware of the income disparity between himself and the other students because the latter were "being dropped off in limousines" while his mother took him "on the bus to school." Despite this, Miguel did not feel that his peers treated him with disrespect.

He recounted an anecdote that represented the "most blatant" instance of racism he experienced in high school, in which an old, white, male administrator commented on the hat he was wearing. Miguel said the administrator told him, "Miguel, I really want, you know, to compliment you on your really good work ethic um, and your achievements here at the school, you really um, you would never guess, with you wearing that hat like that." Miguel interpreted the comment as "a compliment but also a slap in the face at the same time," concluding that it "was such a messed-up comment."

With regard to media, Miguel noted that he had not discussed media with his parents and that the only media restrictions he had growing up were from his mother who “did not let me start violent movies until I was like 12.” He added that his two older siblings did not have that restriction.

Miguel, who was interested in studying business, explained he did not have much help applying to college but did his own research and applied to the schools he thought would be the best for him. He added he “didn’t want to be too close to New York, ’cause I kind of wanted to get away from the whole big, big city feel,” and SEPU was his first choice. Miguel was very active with various Latina/o and minority student organizations on campus and said he was always thinking “about programs to put together, professors to talk to, faculty members to talk to about those issues” of “racial stratification” at SEPU.

#### *Low-identifiers’ short biographies*

##### *Alejandro (LI):*

Alejandro spoke with a very soft voice and seemed a little shy. At the beginning of our first interview, his answers were brief and hesitant; I had to ask many follow-up questions to make him elaborate. By the end of the interview, he appeared more relaxed and confident.

As previously mentioned, 21-year-old Alejandro could easily be identified as a white American. He was tall and slim, with brown hair, brown eyes and a very fair skin complexion. The younger of two sons, Alejandro was born to Puerto Rican parents who moved to mainland U.S. in 1980 for their graduate studies. He was raised in a predominantly white neighborhood in Georgia, where his family continues to be the only Latina/o one.

Alejandro was not fluent in Spanish. While he said he understood it “very well,” he “grew up pretty much learning mostly English.” He stated his parents raised him and his brother

speaking English because they did not want them to have an accent. He explained that his parents felt discriminated against because of their Spanish accent and thus wanted to avoid this for their children.

Being the only Latina/o family in his neighborhood, Alejandro said he befriended and identified with his white neighbors and classmates. Alejandro attended predominantly white schools and went to a private high school, where he “didn’t really feel alienated or anything like that.” Alejandro said he did not interact with the few other Latina/os present in his high school because they did not play soccer in the same league as he did and they were not in his honors classes.

Alejandro recalled discussing media content with his parents, who would tell him the stories from television news were not a reflection of reality. Growing up, Alejandro said his parents’ cable system allowed them to automatically restrict certain television shows and websites based on their content. However, Alejandro added his parents did not limit the amount of time he spent watching television, but they limited him to no more than two hours of video games in a row. He stated, “my parents are always commenting about how the news is always bad [...] They did a good job of showing, like telling me that that’s not really how it is.”

Alejandro’s brother, who was three years older than him, attended SEPU and joined a white fraternity. When Alejandro enrolled at SEPU, he joined his brother’s fraternity and did not get involved with any Latino organization on campus, focusing his time instead on his fraternity and business-related organizations.

*Cristian (LI):*

Cristian, the older of two brothers, was born in Florida to Mexican parents who had moved to the United States in 1991 to join relatives in the state. When Cristian was four years

old, his family moved to a small, rural, predominantly white town in North Carolina because his father had heard about available farming jobs. Cristian said he “never really grew up around other Hispanics” and instead established strong bonds with his white friends. While there were “two or three” Latina/o families living in the town, Cristian commented he preferred spending time with his white friends, with whom he was in honors classes.

In 2002, Cristian’s family moved to Mexico for two years, where Cristian completed fifth and sixth grade. While Cristian said he never asked his parents why they decided to leave North Carolina, he attributed the move to a combination of two factors: being away from their family in Mexico for more than 10 years, and the “discrimination and racial pressure” his family might have experienced after the 9-11 attacks. Cristian explained his family eventually moved back to the same town in North Carolina because his father earned more working in construction there than he did in Mexico.

Cristian’s closest friends in high school were white Americans. He said he was the only Latino in honors classes and on the soccer team, and therefore did not feel connected to the few other Latina/o students in his high school. Cristian recalled his high school experience as being very positive. He excelled academically and developed strong friendships with white students, many of whom are still among his closest friends in college. Cristian, a 20-year old, in-state, first-generation college sophomore, strongly believed that being Latino had not affected his interactions with his white friends who, according to him, saw him as they would see any other high-achieving student. He was of average height and weight, with short, gelled black hair, brown eyes and a brown skin complexion. Cristian thought he looked Latino, although he said people occasionally thought he was Asian.

Cristian said he never talked about media with his parents apart from television restrictions. He stated his parents always told him to do his homework after school before watching television and did not want him to watch too much television. However, as Cristian said, referring to his working parents, “in theory the restriction was there, but I mean, you [his parents] can’t enforce it, I mean, we’re [he and his brother] home by ourselves.”

Cristian said he only applied to three in-state universities, one private and two public, because he wanted to stay relatively close to his family. All three universities were less than a four-hour drive away from his home. He did not get accepted to the private university and decided to attend SEPU because it had a better reputation than the third university he had applied to. Cristian was not involved with any Latino organization on campus. However, he became very active with his student residential board of governance and was involved with SEPU’s student government. Cristian had also made plans to move into an off-campus apartment with six of his white friends his junior year.

Throughout the interviews, Cristian was calm and spoke slowly, answering my questions thoroughly. However, he often seemed to jump back and forth between various thoughts, and I sometimes felt that he was sharing too much personal information.

*Enrique (LI):*

Enrique, a 20-year old, in-state college sophomore, spoke really fast, using the word “like” a lot. His responses were generally not very organized and sometimes gave the impression that he was simply thinking out loud rather than responding to an interview. He was born in a predominantly white neighborhood in Florida, the oldest of three sons born to college-educated Mexican parents who had moved to Florida in 1990. In 2004, Enrique’s father was promoted to an upper-management position at his company and the family relocated to the suburbs of a big

city in North Carolina. Prior to moving to North Carolina, the family had lived in Mexico for a year when Enrique was two years old, and in Chile for a year when he was six years old because of his father's job.

Enrique recounted his family had always lived in predominantly white, upper middle class communities in the US. Even in Florida, which is known to have a large Latina/o population, Enrique's family lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. He also recalled that his parents used to listen to a lot of English music while in Mexico and that his father followed the National Football League and became a fan of the Dolphins even before they moved to Florida.

All the schools Enrique attended in Florida and North Carolina were public and predominantly white. Enrique explained that due to his schools' demographics, most of his friends were also predominantly white Americans. Enrique said he did not think of his friends in terms of their race or ethnicity; he was simply attracted to people he perceived as similar to him. Due to his social environment, the people he perceived similar to him were upper middle class, high-achieving white students. Because of his phenotype—very fair skin; short, black, curly hair; and black eyes—Enrique could pass for a white person. Indeed, he noted that some of his classmates were surprised to learn that he was Latino; he, however, thought he looked Latino and referred to his skin complexion as that of a “tan white person.”

Enrique only recalled discussing media content with his parents once, when his mother played an audio book in the car about the apocalypse. When Enrique's mother, he and his two younger brothers talked about the ill fate of some characters in the book, she always stressed not to worry because “it's a book.” Enrique's parents' television system allowed them to block off any adult-rated television shows and movies until he turned 17 years old. Enrique said his



parents were very cautious about what he and his brother watched on television. His parents also restricted the amount of time he spent playing video games, which he said was only allowed on weekends and school holidays during specific times during the day.

While Enrique did say there were two Latina students in his honors classes, he also pointed out that most Latina/o students in his high school did not perform as well as he did academically, stating that they were “under-achieving.” Perceiving Latinos as under-achieving seemed to be a way for Enrique to rationalize why most of his friends were white. In his junior year of high school, Enrique participated in a SEPU diversity recruitment program during which he spent two days and one night on campus with other prospective and current students. He said that after the program, he knew he would “definitely apply to [SEPU].” Enrique was not involved with any Latino organization on campus. He joined a white fraternity his freshman year and was mostly active with business-related organizations.

*Javier (LI):*

Javier was a 21-year-old New York native with a short and slim but muscular build. He had short brown curly hair, which he said could easily grow into an Afro, brown eyes, fair skin and large, brown-framed glasses. Javier was very calm; he sat straight in his chair and spoke in a soft voice without many gestures. He seemed thoughtful, taking his time to think before answering questions with answers that were often brief.

Javier had an older and a younger sister and was raised in Brooklyn, surrounded by mostly Latina/os and Blacks, until he was 12 years old. His father was also born in New York to Puerto Rican parents, whereas his mother was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the mainland in 1981. Javier’s parents met while studying at a university in New York City, from which they both graduated. While his mother had “a traditional Puerto Rican upbringing,” he commented

that his father was “Americanized” because he had attended a predominantly white high school and was “not as articulate in Spanish as he is in English,” and for this reason, they spoke English at home.

Javier’s parents saved enough money to buy a house in the suburbs, and he recalled the shock he felt moving into his new neighborhood because he had never seen “that many white kids.” Javier was one of the few Latina/o students in his high school and the only one in the honors classes. He related that the transition from his previous school to this one was hard, but that he became really close friends with five students who were in his classes and lived in his neighborhood; all five of them were white Americans. Javier also played baseball and basketball in high school. He said there was one other Puerto Rican student on the baseball team and one African-American student on the basketball team. However, Javier never developed a friendship with either of them because he “didn’t really see them too much in school” due to his honors class schedule.

Javier did not recall discussing media content with his parents. He said his parents did not restrict his media consumption and trusted his judgment of which shows he watched. Javier and his father both enjoyed science-fiction and developed the habit of watching *Fringe* together. He said his father recorded the episodes and watched them with Javier when he was home during school breaks.

An out-of-state junior at SEPU, Javier explained he applied to SEPU late in the application process. He had already been accepted at his “safety schools” close to home but was also attracted to going farther away “to get away.” Javier thus applied to two non-northeastern predominantly white schools, SEPU and a private one, got accepted at both and decided to attend SEPU. He recounted he chose SEPU because it was “the big basketball school” and it had a

reputation as “one of the top public schools.” Javier said he has been an avid fan of the basketball team since he enrolled at SEPU.

*Leonardo (LI):*

Leonardo commented that he never felt “a very super strong tie” to his Latino identity, and while he was “not ashamed” of it, he also said, “I am Latino but like, it’s not like, that part doesn’t affect my life.” In other words, being Latino does not define who Leonardo is. I told Leonardo I was surprised to hear him say that because he possessed many characteristics that many would consider Latino. He was the older of two sons and was born and raised in an all-minority neighborhood in New Jersey. Both of Leonardo’s parents were Hondurans who moved to the United States in 1988. His father did not attend college, whereas his mother started but did not graduate. Leonardo and his family moved to a small, predominantly white town in North Carolina when he was 16. Leonardo recalled he did not know any white people until he moved to North Carolina. He said moving was not difficult, and he was pleasantly surprised by the friendliness of southern people.

Leonardo was a 20-year-old, in-state, sophomore, slim and of average height, with short black hair, black eyes and a light brown skin complexion. He wore thin-rimmed glasses and gelled his hair to hold it down. As previously mentioned, although he said he did not look Latino, I disagree with him and would have categorized him as Latino. Leonardo spoke softly and did not gesticulate much. Most of his responses were brief but he never hesitated to be more thorough when asked.

Leonardo spoke Spanish, was part of the Latina/o dance team and volunteered with a humanitarian project helping poor people better their living conditions in Central American countries. However, he stated that he had not chosen these activities because of their connection

to his Latina/o heritage. He said that Spanish “wasn’t like the language I chose, it was like the language that was given to me.” He explained that he joined the Latina/o dance team because his friend was the dance teacher, but that “if my friend was on a hip-hop dance team, like that would have been the same thing if he would have decided to teach me, I would have joined that too.” He provided a similar answer for his involvement with the humanitarian project in Central America, stating, “if the project was going to a country in Africa it would have been the same, it didn’t like, the group didn’t attract me because it was going to a Latin American country.”

Leonardo did not recall discussing media content with his parents. He said his parents restricted his media consumption to no more than two hours of television or video games in a row. Leonardo applied to the three “most prestigious colleges in North Carolina,” got accepted to two of them and was encouraged by his white friends to attend SEPU. Leonardo said he did not feel the need to be involved with the main Latina/o student organization on campus. He said he was “extremely happy” at SEPU and enjoyed everyday campus life, such as living in the dorms and longboarding (skateboarding on a longer skate) on campus.

*Ricardo (LI):*

Ricardo was one of six children; he had two older brothers, one older sister and two younger brothers. He spent most of his life in a small, rural, predominantly white, North Carolina town, where his family was one of only three other Latina/o families. Ricardo said his parents were Mexicans who immigrated to Texas in 1989 with their two oldest sons, moved to North Carolina in 1991 before moving back to Mexico for a couple of years, and returned to North Carolina in 1994. Ricardo explained his parents’ “transition” to and from Mexico was “because they didn’t know if they wanted to stay here [in the U.S.] all their lives.” Ricardo added his parents eventually decided that returning to North Carolina was “the best thing for us.”

Despite the low percentage of minorities where Ricardo lived, he said living in that small, rural town “wasn’t hard” and was “really good.” He explained that his father worked for “a white farmer who actually owned pretty much the entire town” and who would even “help us out if we didn’t have enough money.” Ricardo explained that being associated with this farmer made his family feel integrated and appreciated in town. Ricardo also credited his oldest brother, who was six years older than him, as one of the reasons why living and going to school in a predominantly white, small, rural town “wasn’t hard.” Ricardo said his oldest brother set an excellent precedent for him and his siblings in school, made sure all did their homework after school and always encouraged them to work hard.

Ricardo said he was president of his class all through high school and graduated salutatorian. He was in honors classes and played on the football team. Ricardo recalled only one other Latino student in his high school, with whom he did not interact because they “didn’t have the same classes together.” The majority of Ricardo’s friends in high school were white Americans.

Ricardo said the only media images he recalled discussing with his parents were action movies and wrestling games. He said his father watched a lot of action movies and explained to Ricardo and his siblings that “it’s just all special effects.” He added he and his family also watched a lot of wrestling on television and his parents emphasized that “what they do is fake.” Ricardo explained his parents never established media restriction rules for him and his siblings because they were very involved in sports and “made good grades.”

Ricardo was a 21-year-old, in-state, first-generation college junior at SEPU. He was of average height and weight with neck-length black hair, black eyes and a light brown skin complexion, which made him say that his Latina/o heritage was “not easily recognizable.” I

disagree with Ricardo and think he looks very much Latino based on his phenotypes.

Interestingly, he talked with a light southern accent, a southern drawl that I had only previously heard in some white rural southern people. His speech was slow and he took his time to answer questions. He was calm and did not gesticulate much.

Ricardo's older brothers influenced him from a young age to support SEPU in sports and also to aspire to attend that university. Both of his older brothers graduated from SEPU, and Ricardo's older sister and younger brother were also attending SEPU. Ricardo was not involved with any Latina/o organizations on campus; he was solely focused on business-related organizations because he considered them important for his future career.

In the following chapter, I elaborate on participants' social and academic backgrounds and their different experiences prior to attending SEPU. I address some of the concerns they mentioned regarding their perceptions of Latina/os both in real life and in the media, as well as their views of U.S. society and how they feel about being a minority in the U.S. These themes also expose some of the main similarities and differences among HI and LI participants.

## CHAPTER V: PERSONAL AND MEDIATED EXPERIENCES

Prior to addressing the dissertation's main research questions, I discuss some recurrent themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes provide general background information about participants' childhood neighborhoods and high schools but also reveal how participants perceive media representations of Latina/os, and how they make sense of such media images while keeping in mind the conditions of many Latina/os in the U.S. The focus of the dissertation is to explore how Latino undergraduate students at a predominantly white public university perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences. However, we cannot ignore participants' personal backgrounds as well as their experience with and understanding of media prior to attending college. Therefore, this chapter establishes the context in which participants evolved personally and academically to better understand their state of mind upon entering SEPU.

*"We have so much different flavors."*

As discussed at length in chapter 2, media usually portray members of minority groups as possessing the same set of stereotypical characteristics. While I have separated Latino participants in two groups, HIs (high-identifiers) and LIs (low-identifiers), based on their level of identification with their Latina/o heritage, the heterogeneity of Latina/os goes well beyond this dichotomous division. Participants highlighted differences in terms of country of origin, culture,

language, worldview, phenotype and experiences. For instance, Arturo (HI) stated, “as a Latino population, we have so much different flavors, um, different perspectives, we view things differently,” thus contradicting dominant media portrayals, which not only show that most Latina/os are alike but that most Latina/os think alike as well. Arturo’s comment also expresses the intellectual richness of Latina/os. Others referred to the heterogeneity of Latina/os as mostly based on country of origin. Eduardo (HI) said Latina/os “come from different places and all have different customs, cultures and traditions,” while Cristian (LI) said, “there’s so many different countries, and even though we’re all close to each other, it’s so, you know like, we’re also so different in a lot of aspects.” Both comments imply that using one term to refer to such a large group of people overshadows the heterogeneity of Latina/os.

Oseguera and her colleagues (2009) emphasize that the term “Latino” tends to overlook the racial, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic and educational differences of the Latina/o populations in the U.S. and of Latina/o students in college. While I use the term “Latino” in reference to any of the 12 participants, who are all U.S.-born with Latina/o parents, each participant represents a unique member of the U.S.-Latina/o group and is different from other participants at various levels beyond cultural identification. Indeed, each participant’s narrative reflects his personal experiences, and the similarities among certain narratives should not lead us to generalize how Latino students perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences. Before discussing media, I briefly address information regarding participants’ social and academic backgrounds, as well as how they feel about being a minority in the U.S.



*“Poor, poor background, heavily, heavily culturally rich”*

All participants’ parents are Latina/os, and apart from Javier (LI) whose Puerto Rican father was born in New York City, all participants’ parents were born outside of mainland U.S. Half of the 12 participants, four of the six HIs (Arturo, Eduardo, Mauricio and Miguel) and two of the six LIs (Javier and Leonardo), reported growing up in predominantly African-American and Latina/o, or predominantly Latina/o neighborhoods. Miguel (HI) described the New York City “predominantly Dominican neighborhood” he grew up in as follows:

You know, definitely, you know, poor, poor background, heavily, heavily culturally rich though I would say, you know, music playing all the time, you know, kids playing outside, um, you know everything you, I guess like see in the media, of like lower income neighborhoods, like kids playing outside, you know, kind of, parents sitting outside talking to each other, kind of this very like, um, kind of free for all kind of ambiance I would say um, but yeah, it was, it was, it was certainly like that, especially in the summer.

Despite the low economic status of his neighborhood, Miguel (HI) remembers it as “heavily culturally rich.” He uses media to illustrate the memory of his neighborhood, probably assuming it would be easier for me to picture his neighborhood by referring to media images. His mention of media is interesting because he thinks that in this instance, fictional media representations accurately describe real life situations. Miguel knows I did not grow up in a “predominantly Dominican neighborhood,” but he assumes I am familiar with how media depict Latina/o neighborhoods. Grossberg and his colleagues (2006) emphasized how media representations can influence us to perceive everyday life as well as to “construct meanings and expectations associated with particular social identities” (p.247). Miguel’s comment echoes media researchers’ findings that we rely on mediated experiences when we lack personal ones

(Ford, 1997; Grossberg et al., 2006; Mastro, 2009). Javier (LI) also reported growing up in a predominantly minority neighborhood in New York City:

It was just a lot of Blacks and a lot of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, so pretty much everyone was the same there, everyone was hanging out in the streets you know, playing basketball, playing football in the streets, and we had pretty much the same experience growing up.

Similar to Miguel (HI), Javier (LI) recalls children playing in the streets. He also notes that he shares experiences similar to those of his peers of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, which helps establish a bond between him, a Latino from Caribbean heritage, and Africans and African Americans. Arturo (HI) also talked about the bond he feels with black students because he grew up in a predominantly minority neighborhood. Unlike Miguel and Javier, who remember positive aspects of their poor neighborhoods, Leonardo (LI), who grew up in Jersey City, expressed different thoughts regarding his neighborhood:

I grew up in a minority neighborhood that I wasn't a part of, like it was like a dangerous neighborhood. It wasn't like we wanted to be there really, it was kind of just that like, you know, when, when you don't have that much money, you take it wherever you can get it, you know.

Leonardo (LI) said he “wasn't a part” of his neighborhood, which he described as not dominated by any particular group but as having “all different types of minorities.” He attributes having lived in this neighborhood to his family's lack of money. While income and place of residence are related, it is interesting to note that Miguel (HI) and Javier (LI) attribute living in predominantly minority neighborhood to their racial/ethnic origins. Half of the participants reported growing up in predominantly African-American and Latina/o, or predominantly

Latina/o neighborhoods; the other half, two HIs (Federico and Hernando) and four LIs (Alejandro, Cristian, Enrique and Ricardo), reported living in predominantly white neighborhoods, often being one of the few Latina/o or racial minority families. Alejandro (LI) recalled living in a predominantly white neighborhood with only a few minority families.

The area is mostly pretty much Caucasian, like especially the neighborhood that I grew up in. And um, that's pretty much been the same in the other neighborhoods I've lived in except for now, the area I live in now, there are a few more like um, they're a few more Asian families and then a few more like Middle Eastern families too.

The demographics of Alejandro's (LI) neighborhood in Georgia are similar to those described by other participants who grew up in suburban neighborhoods, or to those described by participants who moved from predominantly poor, minority neighborhoods to middle-class, white neighborhoods. Cristian (LI) said he "never grew up around other Hispanics" and Hernando (HI) said the high school he went to "was majority white. There's a couple of black people, [and] two or three Puerto Ricans," then added, "it's, it literally mimicked the actual environment that I was growing up in." Based on the recollections of the six participants who reported growing up in predominantly white neighborhoods, Ricardo (LI), whose family has been living in a rural part of North Carolina since 1994, grew up in the neighborhood with the most Latina/o families, which was "probably about three."

Due to these demographics, most of the interactions these participants had with Latina/os took place in their homes, with their family members. It is important to keep this in mind because growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood is not synonymous with living as white American families do. Similarly, attending a predominantly white school does not mean that Latina/o students automatically reject their Latina/o identity for a more mainstream one.

Indeed, even though participants grew up in racially different neighborhoods, all attended predominantly white high schools in which they were the only or one of the few Latina/o student(s) in honors and/or advanced placement (AP) classes.

*“Really isolated and really out of my comfort zone”*

Apart from Alejandro (LI) and Mauricio (HI), all participants went to public high schools. Three participants who grew up in predominantly minority neighborhoods—Arturo (HI), Javier (LI) and Leonardo (LI)—attended predominantly white high schools because their families moved to predominantly white suburban neighborhoods. Of the other three participants who grew up in predominantly minority neighborhoods, Eduardo (HI) attended a predominately white high school because of the “busing in [*name of his county*] at that time,” referring to the practice of transporting children from poor neighborhoods to attend better schools in richer neighborhoods. Mauricio obtained a scholarship to attend a private, all-boys, predominantly white high school, and Miguel (HI) was able to attend predominantly white public schools because his mother, who worked as a nanny, asked to use her employer’s address as her place of residence. All reported undergoing similar experiences because they were the only, or among the few high-achieving Latina/o student(s) in their schools. Indeed, many participants said the majority of other Latina/o students did not prioritize education. For instance, Federico (HI) described his Latina/o peers as follows:

They were the Latinos that weren’t going anywhere really; they were just in school to be in school. They, they didn’t plan on going to college or anything. Um, they were into a lot of bad things, those were the kids that were gonna be in gangs in less than a year.

Federico (HI) talks about the low expectations he has of his Latina/o peers and how he, a Latino in a prestigious university, is different from them. Similarly, Cristian (LI) stated he had different priorities than other Latina/o students in his school, saying, “these other Hispanic students I saw like, I didn’t know them, and when I did see them, I’d just see them like smoking something, like smoking drugs, doing who knows what, and there was just never any connection between us.” Cristian is much more explicit than Federico in expressing how different he perceives himself compared to these other Latina/os engaging in “who knows what” types of activities. Participants’ feelings towards other Latina/o students who are not high-achievers confirm what Conchas (2001) found in his study of high school Latina/o students. He reported that high-achieving Latina/o students “felt that others [Latina/os] did not share similar values” because they were not performing as well in school (Conchas, 2001, p.492). He concluded that high-achieving Latina/os simply had little desire to associate with students at the bottom of the academic track whether they were Latino or not (Conchas, 2001). Being the only, or one of the few, high-achieving Latina/o student(s) in predominantly white high schools was more challenging for participants who had moved from a predominantly minority neighborhood to a predominantly white neighborhood. Arturo (HI) recalled his first days in high school as follows:

I went from going to a 99% minority high school to a predominantly white high school, just me, by myself in high school. Um, and so that was a big, big, big, big culture change for me because um, I was, I was a New York kid, I was, you know, speaking, you know, weird. Um, I had long shirts, I was um, you know, the outcast so it was really weird for me and I was really isolated and really out of my comfort zone because I was known to be, not popular, but um, at least to be able to intermingle and now, um, I couldn’t intermingle.

Arturo’s (HI) feeling of isolation was cultural, due to his speech and attire, and psychological, due to the “big culture change” this transition represented. Javier (LI) also

remembered feeling out of his comfort zone when he first attended a predominantly white school:

I'd never seen that many white kids in one place at one time. It was like kind of shocking. And um, and yet when I, when I went to school there in, in Long Island it was the first time I had actually seen an Asian person too. I had never seen, I'd never seen somebody who was Asian, like in real life, not on TV. It was just really um, really crazy.

Similar to Arturo (HI), Javier (LI) felt out of place because of his racial/ethnic and cultural background. He labeled “shocking” what Arturo labeled “big cultural change.” Participants who grew up belonging to majority groups in their predominantly minority neighborhoods found themselves surrounded by other racial/ethnic groups with whom they had never or rarely interacted before. Many education researchers have pointed out the isolation that Latina/o students like Arturo and Javier feel in predominantly white schools. They feel isolated because they experience themselves as different from their white peers and think they can only fit in by assimilating to mainstream culture (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996; Hurtado, 2005). These students also perceive U.S. school culture as contrasting with their family culture (Flores Niemann et al., 2000; Suarez et al., 1997) and believe that some students and staff hold stereotypical views of them (Cammarota, 2004). Conchas (2001) posits that Latina/os who excel academically in high school either alienate themselves or only socialize with other high-achieving students, regardless of their race. In either case, the Latina/o students observed by Conchas did not want to associate with other Latina/o students. Conchas suggested this avoidance implies that high-achieving Latina/os are aware of the message associating them with low-achieving Latina/os would send to white students and professors, and might affect their subsequent interactions. Findings from this dissertation confirm Conchas’ conclusions,

especially for LIs, who befriended white students, and for HIs who grew up in predominantly minority neighborhoods, who isolated themselves.

*“We’re not exposed to people of other races, then we only know what we see in the television.”*

The role media play in exposing audiences to other racial/ethnic groups is apparent in Javier’s (LI) comment that apart from on television, he had “never seen somebody who was Asian” until he attended high school in his new neighborhood. At that point in his life, his only interactions with Asians were mediated ones. Similar to Javier, all participants emphasized to various degrees the important role media can play when thinking about or interacting with groups of people they are unfamiliar with. HIs made such comments almost twice as frequently as LIs. Miguel (HI), for example, provided a hypothetical example using a white Southerner meeting an Indian person for the first time, which echoes Javier’s comment:

I’m assuming when people in the South, or people in general, you know what I mean, are not exposed to something, our only way of knowing about that is by reading about it or seeing it, right? So we’re not exposed to people of other races, then we only know what we see in the television, ‘oh, I never really had an Indian friend, but that Indian guy, that must be what Indian people are like’ [*he chuckles*], you know what I mean, so when I finally meet an Indian guy that could potentially be my friend and I’m thinking, ‘hey, what is this guy possibly like,’ I always draw that connection to the movie, ‘well, I wonder if he, if his parents do cook this, or if, you know, if his Mom has a red dot on her forehead,’ you know, you start just referring to what you know, and what you know is the media.

Miguel (HI) explains that in many situations, media represent our only point of reference and might affect how we approach people. His comment also illustrates how media encourage us to think about certain minority groups in terms of stereotypes because we lack real-life experiences to think otherwise. Grossberg and his colleagues (2006) provide an example similar to Miguel’s to illustrate how media stereotypes affect us. Using an Azerbaijani instead of an

Indian, they state that if people never interacted with Azerbaijanis, “then it is likely that what they think such people are like will be the result of what they have seen, heard, or read about them in the media” (p.235). Numerous media scholars have warned us about the harmful effects media representations of racial minority groups can have on white audiences’ perceptions of people belonging to those groups (e.g., Chávez, 2008; Grossberg et al., 2006; Kellner, 2011; Mastro, 2009; Merskin, 2011; Rodríguez, 2008; Santa Ana, 2002; Valdivia, 2010). Six participants reported experiences related to these media effects. Four HIs (Arturo, Hernando, Federico and Miguel) and two LIs (Cristian and Leonardo) commented on their perceptions of the racial climate that they felt reigned in the environments in which they grew up. For instance, Hernando (HI) said that after having felt discriminated against by the mother of a young, white American woman he wanted to date in high school, he simply decided to avoid interacting with white women on an emotional level:

If I start trying to talk to a white girl then all of a sudden like I’m going to have to deal with her friends and then you know guys that are white in their mind will be like, ‘oh screw that, you know, Hispanic person and why are you talking to him?’ And I mean they, that’s what some of that, you know, is always associated, it’s just like ‘Hispanic people are, are lower class people, so why would you associate yourself with them?’

Hernando’s (HI) comment regarding how he feels at the thought of approaching a “white girl” illustrates his social isolation as well as how he believes many white Americans perceive all “Hispanic people.” His comment also suggests that while not all white Americans hold racist views against Latina/os, the number of those who do is large enough to influence other white Americans’ interactions with Latina/os. Indeed, in this scenario, Hernando does not mention anything that might lead us to think that the “white girl” would reject him because he is Latino. However, he insinuates that the “white girl” might be peer-pressured to avoid interacting with



him. HIs are cautious not to label all white Americans as racist, but they do think that many white Americans perceive Latina/os stereotypically, which then affects interracial interactions. In chapters 6 and 7, which deal with college experiences, I further address interracial interactions and how participants perceive the racial climate on campus. However, I wanted to point out early on that HIs were more likely to view their everyday experiences from a racial standpoint than LIs were. This different perspective regarding the role race plays in participants' lives, as well as how they perceive media to influence interracial relations, will be a leitmotif throughout the dissertation.

*“The gangsters in the movies”*

Participants were well aware of the many stereotypes media use in their portrayals of Latina/os. While HIs tended to discuss media representations of Latina/os in more depth and breadth than LIs did, both groups accurately described how most Latina/os are presented in the media. In chapter 2, I reported on the findings from many studies regarding these media representations; participants' answers mirrored these findings. However, I would like to point out a few examples that are representative of how HIs and LIs described media portrayals of Latina/os. For instance, when discussing entertainment media, Arturo (HI) noted the following:

I feel like a lot of the roles that are given to Latinos, they're like not the main roles, and they're like more of a just a background and not paid too much attention, they just get pushed off to the side and stuff like that, so I guess that's what the perception a lot of people have of Latinos in society, in the sense that they just like, are just there, [*he chuckles*], type of thing, um, so, in terms of portrayals of racism, um, not so much like direct, but maybe subtle or unconscious racism.

Arturo's (HI) comment goes beyond simple description. While he does point out some specific descriptions during our discussions, such as “gang member” and “construction people,”

he also notices that Latina/os are *not* portrayed in “the main roles,” which is a point repeatedly made by scholars like Rodríguez (2008), who have pointed out that Latina/os are most noticeable by their absence in entertainment media. Latina/o characters, Rodríguez says, serve as “pure background to titillate the viewers” (p.170). Furthermore, Arturo explains that having Latina/os “pushed off to the side” in the media is creating “subtle or unconscious racism.” Scholars have referred to this type of racism as “new racism,” which can have even more detrimental consequences to minority groups because it is not as blatant as other forms of racism (Henry & Sears, 2002). Let us compare Arturo’s comments to Alejandro’s (LI):

You definitely don’t see a lot of um, Hispanic people being portrayed in a, in not so much of a positive light. A lot of times they’re gonna be like the gangsters in the movies or they’re gonna be the ones who are like selling drugs, doing drugs, like it’s not, you don’t really see a lot of them like in a high position of authority.

While Alejandro (LI) also recognizes that Latina/os are not portrayed “in a high position of authority,” his descriptions of media representations are less thoughtful than Arturo’s (HI). Alejandro mainly uses broad terms such as “not so much of a positive light” and “selling drugs.” These descriptions accurately reflect some of media representations of Latina/os, but they are not as detailed as that of HIs. Similarly, I asked participants if they noticed gender differences in media portrayals of Latina/os. Leonardo (LI) responded that to him, “they look like they’re just portrayed the same; it doesn’t matter if one is a male or not.” Hernando (HI) answered the same question as follows:

Mainly the women are the exotic women, they look beautiful and all that stuff. And then if there are Hispanics it could be just um, what is it, the poor boy that the women want or something like that or the um, what’s it called, the Latino lover, some people say I guess. Um, just seductive Hispanic men I guess basically but not they don’t, I haven’t, I haven’t

had a large impact in seeing like as Hispanics portrayed as like the boss of anybody or actually you know, doing something serious.

Not only does Hernando (HI) identify a gender difference that Leonardo (LI) does not acknowledge, but he also uses specific terms to describe Latina/o characters as “exotic women” and “Latino lover.” These terms echo the ones Ramírez-Berg (2002) used to identify stereotypical roles played by Latina/o actors. He classifies Latino characters in entertainment media as being bandidos, buffoons or Latin lovers, the same term Hernando used in his response. Ramírez-Berg (2002) defined Latin lovers as possessing “eroticism, exoticism, tenderness tingled with violence and danger, all adding up to the romantic promise that, sexually, things could very well get out of control” (p.76). Similarly, Latina characters are harlots, clowns or dark ladies. Hernando’s (HI) “exotic women” could be a combination of Ramírez-Berg’s “harlots” and dark ladies.” He defined harlots as “lustful and hot-tempered [...] she is basically a sex machine innately lusting for a white male” (pp. 70-71), whereas he defined dark ladies as “virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic—and erotically appealing precisely because of these characteristics. Her cool distance is what makes her fascinating to Anglo males” (p.76). Hernando associates the exoticism of Latinas to their physical looks, thus suggesting that one of the main purposes of Latina characters is to mesmerize other characters as well as audience members.

HI displayed a greater level of media literacy than LIs. For instance, Alejandro was the only LI to note that Latina/os are not portrayed in “high positions of authority” and Cristian was the only LI to mention the stereotype of the Latino as construction worker and Latina as cleaning lady. No LIs mentioned media representation of Latinos as gardeners and of Latinas as pregnant. I identified 45 words referring to media stereotypes of Latina/os and compared their use between

HIs and LIs. These words included stereotypes such as “criminal,” “gangsters,” “illegal,” “immigrants,” “maids,” “Mexicans,” “pregnancies” and “sexy.” Overall, HIs used words associated with stereotypes twice as often as LIs, with 354 references versus 184. LIs were more likely to associate media representations of Latina/os to criminal activities than HIs (54 versus 42 references), but HIs talked more about media stereotypes of Latina/os as undocumented immigrants (43 versus 34 references), as Mexicans (120 versus 56 references) and as sexual objects (27 versus 10 references). HIs and LIs used variances of the word “stereotype” approximately the same number of times (110 versus 108, respectively), but HIs made more references to “media” and “television” than LIs (250 versus 204).

In addition to the differences in HIs’ and LIs’ descriptions of media portrayals of Latina/os, one of the most interesting findings on this topic is that all participants overlooked the more recent Latina/o media representations as affluent consumers, as described in chapter 2. Maybe such portrayals are still too new and limited to have really made an impact on participants, who seem to be dominated by decade-old and pervasive stereotypical Latina/o media representations. Eduardo (HI) was the only participant who cited an example of media portrayal that avoids dividing Latina/os and white Americans into two distinct groups: “George Lopez and his show, *The George Lopez Show*, which is about a Hispanic family um, going through life, showing that um, Latin families aren’t really that different from Americans.” According to Eduardo, *The George Lopez Show* offers an alternative depiction of Latina/os, one in which they “aren’t really that different from Americans,” thus sharply contrasting with the aforementioned stereotypical media representations of Latina/os.

In chapter 2, I cited studies suggesting that shows such as *The George Lopez Show* and *Ugly Betty* offered a more realistic portrayal of U.S. Latina/os. Eduardo’s comment came while

he was discussing media portrayals of Latina/os in general. He had just talked about media depictions of “pretty” and “sexier” Latinas and then mentioned *The George Lopez Show* because he was trying to think about a specific Latina/o character; George Lopez was the only one that came to his mind. The discussion then turned to news portrayals of Latina/os as “bad people” who are “doing something wrong.” Therefore, Eduardo’s comment about *The George Lopez Show* emphasizes the importance of representations of Latina/os “going through life” to counter the wealth of stereotypical media representations of Latina/os.

Ramírez-Berg (2002) offers examples of resistance to stereotypical portrayals of Latina/os in movies. He mentions the Chicano documentary movement that started at the same time as the civil rights movements and aimed to teach Mexican-Americans about their culture and history as well as make them feel proud of their heritage. He uses Latino director and producer Robert Rodríguez as an example of resistance in Hollywood. Rodríguez has created counter stereotypical characters by casting Latina/o actors in main roles, depicting “regular” Latina/o families in the U.S and using Spanish lines in movies (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Two HI participants (Arturo and Eduardo) referred to images about the 2006 demonstrations against an anti-immigration bill as examples of counter stereotypical images of Latina/os in news media. These images portray Latina/os as “working toward making progress,” to use Eduardo’s words. I elaborate on these images in the next chapter, but at this point, it is important to note that only two participants mentioned counter stereotypical media representations of Latina/os, thus implying that the media images participants have of Latina/os in their minds are dominated by unfavorable ones. As with descriptions of Latina/os in entertainment media, participants also discussed news media portrayals of Latina/os in terms of stereotypes.

*“You see it in real life and it’s more reinforced when you see it in the media.”*

While participants condemned media representations of Latina/os on the whole, all HIs and two LIs (Cristian and Enrique) also recognized that certain stereotypical media portrayals of Latina/os exist in real life. Eduardo (HI), reflecting on Latina/os from his neighborhood, said, “a couple of them actually have like, are part of gangs.” Mauricio (HI), referring to “the young pregnancies” depicted in the media, said, “that has happened.” During another interview, Mauricio mentioned that his sister had her first child at 19 years old. Cristian (LI), talking about what college students see on campus, said, “there’s a lot of Hispanic workers that work around here building our stuff.” All these comments suggest that participants and most other students have witnessed Latina/os in real life acting in ways or in roles that reflect media representations. Miguel (HI) used his own family to explain the veracity of certain media stereotypes:

My mother is a housekeeper, you know, you know, my brother at one point in time was a very like strong, you know, kind of like abs, ripped and, um, you know, you could say even handsome, young Latino male, so I mean, my father, you know, is a porter, which is somebody who like, cleans buildings and stuff like that, so I mean, stereotypical and, but valid in many ways.

Miguel’s (HI) family members could have appeared on television as the stereotypical characters of the middle-aged Latina maid and the Latino help, as well as the young, virile Latino as described by many content analysis studies of entertainment shows. Therefore, Latina/o viewers such as Miguel may have to remind themselves that while they have relatives or friends whose professional activities resemble these media portrayals, their future is not limited to such portrayals. His comment also illustrates the fine line that exists in people’s mind when separating people’s “stereotypical” views of Latina/os from “valid” ones. Crossing the line to distinguish Latina/os’ true experiences from media representations of Latina/os can negatively affect

audience's perceptions of Latina/os. Indeed, all but three participants said that witnessing a particular behavior in real life "heightens" or "reinforces" stereotypes about Latina/os. In chapter 7, I discuss how participants believe that their good actions and behavior on campus contribute to changing white students' perceptions of Latina/os. However, it is interesting to note that all the examples participants provided about people observing other Latina/os dealt with unfavorable stereotypes. Mauricio (HI) expressed how this fine line could easily be crossed with one "unlucky" interaction when he said that in real life, "Latino will like either fall under the stereotype or will be completely different, and if it falls under it like, that's kind of like unlucky because, that just gives the other person more reason to believe it's true." Javier (LI) made a similar comment and explicitly linked behavior and media representations to people's perceptions of Latina/os:

I'll see some Latinos kind of acting, acting ignorant in real life, and I'm like 'oh man,' it's not just the fact that it's in the media but it's the fact that it's being kind of continued in every day so people are gonna notice this and, kind of, maybe start to generalize that to all Hispanics and I kind of have to differentiate myself from those, from the people in real life as well as, in addition to the media.

Javier (LI) describes how he feels that perceptions of Latina/os are being affected not only by media representations but also by some Latina/os themselves. In other words, people's personal and mediated interactions with certain Latina/os will reinforce the stereotypical images they might already have in mind regarding Latina/os. Javier's comment also shows how this affects him on a psychological level because he feels the need to "differentiate" himself from Latina/os "in real life" as well as in the media. I further discuss this idea in chapter 6 when addressing the role media play in participants' interactions with other students on campus.

Similarly, Hernando (HI) explained that even witnessing “one little example of that in person” is enough to validate all media representations of Latina/os as true.

It’s basically like from seeing the stuff on TV and actually seeing stuff, like just seeing, being overtly exposed to those kind of um, those kind of portrayals of Latinos on TV and the news and the radio and all that stuff and then seeing let’s say one little example of that in person, seeing one Hispanic person, you know, coming out of a house like they were just cleaning it or something like that [...] They see that once and then they’re like ‘oh, everything else must be true if I saw that,’ you know what I’m saying?

According to Hernando (HI), the more people are “being overtly exposed” to media representations of Latina/os, the fewer real life examples they will need to validate their mediated perceptions of Latina/os. All participants except Eduardo (HI), Leonardo (LI) and Ricardo (LI) made similar connections. As previously mentioned in chapter 2, media scholars refer to this phenomenon as “resonance,” which is directly linked to cultivation theory. The idea of resonance implies that when people’s real life experiences match television content, they receive a “double dose” of messages that “resonate” and amplify cultivation effects (Gerbner, 1998, p.182). Arturo (HI) synthesized this idea remarkably well when he said, “you see it in real life and it’s more reinforced when you see it in the media.”

The discussion above presents an overview of the environment in which participants grew up and describes their perceptions of U.S. society. These themes exposed some of the main similarities and differences among HI and LI participants. While all attended predominantly white high schools, only half of them grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods. Even though the dissertation does not aim to understand why first-generation U.S. Latina/os have different levels of cultural identification, it is interesting to note that place of birth and/or parents’ income does not seem to affect participants’ level of identification with their Latina/o



heritage. These themes also confirmed one of the study's main assumptions: HIs appeared to be more articulate and reflective in their descriptions of media representations of Latina/os than LIs. In addition, HIs were much more likely to express their concerns about the racial climate in the U.S. and to report that stereotypical media representations of Latina/os exist in real life. These differences between HI and LI participants will continue to appear in most of the themes addressed in the dissertation.

Next, I explain how participants understand the role media play regarding white Americans' perceptions of Latina/os. I thus mainly focus on the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and non-university-related white Americans' perceptions of Latina/os. This section will also serve as a point of reference when comparing participants' thoughts concerning media's influence on the perceptions students from different racial/ethnic groups have about Latina/os in general, as well as about participants as people.

*"Seeing it in the media every single day for months, for years, for decades"*

All participants noted that they thought stereotypical media portrayals of Latina/os affect how Americans in general perceive Latina/os. As Arturo (HI) stated, "media nowadays is a big part of people's lives." Indeed, as mentioned in chapter 2, media are a ubiquitous presence in our lives (Johnson, 2009; Kellner, 2011; Lewin, 2010), and they can influence our perceptions of various groups in society, especially if we lack meaningful personal experiences with members of those groups (Grossberg et al., 2006; Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Miguel (HI) explained why he thought media images can be so powerful as to influence our perceptions of reality as follows:

The most important thing is, especially when talking about the media, you're not talking about a microcosm second, or a microcosm moment, you know, 'yeah I saw that in the media,' that's not gonna change my perception of anything for ever. It's seeing it in the

media every single day for months, for years, for decades, that eventually changes people, you know.

The relationship between media exposure to a particular image “every single day for months, for years, for decades,” and the audience’s belief in its accuracy that Miguel (HI) describes, represents the basis of cultivation theory, which posits that audiences’ repeated exposure to mediated images shapes their attitudes and influences them to perceive the world in a certain manner (Gerbner, 1969, 1998; Gerbner et al., 1980, 1982). Miguel attributes media’s power to influence people’s perception to media images’ recurrence and reach. Furthermore, and as mentioned in chapter 2, many Americans only have rare and limited interactions with Latina/os. For instance, Eduardo (HI) expressed how media can influence viewers to perceive Latina/os based on their unfavorable media representations.

All I heard about Latinos when I was growing up was um that they were, that they were bad people I guess, especially in the news because of all like the political stuff they’re like, they’re going through, not being like, being illegal, um, growing up I heard a lot of negative stuff about Latinos and I guess if I wasn’t around Latinos and if I didn’t know how they were, um I think that would have shaped my view I had of them.

Eduardo (HI) attributes significant power to media in shaping and generalizing our views of others, especially, as Eduardo points out, when media are the only interaction we have with members of that group. Alejandro (LI) shared a similar view, stating that “if you don’t know somebody well then um, then you might default to what you’ve learned based on all the media that you’ve consumed.” According to him, media images thus represent the “default” information we rely on for our perceptions of others when we do not have any other information available. These quotes illustrate how we use media images to access information in our memory when making a judgment about a particular topic concerning a group of people. Indeed, as

mentioned in chapter 2, frequent television exposure affects viewers' perceptions, especially if media represent viewers' only experience (Shrum, 2001; Shrum and O'Guinn, 1993). Therefore, media images influence our judgment because they are easily accessible in our mind (Shrum, 2009). The more people are exposed to stereotypical representations of Latina/os, the more likely these representations will become the "default" ones in people's minds when thinking about Latina/os.

Overall, participants expressed similar thoughts regarding the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and white American viewers' perceptions of Latina/os. For this relationship, participants agreed that the combination of media exposure and low levels of personal interactions was likely to result in viewers' "final perception of them [Latina/os], even before meeting them, you know has already been, you know, paved by um, or carved out by media portrayal," as Miguel (HI) stated. Participants' comments reaffirm the cultivation effects reported by several media studies. In this case, media representations of Latina/os influence viewers' perceptions of Latina/os. Mauricio (HI) expressed the same concern when he stated, "I feel like what they [white American viewers] see on TV or what they hear is like what most of their kind of beliefs towards them [Latina/os] come from." In Mauricio's mind, there is a strong relationship between what viewers "see on TV" and their "beliefs" about Latina/os. All participants expressed their thoughts on what "beliefs" viewers may hold of Latina/os due to their media consumption. These can be categorized in three main groups: Latina/os as "criminals," Latina/os as "illegal immigrants" and Latina/os as "uneducated."

*"The people committing those crimes are Hispanics on the news."*

Federico (HI) commented on how news media contribute to viewers' perceptions of Latina/os as criminals. Referring to the "bad things going on in the country," Federico said,

“people getting raped, people getting robbed and getting killed and, it seems lots of the times the people committing those crimes are Hispanics on the news.” His comment implies that if Latina/os are overwhelmingly portrayed in the news as “the people committing those crimes,” viewers will logically blame “bad things” on Latina/os. Indeed, the content analysis studies mentioned in chapter 2 have persistently demonstrated that Latina/os and African Americans are overwhelmingly portrayed in the news as perpetrating crimes against Whites. In the following exchange, Alejandro (LI) expanded on Federico’s thoughts regarding the potential effects news media representations of Latina/os may have on viewers:

*Alejandro:* I just feel like since you don’t see that many people, that many Latino people who are um, I guess good role models in the media, then Americans tend to see them as like a lower class or like just I don’t know, not, not I don’t know how to say it but um, I guess they [Americans] would just kind of see them [Latina/os] as like second-class citizens or just like um, almost like dangerous people that you don’t wanna like hang out with.

*Joseph:* Why dangerous?

*Alejandro:* Just because like, especially like in the news, like I said before like a lot of times they’ll have stories about like criminals who are Hispanic.

According to Alejandro (LI), what is not portrayed in the media is as important as what is portrayed. Indeed, because Latina/os rarely appear as “good role models in the media,” viewers are not exposed to counter representations that might encourage them to “hang out” with Latina/os in real life. He specifically stressed the role he thinks news media play in creating the image of Latina/os as “second-class citizens” and “dangerous people” in the minds of non-Latina/o viewers. Such comments are similar to the findings from Latino media scholars who analyzed news stories about Latina/os and found that Latina/os were consistently portrayed as “dangerous” and a “threat” to U.S. society groups (Chávez, 2008; Santa Ana, 2002). Ricardo (LI) also blamed overall media representations for the unfavorable perceptions many might hold

about Latina/os. The following comment is part of his answer to the question, “how do you think that those media portrayals of Latinos affect how white American people perceive Latinos in general?” which I asked him after we had discussed how he thought media portrayed Latina/os:

It [media] gives them [white American viewers] the perception that, I mean, that we [Latina/os], we are undeserving and that we are, pretty much coming off as like thieves because we, I mean, we steal the health care or don’t pay the taxes that they [white Americans] pay and things like that.

Keeping the same line of thought as other participants, Ricardo (LI) establishes a clear relationship between media portrayals of Latina/os and white American viewers’ perceptions of Latina/os. While Ricardo does not mention any specific media representation in his answer, the idea that Latina/os are “thieves” who “steal the health care or don’t pay the taxes” is related to the image of Latina/os as immigrants invading the U.S. and freely benefiting from its resources to the detriment of American citizens (Chávez, 2008). Ricardo’s comment reflects some of the most recurrent images of Latina/os depicted in news media. Indeed, as discussed in chapter 2, Latina/os are often portrayed as “illegal aliens.” Santa Ana (2002) contends that such images represent metaphors that dominate audience’s perceptions of Latina/os in general. One of the metaphors Santa Ana found in his analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* deals with the U.S. as a house being broken into by Latina/os, who as Ricardo stated, are “thieves.”

*“A lot of the Hispanics are illegal immigrants.”*

The “illegal” immigrant represents the second main category of “beliefs” participants most cited as dominating white Americans’ thoughts about Latina/os due to media portrayals. Leonardo (LI) was blunt about it, saying that “white people in general see like, without knowing anything, just see us as illegal immigrants, and you know, that’s just like the, the, the stereotype

that we have to live with.” According to him, white Americans make this stereotypical assumption about Latina/os being “illegal immigrants” “without knowing anything” about Latina/os and/or their actual citizenship or residency status. Similar to what other participants have said, Leonardo implies that because Americans rarely interact with Latina/os, their perceptions of the latter are based on media representations. Eduardo (HI) offered a more thorough explanation:

I think that people also think that a lot of Latinos are recent um, immigrants from other countries and that um, looking towards a lot of the news recently about um illegal immigrants, I think a lot of people would think that just right off the bat, especially more towards, more so in the South, um that a lot of the Hispanics are illegal immigrants.

Note that Eduardo (HI) qualifies his conclusions as applying to people “more so in the South.” Above, I discussed how some participants reported that people from the U.S. South in general might be more racist than in other parts of the country, mostly due to overtly segregated past policies and the current lack of racial diversity, and might thus be more likely to perceive Latina/os as portrayed in the media. In addition, the high percentage of recent immigrants to the area might encourage racist attitudes. Eduardo confirms these previous findings using one specific media image, that of the “illegal immigrant.” Chávez (2008) claims this image represents one of the most prevailing representations of Latina/os in the news. According to Eduardo, this image is so prevalent that “a lot of people would think that just right off the bat,” that is, without thinking twice about equating Latina/os to “illegal immigrants,” or, as Leonardo (LI) put it, “without knowing anything.”

*“Americans see Latinos in the sense of low class, uneducated.”*

While all participants agreed that media representations of Latina/os contribute to white American viewers perceiving Latina/os as “criminals” and “illegal immigrants,” only HIs attributed a third category of “beliefs,” that of Latina/os as uneducated. Indeed, answering one of the questions I asked about the relationship between media portrayals of Latina/os and white Americans’ perceptions of Latina/os in general, Eduardo (HI) mentioned academic expectations:

I think a lot of people would think that Latinos aren’t that um, aren’t that um, aren’t that motivated to get a post high school graduate um, a post high school education, and that, that, that we don’t have that, the capability of obtaining a post high school education, whether it be in the university or just community college.

Eduardo (HI) straightforwardly talks about the low expectations of Latina/os beyond high school. We cannot ignore the fact that Latino high school students have the highest dropout rates, but we also need to keep in mind that the number of Latinos attending college is increasing, as mentioned in chapter 1. However, Eduardo, discussing potential media effects on audiences, suggests that because Latina/os are not portrayed in the media as excelling academically, viewers might perceive them as not “motivated” or not having “the capability of obtaining a post high school education.” While talking about entertainment media portrayals of Latina/os and the use of Spanish, Arturo (HI) commented on the reality of Latina/os speaking Spanish in the U.S., but then added the following:

Comedy shows as well like to poke fun at Latinos, and sometimes it’s funny and sometimes it’s like a little too much. Um, you know shows like *Tosh.O*, um, shows like that um, it, it’s, it’s funny and witty at times but it also reinforces that English, there’s a joke he said that ‘I have voices in my head but I don’t understand them ‘cause they, they keep speaking Spanish.’ That’s funny [*he chuckles*] but at the same time he, and after that he followed it ‘I think the voices in my head should, should just go get a job.’ Um and so it, it, it’s funny in the sense that um, the Spanish-speaking people, and it’s based on some

reality, we Latinos speak Spanish in America and look for jobs. But at the same time it reinforces, and it primes, I guess, constructs more of, of how Americans see Latinos in the sense of low class, uneducated and um, you know, very low, um, SES [socioeconomic status].

Arturo (HI) uses a specific example of a television comedy show to illustrate how the recurrent media portrayal of Latina/os as jobless Spanish speakers may influence viewers to associate Latina/o with “low class” and “uneducated.” Viewers might assume that Latina/os use Spanish because they do not know how to speak English, which is directly related to being “low class” and “uneducated.” Arturo’s comment also illustrates the intersectionality of race and class, which suggests that uneducated and low-class Latina/os are more racialized than educated and more affluent Latina/os (Alcolff, 2006). In this sense, Latina/os are not perceived in white Americans’ minds solely as a racial group, but they also represent a social class that is lower than that of white Americans. While all participants agreed that media representations could influence viewers to perceive Latina/os as “criminals” and/or “illegal immigrants,” HIs also reported that American viewers could perceive Latina/os as uneducated. HI and LI participants also expressed different thoughts regarding Americans’ ideas on the origins of U.S. Latina/os.

*“They’re all Mexican.”*

All four HIs whose parents are not Mexicans (Arturo, Federico, Hernando and Miguel) said that most white Americans perceive all Latina/os as Mexicans. However, only one of the three LIs whose parents are not Mexicans (Javier) mentioned this generalization. Federico (HI) offered the most comprehensive explanation regarding this misconception. He said that media “portray Hispanics as Central Americans because they are the largest population of Hispanics in the United States.” Indeed, a report compiled for the U.S. Census revealed that Central Americans currently make up 70.9 percent of Latina/os in the U.S., out of whom 63 percent are



Mexicans (Ennis et al., 2011). Federico (HI), who is of Puerto-Rican and Cuban ancestry, continued to explain how media contribute to reinforcing the idea that all Latina/os are Mexicans:

If you look at any big Hispanic names, on television, George Lopez, Carlos Mencia, Gabriel Iglesias, they're all Mexican. Carlos Mencia is like half, but, still they're portrayed as Mexicans on TV, and they're representing the whole Latino community when they stand up and do their comedy.

Interestingly, none of these comedians was born in Mexico; Mencia was born in Honduras, as Federico said, "Mencia is like half," and both Lopez and Iglesias were born in California. All, however, can trace their heritage to Mexico and mainly poke fun at Mexican-American characters in their comedy shows. Federico's comment suggests that because the main Latino media celebrities are of Mexican heritage, it is natural that when Americans hear "the term Latino or the term Hispanic, they automatically think 'Mexican.'" Federico also said that news media portrayals of Latina/os contribute to associating all Latina/os with Mexicans:

When they see so many Latinos in the news crossing the borders, um, it will, it, it influences them, 'cause the border that they're always crossing is the Mexican border. So people will think that, that's what, that's what causes so many people to think if you're Hispanic in the United States you're Mexican.

Federico (HI) also blames the news media for showing images that can mislead viewers regarding the status of Latina/os in the U.S. His comment suggests that media should be responsible for educating their audience on immigration matters. Indeed, one of the main roles of news organizations is to educate audiences about national and international events. However, these media representations made some HIs of non-Mexican heritage feel discriminated against

by referring to them as “Mexicans.” Arturo (HI), who is of Salvadoran ancestry, said that when he gets “called or stereotyped as a Mexican,” it denies him his Salvadoran identity and it reduces “the whole [Latina/o] culture into one thing,” which he refers to as “really subtle” racism.

Miguel (HI), who is of Dominican ancestry, recalled an incident in which some of his Latino friends had been invited to party at one of the predominantly white fraternities by a white member of that fraternity. However, when they arrived at the party, Miguel said his friends were confronted with the following welcome by the white fraternity members: “you guys are Mexicans, get out of our house.” Miguel then added that his friends “weren’t Mexican at all” but they were nevertheless perceived and identified as such. In this incident, the fraternity members use the term “Mexican” to express their difference from and disrespect for Latina/os who are not worthy of being in their house. Therefore, “Mexican” is not only used as a racial slur, but as a form of othering one group of people from another. Arturo (HI) had mentioned that when white Americans address him as “Mexican,” he feels it carries “connotations of ‘go back to Mexico.’” In other words, the connotation is to leave the country, or as the fraternity members said, to “get out of our house.”

As Federico (HI) remarked, media can be held responsible for associating Latina/os with Mexicans. While participants’ comments on this matter were not prompted by any particular question during our interviews, I did ask all participants how they thought media representations of Latina/os affect white Americans’ perceptions of Latina/os in general. As with their answers regarding how they perceived Latina/os to be portrayed in the media, HIs were more detailed in their responses than LIs were. Overall, participants expressed similar thoughts regarding the relationship between media portrayals of Latina/os and white American viewers’ perceptions of Latina/os in general. When discussing this relationship, HIs provided longer answers and were

more thorough in their explanations. This suggests that HIs may have been thinking more about the effects of media on perceptions than LIs. On the other hand, many LIs seemed to be giving this subject serious thought for the first time during our interviews.

As in the previous discussion concerning participants' accounts of how they thought media portray Latina/os, participants did not mention the most recent and more favorable media images of Latina/os mentioned in chapter 2. This is not surprising, as they seem to either not be familiar with these alternative images, or the stereotypical images are simply too salient in their mind for them to notice an improvement in media portrayal of Latina/os. Indeed, participants either stated that media provided them with no positive Latina/o role models or did not mention anything about the presence of such role models.

*“As of right now, we don't have any role models [...] we serve as the role models.”*

All HIs mentioned the lack of U.S. Latina/o role models to look up to. On the contrary, only one LI (Javier) noted the lack of role models for Latina/os in the U.S. This difference between the two groups could be attributed to participants' level of cultural identification. LIs may not be actively searching for U.S. Latina/o role models because their *Latinidad* is not a salient part of their identity. LIs may also be more likely to find role models in white American leaders, who may not appeal to HIs as much. In terms of role models, González (2002) notes the importance of inviting Latina/o guest speakers on campus, as well as of classes focusing on the Latina/o experience in the U.S. so that Latina/o students can take more pride in their heritage and feel the university respects their culture.

Participants who mentioned the lack of U.S. Latina/o role models argued that it represents a motivation for them to work hard so they can become role models for the next generation of Latina/o students. Arturo (HI) was the most vocal on this topic, stating: “we don't

have, we don't have leaders um, in the Latino community, we don't as, as Latino Americans we don't have leaders." To emphasize that he is not the only one with that thought, he added: "when you ask Latino students who their role model and leader is, you have nothing." This comment suggests that Arturo might have previously discussed this issue with other Latina/os. Arturo did mention two people who could currently be regarded as the "main" U.S. Latina/os role models: Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina Supreme Court Justice, who was born in New York of Puerto-Rican parents, and Jorge Ramos, a journalist for Univision, who was born in Mexico. However, Arturo immediately followed his mention of Justice Sotomayor and Mr. Ramos with a comment placing their accomplishments in a larger context: "but these people, they really haven't done, gone like beyond I guess. I wouldn't say that they're not leaders, they're, they're leaders but um, to measure Jorge Ramos to Dr. Martin Luther King, it's almost like a sin." Arturo's point of reference for an accomplished non-white leader is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a civil rights champion, and arguably one of the most famous and respected African-American leaders. No participant, however, mentioned César Chávez as a U.S. Latino role model. Chávez, who was born in Arizona and was of Mexican descent, was a labor leader and civil rights activist who fought for farm workers' rights from the 1950s to the 1970s, and is considered the "Latino Martin Luther King Jr." Arturo's (HI) comment implies that due to the lack of U.S. Latina/o leaders, Latina/os in search of role models may turn to other racial minority leaders. In addition, because media emphasize certain figures more than others, U.S. Latina/os are less likely to encounter Latina/o role models in the media. As previously mentioned, with no role models to emulate, HI participants perceive themselves as being role models for younger Latina/os. As Arturo (HI) said:

We serve as the role models because we are at, we are at a prestigious university, we are the role models for Latinos that are high school students that are not here, so we're like, 'hey if he made it, I can make it too.'

Arturo's (HI) comment illustrates the importance of role models, especially for the youth who, according to him, need to see that Latina/os "can make it" to college. He feels responsible to succeed to compensate for the lack of Latina/o role models in the media. Similarly, Eduardo (HI) also mentioned that many Latina/os grow up with no role model or "positive influence" and the role he can play to change that. He said that attending college has motivated him to "tell them [Latina/o high school students] that there is the possibility for them to do something with their futures." Eduardo's comment mirrors Arturo's, implying that young Latina/os need to see successful Latina/os to realize that they too can be successful. If media do not deliver this message to Latina/o youth, high-achieving Latina/os feel they should present it in person. In his study on Latina/o youth, Cammarota (2004) followed Latina college graduates who went back to their predominantly Latina/o neighborhoods and changed the expectations of Latinas. Cammarota emphasizes the impact such role models can have on communities. He states that "these new images for Latinas were absorbed by families, inspiring the younger generation to achieve positions in life that had been unattainable for the previous generation of women" (p.70). Cammarota's findings support HIs' claims and suggest HIs' desire to serve as role models for younger Latina/os would bear fruit. Steele (1997) also address the importance of role models in his work on stereotype threat—the idea that members of a stereotyped group are aware that others might perceive them as reinforcing negative group stereotypes—which I discussed in chapter 2. Steele posits that "people from the stereotype-threatened group who have been successful in the domain carry the message that stereotype threat is not an insurmountable barrier there" (p.625).

Mauricio (HI) used the example of his nephews, who are 5 and 7 years old, to show how important role models can be for young people in thinking about their future: “my nephews, like they’re gonna want to go to school, and they’re already talking about going to school just because I go to school.” Mauricio, who is the first person in his family to attend college, acts as a role model for his nephews. Without Mauricio’s example, one may wonder whether they would have expressed as much enthusiasm about going to school. Similar to Mauricio’s nephews, five participants (two HIs and three LIs) mentioned that they see their parents or older siblings as role models, leading them to realize that Latina/os can be successful in the U.S and/or to motivate them to excel. For instance, when Javier (LI) mentioned the lack of high-achieving Latina/o students in his high-school, he added, “my parents were those high-achieving examples for me, my parents and my older sister was also.” Indeed, Javier’s parents and his sister graduated from college in New York, and Javier recalls discussing his college application process with his mother. Growing up, Javier thus knew college was accessible to Latina/os.

Alejandro (LI), whose parents attended college in Puerto Rico and then came to mainland U.S. for their Master’s degrees, also described his parents as role models for “successful” U.S. Latina/os he could look up to: “I really admire my parents especially like, I really admire my Dad ‘cause I mean, he came from Puerto Rico to here and, he definitely faced adversity and then like now he’s pretty successful, like he owns his own company.” Even though Alejandro’s parents are American citizens, Alejandro mentions the “adversity” they faced as Latina/os in the U.S. Elaborating on his parents’ experiences, Alejandro said that language was one of the main barriers his parents faced due to their heavy Spanish accent. Alejandro’s parents are his role models because they overcame “adversity” to become “successful” Latina/os in the U.S. Alejandro, who speaks flawless English but is not fluent in Spanish, can look up to his parents’

achievements and try to emulate them. In chapter 7, I further address the role Spanish language plays in participants' identity.

Unlike Javier (LI) and Alejandro (LI), most participants' parents did not attend college. Nevertheless, Arturo (HI), Miguel (HI) and Ricardo (LI) said they admired the hard work ethic of their fathers. Ricardo also said that his older brother "set the standard" for excelling in school. Talking about his father, Arturo said, "growing up, I always wanted to be like him just 'cause of all the stories he told me, all the struggles he went through growing up, how he came to this country." Arturo uses his father as a role model for tenacity and aspires to be as strong as he has been going through "all the struggles" of a Latino immigrant in the U.S. Arturo's parents immigrated from El Salvador to a poor neighborhood of New York and now live in a middle-class neighborhood in North Carolina. Looking at his father's accomplishments, Arturo knows that U.S. Latina/os can overcome everyday "struggles."

### *Moving on to college*

This chapter reveals the heterogeneity of U.S. Latina/os who are too often denied their individual differences, not only in mainstream media but also in scholarship. As mentioned in chapter 2, race scholars Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) argue that most people think of Latina/os in terms of "simple answers" or "simple rules." Other studies have tried to address the complexity of Latina/o students' academic experiences by dividing them in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class, citizenship, residency status, immigration generation, parents' literacy levels and so forth. While I wanted participants to share demographic characteristics such as gender (male), place of birth (first generation U.S.-born) and immigration generation (1.5), I too divided participants based on their levels of cultural identification (high and low).

Participants' accounts also reveal differences within HIs and LIs based on their parents' country of origin, the types of neighborhoods they grew up in and their social status. All these factors are part of each participant's identity and affect his everyday experiences. However, when dealing specifically with their academic experiences, their descriptions of media representations of Latina/os and their interpretations of such representations on white Americans' perceptions of Latina/os, participants' cultural identification is the main factor affecting their personal and mediated experiences.

The previous discussion shows that participants entered college with two very different mindsets. Compared to LIs, HIs perceive race/ethnicity to be a more salient part of their identity, are more aware of stereotypical media representations of Latina/os and are more sensitive to media's effect on white Americans' perceptions of Latina/os. However, participants' overall descriptions of media representations of Latina/os were similar. Even though HIs were more thorough and critical than LIs, all participants identified many media stereotypes and seemed to be unaware of the most favorable portrayals. This is important because if participants had not agreed on media representations of Latina/os, it would have affected the credibility and dependability of the group comparison (Deaux et al., 2007). In the next chapter, I elaborate on the differences between HIs and LIs by focusing on their experiences at SEPU and the role they perceive media to play in their college experiences.



## CHAPTER VI: COLLEGE EXPERIENCES THROUGH THE MEDIA LENSES

Many education researchers have commented on the importance for Latina/o students to meet other high-achieving Latina/o students on campus because it creates a sense of belonging in large, predominantly white universities (McLaughlin González & Ting, 2008). It also reduces the pressure Latina/o students may feel to assimilate into the mainstream culture in order to succeed in college (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005). Meeting other Latina/o students in college also creates “a strong sense of common group identity,” which leads to “a higher level of satisfaction with their college campus” (Gloria et al., 2009, p.321). In this chapter, I explore the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and participants’ perceptions of their college experiences. I focus on how participants perceive media representations to affect their interactions with students and professors.

### *“More Latinos in higher education”*

After having been the only or one of the few high-achieving Latina/o student(s) in their high schools, participants were now attending a university with approximately 800 other high-achieving Latina/o students. All but two participants (Alejandro and Leonardo, both LIs) mentioned they were “excited” to have met other high-achieving Latina/o students at SEPU. Federico (HI), who stated he “wasn’t expecting many Latinos” to be attending SEPU, said not only that he “met a lot of them,” but also “started hanging out with them.” Indeed, as Hernando

(HI) said, the Latina/o student population at SEPU provides him with “a tight community where you can get along with people and have friends.”

Participants also expressed the pride they felt seeing other high-achieving Latina/o students, a sentiment they could not feel in high school. Eduardo (HI) claimed that the presence of Latina/o students on campus “gives you more of a sense of pride in yourself.” They were aware that Latina/o students were nevertheless underrepresented at SEPU. “Even though it’s not like a huge representation,” as Enrique (LI) said, they were surrounded by more Latina/o students at SEPU than they were in high school. Javier (LI) explained why meeting Latina/o students in college “strengthened” his pride:

Just seeing more, more Latinos in higher education, and since I didn’t see very many of them [high-achieving Latina/os] in my AP classes, it kind of just strengthened the idea, yeah, we, as a group, the Latino group can achieve the same as some of these other groups.

Similar to other participants’ comments, Javier’s (LI) comment indicates that he did not know many high-achieving Latina/o students prior to enrolling at SEPU. While Javier states that he “didn’t see very many of them in [his] AP classes,” findings from television content analyses mentioned in chapter 2 revealed that Javier also could not have seen “very many of them” in the media. Therefore, Javier’s personal and mediated experiences made him doubt the intellectual capabilities of Latina/os to “achieve” as well as “other groups.”

*“They tend to stick out more.”*

While HIs and four of the six LIs were pleased to meet other high-achieving Latina/o students at SEPU, HIs were more likely than LIs to report having friends from various racial/ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, only two LIs (Enrique and Leonardo) emphasized the racial

diversity of their friends. However, participants' accounts of how these friendships developed varied based on their cultural identification: HIs sought out racial minority students while LIs met them based on external circumstances. Arturo (HI), who joined SEPU's Black Student Association, stated, "I just like chilling with them [African-American students] just 'cause I can relate to them more." He then added, "I grew up with African Americans, so I relate a lot to them," concluding, "so I can definitely relate and talk to African Americans for days," something, according to Arturo, that people who grew up in predominantly white areas are unable to do. Similar to Arturo who referred to his childhood in a predominantly minority neighborhood to explain his relationship with African-American students on campus, Eduardo (HI), who also grew up in a predominantly minority neighborhood, said that belonging to a racial/ethnic minority group created a "bond" between Latina/o and African-American students:

I think that there is a bond especially like, I guess you tend to be like, to like um, say hello to each other more often and um, they tend to like um, I guess they tend to stick out more than um in, for example the, if you're in the [main campus quad], and you're the only Hispanic and there's only one other African American there's gonna, there's like, you're gonna notice them, right? So um, with that I guess like, there's a, there's a bond you can see there.

Eduardo (HI) implies that Latina/o students are more likely to "say hello" to African-American students than to white students, and vice versa because they both are part of a racial/ethnic minority group. Eduardo states that "they tend to stick out more." I am assuming he is alluding to what Alcoff (2006) refers to as "visible identity." It is interesting to note that Eduardo specifically mentioned African Americans as opposed to other racial/ethnic minorities such as Asians or South Asians, who would also physically "stick out" among a crowd of white

students. As mentioned in chapter 2, education scholars have often drawn comparisons between Latina/o and African-American students' college experiences because they have historically been more stigmatized in education settings. I will further address the relationship between participants and their African-American peers in chapter 7.

Federico (HI) was the only HI who reported actively meeting other racial/ethnic minorities aside from African-American students by becoming "very active in the Southeast Asian community." Contrary to HIs who sought out other racial/ethnic minority students, LIs accounts of their interracial friendships reveal a different scenario in which such interactions occurred because students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds found themselves in the same place at the same time. Leonardo (LI) attributed his interracial friendships to his place of residence on campus. For example, talking about his dormitory, he said that it was considered to be "the minority dorm," where he met "a lot of people that weren't Caucasian." This suggests that if he would not have lived in the "minority dorm," he would probably have had a less diverse group of friends. Similarly, Enrique (LI) said he met other racial/ethnic minority students when he joined a group of business students, whom he said, "don't care what color your skin might be."

Enrique's (LI) objective to meet people with similar interests contrasts with Arturo's (HI) decision to join SEPU's Black Student Association. When HIs did mention their white friends, they qualified their comments to make sure I understood these particular white students are "open" and "accepting" to use Hernando's (HI) and Federico's (HI) words, respectively. Even though HIs mentioned a tense racial climate between Whites and Latina/os, as described in chapter 5, Federico stated with confidence that *his* white friends are "very open to anything":

I'd say all of the white people I hang out with are very accepting, like they would not, if I brought any of my friends from any background they would not have anything odd to say. They would treat them like anybody else. Um, so the white people I do surround myself with are very open to anything.

Federico (HI) implies that “very open” white students are the exception more than the norm at SEPU. Indeed, according to his comment, typical white students, or at least the image Federico has of typical white students, would say something “odd” to people from different “backgrounds.” All HIs except Eduardo made similar comments when talking about their own white friends, thus differentiating them from other white students at SEPU who would not be as “accepting” of diversity. LIs, however, did not comment on how “open” their white friends are. Because LIs do not consider their race/ethnicity to be a salient part of their identity, they may not think that white students have to be “very open” to interact with them.

*“The cream of the crop”*

HI and LI participants sharply differed in how they felt white students perceive them. While all HIs acknowledged that attending college was not the norm for Latinos, four of them specifically mentioned that many of their white peers attributed their presence at SEPU to affirmative action policies. On the contrary, four LIs stated their white peers perceive them as “really intelligent” students who are Latinos, to use Alejandro’s (LI) words. Because SEPU is a selective university, LIs assumed that their white peers would recognize their academic achievements. As Cristian (LI) stated, “if you’re here at [SEPU] [...] you’re obviously a smart kid.” Ricardo (LI) said that white students perceive him in the same light as any other students on campus, “as equal,” stating, “I don’t think that they would see us differently, um, probably they would just see us as competition on real business jobs.” These comments from LIs suggest they feel academically integrated and respected by their white peers.

Enrique (LI) was adamant his white peers “see [him] as like the cream of the crop,” an expression he repeated five different times to emphasize how proud he feels being a successful Latino student at a highly ranked university. Enrique reinforced this idea, stating that white students “would just see me as one that rose above the rest like, which I mean, like, like not tooting my horn or anything but when I, like I know that I am like a high-achieving Latino student.” When I asked Enrique (LI) if he thought media representations of Latina/os affected white students’ perceptions of Latina/o students, he responded: “the [white] students would see the portrayals on media, see then the students on campus who are Latino, it would be like ‘ok these are probably the top of the top, maybe like the top one percent.’” Again, Enrique assumes that white students perceive SEPU Latina/o students as possessing the same intellectual capabilities as they do. In this comment, Enrique uses the media to justify his argument. According to him, how could white students *not* think that Latina/o students at SEPU are “the top of the top” when they see in the media that Latina/os are more likely to drop out of high school than to attend college.

In the previous chapter, I explained how all participants reported that media representations of Latina/os could affect audiences’ perceptions of Latina/os. Enrique (LI) himself said that such representations could lead white Americans to perceive Latina/os as “lazy” and “not as hard-working.” However, in his above comment, Enrique implies that white students’ perceptions of Latina/o students are different because of the academic environment in which these perceptions take place. As I further explain in this chapter, other participants also noted that a young Latina/o walking on campus with a backpack may elicit different images in white students’ minds than that same Latina/o walking downtown. Indeed, as mentioned in chapter 2, Ladson-Billings (1998), an African-American female professor at a predominantly

white university, explained that the context in which she finds herself influences how she is perceived, stating that in some contexts, such as university functions, she becomes “conceptually White” (p.5).

*“You got in here because of a loophole.”*

The previous comments from LIs sharply contrast with how HIs feel white students perceive them. For instance, Mauricio (HI) said that white students might think that Latina/o students who have been accepted at SEPU “got lucky,” while Eduardo (HI) stated, “I think that people might think that um, I got in, I got in just because I’m Latino you know and that um, the school is just trying to diversify their student population.” In this scenario, Latina/o students are far from being perceived as “the cream of the crop” as Enrique (LI) said earlier. On the contrary, Eduardo suggests that Latina/o students’ role at SEPU has more to do with “diversifying” the student population than engaging in academic activities. Hernando (HI), who was the most vocal about white students perceiving Latina/o students as filling a “quota,” added that “when white students look at other minority students here they, they think, I know a bunch of them think like um, what is it um, what is it, affirmative action.” Hernando suggests that white students do not believe that racial minorities possess the intellectual capabilities to study at a university as prestigious as SEPU, but rather that their presence on campus is dependent on affirmative action policies.

These comments from HIs are consistent with the education literature on this matter. In his study on Latina/o students’ transition to a predominantly white university, Lopez (2005) established that the majority of Latina/o students felt their white peers and professors perceived them as the beneficiaries of affirmative action policies, implying that they were able to enroll in college because of their racial/ethnic background and not because of their intellectual

capabilities. Similarly, Fischer (2010) explained that African-American and Latina/o students at selective universities “must contend with the related suspicions that their admission may have involved some ‘bending’ of academic standards” (p.23). Comparing the two groups, Laar and her colleagues (2008) found that Latina/o students were more likely than African-American students to believe they were admitted through affirmative action. Miguel (HI) also commented on the relationship between affirmative action and white students’ perceptions of Latina/o students:

Maybe the way they [white students] see it is like ‘you’ve only made it this far because of um, what is it affirmative action or something like that,’ like ‘the only reason you’re here is because like, we have to admit Latinos.’ Or maybe like ‘he didn’t work as hard to be here as I did’ you know, ‘he just has that advantage because he’s like colored’ or something like that.

Miguel’s (HI) comment offers four scenarios explaining why white students believe that Latina/o students could not have been accepted to SEPU without any additional help. According to him, white students see Latina/o students as having an “advantage” due to their *Latinidad*, suggesting that white students need to compensate by working harder. Miguel’s comment also hints at the resentment white students may have towards Latina/o students if the former believe that Latina/os do not deserve to study at SEPU, or even worse, if white students believe that an unqualified Latina/o student took the place of a qualified white student. These comments from HIs suggest that if SEPU did not have affirmative action policies to abide by, Latina/o students on campus would be rarer than they currently are. Indeed, according to HIs, white students do not believe that Latina/o students possess the same intellectual capabilities as they do. While HIs suggested that white students perceive them as intellectually inferior, LIs claimed that white students perceive them as equal. These two different perspectives are directly related to participants’ college experiences because they reveal how integrated they feel on campus.



*“I fit in perfectly” versus “Being discriminated”*

Latina/o students at SEPU have different college experiences; there is no “typical” college experience for Latina/o students. Indeed, all participants reported that college experiences for Latina/o students would mostly depend on the people they surrounded themselves with and the types of student organizations and/or activities they decided to join. For instance, Alejandro (LI) and Enrique (LI) both said that their college experiences have been heavily influenced by their membership in predominantly white fraternities. Federico (HI) said he knew Latina/o students who “focus on their studies very much,” to the extent that “they’ll limit their interactions with other people.” Similarly, Eduardo (HI) and Ricardo (LI) commented on the heterogeneity of Latina/o students’ college experiences. Eduardo, referring to Latina/o students’ college experience, proposed that “it’s what you make it” whereas Ricardo stated, “everybody’s experience in college is what they make of it themselves.” Therefore, it would be misleading to address Latina/o students’ college experiences as if they were the same. However, despite the heterogeneity of Latina/o college students, participants’ answers revealed two different types of college experiences based on Latina/o students’ levels of cultural identification.

Before addressing how participants perceive the role media representations of Latina/os play in their college experiences, I discuss how HI and LI participants described the SEPU campus based on how they felt about being Latino there. These descriptions either display “camaraderie” and basketball games, according to LIs, or “racism” and Latina/o student organizations, according to HIs. All LIs reported that they felt “comfortable” and “fit in very nicely” at SEPU. For example, Alejandro (LI) said, “everybody around here [SEPU] especially is very accepting,” while Cristian (LI) said, “I feel comfortable here [SEPU], like I feel safe.” Enrique (LI) expressed his satisfaction with his college experiences, stating, “I’ve always felt

like I fit in perfectly, like I love the school and I love sports. I love the academic side of it. It all just worked out really well.” Other LIs echoed Enrique’s “fit in perfectly” comment by saying they do not feel different from SEPU’s undergraduate student body. It is worth noting that SEPU’s undergraduate student body is composed, among others, of 69.1% white students and 5.4% Latina/o students. Despite these demographics, Javier (LI) said, “I feel like I’m just like any other student” and “I feel like I’m part of the [SEPU] community,” while Alejandro (LI) stated, “I’d say I’m pretty similar to the student body.” These comments illustrate how well LIs feel integrated and “part of the community” at SEPU. Alejandro’s (LI) concise and straightforward comment indicates that as far as he is concerned, there are virtually no differences between him and SEPU’s student body. These comments might suggest that because race/ethnicity is not a salient part of LIs’ identity, they reported experiencing college “just like any other student.”

The comments contrast with how HI participants reported feeling at SEPU. Indeed, while LIs overall said they “fit in perfectly” on campus, HIs mentioned instances in which they felt isolated and/or victims of covert racism. For instance, Hernando (HI) compared the SEPU students to the people in the small North Carolinian town where he grew up, saying that “the white people here on campus are, more racist and more closed off, a lot more closed off.” His repetition of “closed off” suggests that he has not been treated in the most welcoming way. Compared to LIs, race/ethnicity represents a salient aspect of HIs’ identity. Several studies reported that students who strongly associate with their racial/ethnic group and are aware of the stereotypes attributed to their group, often interpret their everyday interactions as being the result of others’ stereotypical belief about their group (Gonzales et al., 2002; Guyll et al., 2010, p.118; Laar et al., 2008). Hernando’s (HI) and other HIs’ comments illustrate that point, which Laar and

her colleagues (2008) summarized, stating that college students who strongly identify with their racial/ethnic group “perceive more ethnic discrimination against their group on campus” (p.300).

Arturo (HI) commented on a specific group of the SEPU student population, stating, “you definitely have those students who are really intolerant and have really conservative ideas and, and um, I guess you would call these people racist.” Both Hernando (HI) and Arturo use the term “racist” to describe how they perceive certain “people here on campus,” which is in sharp contrast to how Javier (LI) and Alejandro (LI), among other LIs quoted above, described their overall perceptions of campus. To illustrate this “racist” climate, Miguel (HI) described what he witnessed everyday on campus:

Me actually being discriminated, just seeing, just body language, facial expressions, um, of white counterpart students, my white students, peers, when I look at them, when they see me, when I’m talking to them, when I see them interacting with other minorities or I see them observing other minorities interact, that facial expression.

Miguel (HI) described a series of covert forms of racism directed towards him or other racial minority students. Indeed, the “body language” and “facial expressions” of white students are subtle ways for them to convey that minorities are not as welcome on campus as Whites. I was particularly interested in Miguel’s comment that he noticed the facial expressions of white students “observing other minorities interact.” I asked Miguel how often he thought these covert forms of racism occurred at SEPU:

I can tell it happens every day, I know 100 percent sure, there’s no doubt in my mind, you know, I’d put my job on it, [*he chuckles*], you know that it happens every single day, every, at least 10 times an hour, it happens around this campus, at least, at least, at least, you know.

While it would be close to impossible to verify Miguel's (HI) claim that covert forms of racism occur "at least 10 times an hour," his repetition of "at least" three times at the end of his comment, indicates that Miguel thinks that figure is underrepresenting the reality. Miguel's comment represents another sharp contrast between HI and LI participants' perceptions of their college experiences. According to Miguel, "there's no doubt in [his] mind" that racial minority students are victims of such acts, whether they notice it or not. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that LI participants think they "fit in perfectly" on campus because they do not notice the "body language" and "facial expressions" of white students "observing" them. However, the HIs did not imply that LI Latina/os perceive themselves or are perceived as Whites.

Previous education studies have also reported tense racial climates at predominantly white universities and have emphasized the importance of improving interracial relations on campus (Hurtado, 2005; Miller & García, 2004; Pinel et al., 2005; Young & Brooks, 2008). Strayhorn (2008) talks about the "marginality that often results from an unwelcoming environment that fails to appreciate, embrace, and engage diversity" (p.305), whereas Castellanos and Gloria (2007) state that "from negative campus interactions to not finding mentors who understand their particular needs, Latina/o students continue to experience the university as an unwelcoming and often discriminatory learning setting" (p.382). Acts of discrimination are an educational barrier that more than half of Latina/o students report having faced or witnessed (Cavazos et al., 2010). Some race scholars refer to subtle discrimination acts as "microaggressions." Davis (1989) defined microaggressions as "stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (p. 1576). Indeed, "racial microaggressions send messages implying that People of Color are unintelligent, foreign, criminally prone, and deserving of socially marginal

status” (Yosso et al., 2009, p.662). Delgado and Jean Stefancic (1992) list “body language, averted gazes, [and] exasperated looks” as examples of microaggressions on campus (p.1283). These examples validate Miguel’s (HI) above comment about the acts of subtle racism he experiences and witnesses at SEPU.

HIs’ accounts of racism at SEPU are “interpersonal microaggressions,” which refer to “verbal and nonverbal racial affronts directed at Latinas/os from students, faculty, teaching assistants, or other individuals in academic and social spaces. These incessant interpersonal attacks lead Latinas/os to feel that their presence disrupts the ‘natural’ state of being on campus” (Yosso et al., 2009, p.667). However, findings from this dissertation only confirmed microaggressions from white students. As I discuss later in this chapter, no participant reported negative experiences with faculty.

In his study of doctoral Latina/o scholars at predominantly white universities in California, Solorzano (1998) found that all Latina/o scholars reported experiencing “subtle and not so subtle racist and sexist incidents” because of their racial/ethnic origins (p.128). Similar to HIs, Solórzano’s participants were “not blind” to microaggressions from other students (p.132). Yosso and her colleagues (2009) argued that microaggressions send Latina/o students the message that “the university is not a safe, welcoming place” (p.669). To use Yosso’s and her colleagues’ (2009) words, findings reported in this chapter confirm that HIs perceive the behavior of their white peers “as a *rejection* of their presence at the university” (p.667, italics in original).

*“I didn’t expect that ignorance.”*

Miguel (HI) recounted an experience in which he clearly felt isolated because of his Latina/o heritage. He told me about a leadership conference he participated in at SEPU with other SEPU students, whom he defined as “above and beyond, very high achieving, um, you know, renowned students.” He then reiterated the excellence of these students stating, “these are leaders on campus, you know what I mean, these are students who for two, three, four years have been working with other students, faculty, staff, professors, everyone, to make an impact on campus.” Miguel really wanted to emphasize that students who participated in the conference were some of SEPU’s top students. Regarding the racial composition of the conference attendees, Miguel said, “it’s predominantly white, I mean our school’s predominantly white, so that makes sense, it was almost the same representation um, that you have like in our school.”

The context of the conference is important because Miguel thought that participating in an event with students of such high academic caliber would represent a different experience than the everyday covert forms of racism he mentioned above. Miguel explained that participants were divided in various groups “almost equally as representative in like, different um, races” to work on assignments together. The following quote clearly shows how Miguel realized the salience of one’s race/ethnicity regardless of the context, as well as his explanation for this phenomenon:

When the assignment was set and done and we still had time left over, um, people still went and spoke to, and maybe just made conversation, just to kill time, with those that were similar to them, so you know, the white students spoke to the white students, the black students spoke to the black students, and the Hispanic students spoke to the Hispanics and so on and so forth, you know, and that was really interesting to me, ‘cause I thought, I thought I was dealing with a different level of students, I didn’t expect that ignorance, so it’s just, pretty much what that showed me was, it really doesn’t matter whether you’re low-achieving, high-achieving student, it has nothing to do with, education, motivation, anything, it has to do with the way you were brought up, you

know, and quite frankly people in the South are just, whether it'd be the way like things are geographically set out with the neighborhoods system, I don't know, but people just raised with people like themselves, so when they get to college level and they're surrounded by people of different walks of life, they just are very intimidated to interact with them.

Miguel's (HI) account shows how disappointed he was to be perceived first and foremost as a Latino, as opposed to being perceived as a high-achieving student who is Latino. Indeed, while Miguel had been used to feeling differently at SEPU, he expected more from these "above and beyond, very high achieving" students than the "ignorance" he witnessed. Based on Miguel's account, he found himself in a segregated social environment. I did not ask Miguel why he did not take the initiative to go talk to a non-Latina/o group of students, but I think that he might have been too shocked or surprised at the situation that he was not in a mental state to make such an effort and risk experiencing further segregation. His comment on "the neighborhoods system" in the South recalls the racial/ethnic demographics of North Carolina mentioned in chapter 1, which suggest that it is possible for many white people in North Carolina to have only limited interactions with non-white people. In addition, as I discuss later in this chapter, all participants reported that people naturally feel more comfortable with people who appear to be similar to them. According to Miguel's reasoning, it is no surprise that white American students might be "intimidated to interact" with Latina/o students.

Miguel's (HI) account is also telling because he offered an explanation as to why these "above and beyond" students acted with such "ignorance." According to him, the social segregation he experienced at the conference is a logical extension of the geographical segregation these students grew up in. Indeed, Miguel said that because these students were "raised with people like themselves" they "are very intimidated to interact with" people who are

not like themselves. Therefore, it seems that Miguel attributes these students' behavior to their "ignorance" of other cultures rather than to potential racist views they may hold.

*"I don't wanna put myself in the situations where I think I could get, experience racism"*

While Miguel (HI) seems to give students the benefit of the doubt regarding their potential racism in that specific scenario, Hernando (HI) expressed his feelings on the matter more directly. For instance, he said that he voluntarily limited his interactions with other students because he might "experience racism": "I stick to the people that I know and the people that know me, they know my culture better. [...] I don't wanna put myself in the situations where I think I could get, experience racism." As we continued our discussion, Hernando said that "the people" he is talking about, those who know him and his culture are other Latina/o students. His comment can be interpreted as inflicting self-social isolation. Indeed, Hernando assumes that if he ventures outside of his social circle on campus, he might "experience racism." Similar to Hernando's experience, Lopez (2005) talks about the "racial balkanization" that can occur at predominantly white universities if Latina/o students feel a hostile campus racial climate. If Latina/o students do not feel comfortable interacting with white students, they "meet their social needs by interacting with students who share their experiences of discrimination" (Lopez, 2005, p.361).

When I asked Hernando (HI) for concrete examples of racism he either experienced or witnessed, he talked about the parties held by white fraternities on campus, stating, "if you're not white, if you don't look like them, they won't let you into their parties, they won't associate themselves with you." His comment shows the racial division he perceives is taking place at certain social events where white students prefer to party with people who "look like them," thus further alienating and isolating students such as Hernando and other HIs. Arturo (HI) made a



similar remark regarding parties but he broadened his example beyond predominantly white fraternities to any “majority white party” where “you’re the only Latino in there.” During such events, Arturo stated, “you’re easy to point out, so you get really bad stares, people talking about you, whispering behind your back, ‘does he belong here?’ ‘what’s he doing here?’” Arturo’s comment also echoes Miguel’s (HI) comment that people are used to being “with people like themselves” so much so that when someone is “easy to point out” due to his race/ethnicity, people ask themselves “does he belong here?” Arturo’s comment also illustrates the uneasiness that comes with attending predominantly white parties where he might not feel welcome because he worries about what others might be “whispering behind [his] back.”

Contrary to HI participants who all mentioned feeling isolated or being discriminated against, only two LI participants (Cristian and Leonardo) talked about instances in which they felt victims of racism. However, unlike the accounts of HIs, who for the most part described general instances of racism on campus, implying that white students’ racist attitudes towards Latina/os are common at SEPU, two LIs recounted an instance in which only one specific individual was involved. Cristian (LI) talked about the white American roommate he had his freshman year, stating, “sometimes he makes like random, like not racist jokes, but reference like Mexican jokes or like some type of joke like that.” It is interesting that Cristian classifies his roommates’ “Mexican jokes” as “not racist jokes,” which might suggest why Cristian, quoted above, said, “I feel comfortable here.” By undermining the racist tone of his roommate’s joke, Cristian can continue to think that he is not experiencing racism. However, race scholars posit that racial jokes constitute a form of microaggression (Yosso et al., 2009). I asked Cristian if he had told his roommate how he felt about his “Mexican jokes.” He replied that he did not feel comfortable addressing that matter and thought that his roommate would get the hint because he

was not laughing at his jokes. Leonardo (LI) recounted a somewhat similar incident involving Molly, one of the white American roommates of his white American girlfriend:

I get this really, really bad vibe, like she, like the other, she was with three other girls, they're all white from North Carolina, and the other two were like, you know, like I've met them so you know we're at least acquaintances, so I say hi, they say hi back, and the last one, every time I say hi, she kind of just gives me a look, it's kind of like, I don't know what it's about, but I do know that like, from what other people tell me, that she, she doesn't really hang out with anyone who's not white.

The “really bad vibe” and the “look” Leonardo (LI) said that Molly gives him mirrors Miguel’s (HI) previous comment regarding the “body language” and “facial expressions” of white students as covert forms of racism Miguel reported experiencing every day and added that occurred “at least 10 times an hour” on campus. While Leonardo said that Molly “doesn’t really hang out with anyone who’s not white,” he does not explicitly label her attitude racist, which suggests that similar to Cristian (LI), Leonardo undermines the seriousness of Molly’s actions. When I asked Leonardo if he had discussed that matter with his girlfriend, he replied that his girlfriend “just told me that she is racist.” While Leonardo’s girlfriend called Molly a “racist,” Leonardo never did. It is interesting to note that this comment, “she is racist,” is supposed to explain Molly’s behavior towards Leonardo as if it were normal for her to treat him this way because “she is racist.” I then asked Leonardo if he and his girlfriend had talked about ways to deal with this situation, to which he simply replied: “it doesn’t bother me, so, it’s not like an issue that I need to bring up, I’d rather stay away from issues.”

Leonardo’s decision to avoid talking about it to “stay away from issues” is similar to Cristian’s decision to avoid confronting his roommate on his “Mexican jokes.” While Cristian minimized the impact of the jokes by saying they were “not racist jokes,” Leonardo said that

Molly's "really bad vibe" "doesn't bother [him]." However, both Cristian and Leonardo decided to talk about these incidents during our interviews, thus suggesting they might affect their college experiences more than they are willing to acknowledge. Regardless of how participants interpret their interactions with other students, it is imperative they feel welcome on campus. Many education researchers have stressed the importance of a positive campus climate on Latina/o students' attrition rates. As Bordes and Arredondo (2005) pointed out, Latina/o students' perceptions of feeling welcomed and belonging to a university are more important than their perceived intellectual capabilities in their decision to stay or drop out of college. Such findings were confirmed by McLaughlin González and Ting (2008), who found that obtaining good grades would not necessarily lead to retention of Latina/o students if they did not feel welcome on campus.

#### *Sporting events versus Latina/o student organizations*

All LIs mentioned that university sports played an important role in their college experiences. While SEPU is nationally recognized for its high academic standards, it is also a basketball and football powerhouse, and many of its other sports are regularly top-ranked in the nation. All LIs stated they followed university sports and that this "passion" made them feel like "part of the [SEPU] family," as Enrique (LI) said. He provided the following account of the first time he attended a SEPU basketball game against a better-ranked team: "We ended up beating them, and everyone was really happy in the dome and we came out and it was actually snowing, and everyone was outside of their balconies, [...] and they were cheering and everyone was going like ['SEPU']." In addition to recalling the fervor he experienced firsthand, Enrique then thought back about this moment and added, "it made me just identify so much more with the school, that was my first like big time like, like this happened at [SEPU] and I was part of it, it

wasn't just like hearing it from the older people." Enrique's comment illustrates the important role sports can play in a student's college experience. Attending that basketball game and participating in the celebrations made Enrique "identify so much more with the school" and provided him with his own story to tell as opposed to similar stories he had heard "from the older people." Javier (LI) also talked at length about how attending basketball games contributed to his "awesome" college experiences:

Everyone is just united for this one 'cause, I mean we really, really don't have any impact on the game, but, but everyone, everyone loves it, we're so into the game, um, that the last [rival team] game that was a few weeks ago, me and a group of friends went down there, the game started at 9:00, we were down there at 2:30, so we were there seven hours before the game just trying to get good seats, and there were about 300 people there, also seven hours early trying to get seats, and everyone was just, the camaraderie was just amazing, it was just awesome, and even though we lost the game, in a heartbreaking fashion, like everyone was kind of there for each other after the game, like hand over the shoulder, you know just a really cool, cool experience.

Javier's (LI) detailed account of this particular basketball game suggests that for him, participating in such sporting events represents an integral part of his college experience. Indeed, through basketball, he felt the "camaraderie" of "about 300 people" "united for this one 'cause." Throughout my discussions with Javier, he kept referring to basketball games as some of his "favorite moments" at SEPU. While all LIs talked about university sports as being an important aspect of their college experiences, only two HIs (Eduardo and Mauricio) briefly mentioned their support for SEPU's sports teams. This might be because HIs do not consider sports such as basketball and football, the two main U.S. university sports, as being salient to their Latina/o culture.

Whereas LIs credited sporting events for positively contributing to their college experiences, all HIs mentioned their active involvement in Latina/o student organizations as "one

of the highlights of my college career,” to use Arturo’s (HI) words. Through these organizations, Arturo said that he found his “Latino-ness” because, as he explained, “I do Latino stuff [*he chuckles*] that I definitely miss back at home.” In other words, Arturo’s involvement with Latina/o organizations helps him cope with being homesick. Similarly, Eduardo (HI) talked about the “close relationships” he formed with other members of Latina/o organizations, and Mauricio (HI) said he met Latina/os who “had the same interests” as he did. Mauricio explained why he enjoyed socializing with other members of the main Latina/o student organization at SEPU:

[The Latina/o student organization] was definitely somewhere, a place where I met um, it was definitely, I feel like a chill time to just socialize with other students that either had, like, similarities, like interests, in terms of interests, maybe favorite TV shows, like things like that, but they had similarities just ‘cause, like we probably, did the same thing when we were little.

Thanks to Latina/o student organizations, Mauricio (HI) was able to meet similar students who shared “interests” and with whom he could identify. Even though Mauricio attended a predominantly white high school, he also said he had four close Latino friends at that school. As an out-of-state student at a predominantly white university, where Mauricio said he knew no one when he started his freshman year, Latina/o student organizations provide him with “a place” where he can “chill” and “socialize” with similar students. Federico (HI) also credits Latina/o student organizations for facilitating his meeting of other Latina/o students and getting “in touch with [his] Hispanic roots more.” Without these organizations, he added, “I probably would have been busy with more white friends than I am with all my Hispanic friends.” The “white friends” Federico mentions are from the predominantly white, in-state high school Federico attended and who are also enrolled at SEPU. However, because of participating in Latina/o student

organizations, Federico is not only able to befriend other Latina/o students but also to stay connected with his “Hispanic roots.”

In contrast to LIs who barely mentioned the presence of Latina/o student organizations, HIs said they actively sought out these organizations to meet other Latina/o students. All participants attended predominantly white high schools, but HIs reported feeling less at ease in predominantly white settings than LIs did. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that LIs may not need the social support Latina/o student organizations can provide because they feel comfortable surrounded by white students, whereas HIs might feel more isolated. Hernando (HI), for example, noted that not all Latina/o students at SEPU sought out Latina/o student organizations:

I looked for ways to embrace my Latino culture and to enhance it basically. Um, I don't think everybody would do that, I mean I know a lot of people, not everybody does that, some people just like kind of try to blend in, they have a lot of white friends, some people don't wanna be coded Hispanic.

Hernando (HI) is adamant that Latina/o student organizations provided him with “ways to embrace [his] Latino culture.” Without these organizations, his college experiences might have resembled his high school ones. During his senior year of college, Hernando was the president of the main Latina/o student organization on campus. However, he also noted that getting involved with Latina/o student organizations is not the default option of Latina/o students. Indeed, he mentioned Latina/o students who “try to blend in” with the white culture by having “a lot of white friends” and not wanting to “be coded Hispanic.”

This distinction between Latina/o students who want to “embrace” their Latina/o heritage on one hand, and those who “try to blend in” on the other, is similar to the distinction between HIs and LIs. However, I would like to point out that I do not assume that LIs “try to blend in” or

refuse to “be coded Hispanic,” but rather that their Latina/o heritage does not represent a salient aspect of their identity. In addition, if the LIs truly refused to “be coded Hispanic,” they would not have responded to my recruitment efforts stating that this study dealt specifically with Latino college students. Regardless, HIs had their own thoughts regarding Latina/o students who do not “embrace” their Latina/o heritage as much as they do.

*“Latino Latinos” and “non-Latino Latinos”*

As Hernando’s quote cited above suggests, one should not simply assume that because students are Latina/os, they would want to mostly socialize with other Latina/o students. Indeed, participants agreed that college experiences of each Latina/o student at SEPU are, to a certain degree, “unique.” However, some HIs pointed out that Latina/o students’ may share similar college experiences based on their level of cultural identification with their Latina/o heritage. Arturo, Hernando and Miguel, all HIs, were the most vocal in explaining what they perceived as “two types of Latino students,” to use Miguel’s terminology, the “Latino Latino” and the “non-Latino Latino.” Miguel did not elaborate much on his definition of “Latino Latinos,” simply stating that they are “proud” and “acknowledge” their Latina/o heritage. In other words, “Latino Latinos” see their Latina/o heritage as a salient part of their identity, a part they want to make sure is recognized by others. However, Miguel provided a more detailed definition of “non-Latino Latinos”:

The white Latinos, anyone being, anyone, you know, that has like, an eighth Mexican [*he chuckles*] you know what I mean, not really Hispanic but they claim it, you know, ‘oh, yeah, I’m Mexican’ ‘well what are you,’ ‘I’m one-eighth Mexican’ you know, technically it qualifies as Latino, you know, under the school, technically, or you have the Latinos that were raised in very non-Latino settings.

According to Miguel (HI), there are two kinds of “non-Latino Latinos.” The ones who are “technically” Latina/os due to a distant relative making them “one-eighth” Latina/o, but are really, according to Miguel, “white Latinos.” These “non-Latino Latinos” might have claimed their Latina/o heritage to qualify as a racial minority, as Miguel seems to suggest when he mentioned that being “one-eighth” Latina/o “qualifies” as Latina/o “under the school.” This definition of “non-Latino Latino” is similar to the concept of “symbolic ethnicity,” which refers to how certain Latina/os “choose when, where, and how they identify with the ethnic group with little or no social consequence” (Chávez-Reyes, 2010, p.499). “Non-Latino Latinos” thus “superfluously practice and identify with selective symbolic forms (ethnic labels, artifacts, cultural practices)” of their Latina/o heritage, as opposed to perceiving it as a key aspect of their identity (Chávez-Reyes, 2010, p.499).

The other “non-Latino Latinos,” according to Miguel (HI), are the ones who are more than “one-eighth” Latina/o, but “were raised in very non-Latino settings,” or, as Arturo (HI) explained, “they didn’t grow up with *salsa*, *merengue*, *bachata*, they didn’t grow up, eating *tacos*, with *quinceañeras*, or *piñatas*, they grew up in a different style, more Americanized, more assimilated.” Arturo assumes “Latino Latinos” would have experienced what he considers Latina/o activities growing up. On the contrary, if Latina/os “didn’t grow up with” these activities, Arturo assumes that their upbringing was “more Americanized, more assimilated” with the dominant white culture, thus making them “non-Latino Latinos.”

Arturo (HI) and Miguel (HI) suggest that Latina/os who are “non-Latino Latinos” are not directly responsible for this part of their identity. Indeed, by talking about “the non-Latino settings” in which they were raised, or by not being familiar with particular dances and practices, Arturo and Miguel seem to hold parents responsible for not emphasizing Latina/o culture in their



children's lives. However, Hernando (HI) is clearly holding "non-Latino Latinos" responsible for "turning white," stating, "they're turning white basically, they're washing themselves down, they're like you know, cutting off all their Hispanicisms basically, all their, their specific things that make them Latino." Hernando essentially implies that these "Hispanicisms" are part of their Latina/o heritage.

In chapter 8, I talk in more detail about these "two types of Latino students" when specifically addressing Latina/o identity. However, at this point, I found it noteworthy that some HIs thought it was important for me to be aware of the differences between them and less ethnically identifying Latina/o students in order to better understand their college experiences. The sharp differences noted above regarding how HI and LI participants reported feeling at SEPU in general, as well as the different activities HIs and LIs mentioned being involved in, illustrate the importance of cultural identification for Latina/o students' college experiences. Indeed, because LIs do not consider their Latina/o heritage to be a salient part of their identity, they are more likely to feel comfortable in a predominantly white university. Prior to college, LI participants attended predominantly white high schools and reported befriending white students and feeling integrated. On the contrary, HI participants, who also all attended predominantly white high schools, reported they never fully connected with white students and felt outcast to various degrees. Therefore, this discussion seems to confirm the assumption that cultural identification does affect Latina/o students' academic experiences.

*"People expect me to dance it because that's what they see on TV."*

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss participants' thoughts regarding how they perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences in general, as well as their goals and self-esteem. While all participants' comments quoted in this discussion are directly

related to media, I do not want to give the illusion that media are the only variable affecting Latina/o students' college experiences. Indeed, as previously mentioned in chapters 2 and 3, education researchers have found that several variables can affect Latina/o students' educational achievements. This dissertation in general and this discussion in particular are specifically concerned with the role of media. However, even though I focused my questions on media, many factors are simultaneously at play when participants discuss their college experiences. Also, while some experiences may appear to be similar, such as those among members of the high and low cultural identification groups, we cannot overlook participants' individual differences. Before addressing the role media play in participants' college experiences during our interviews, I had asked participants to describe how media portray Latina/os. As discussed in chapter 5, all participants mostly focused their answers on unflattering stereotypes such as "gang members," "construction people," "illegal immigrants" and "Latin lover." I also noted that none of the participants talked about the more recent and optimistic Latina/o media representations as affluent consumers. Concomitantly, I did not mention these media images to participants during our interviews. Thus, participants' responses to how they perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences need to be interpreted in the context of media being dominated by these unfavorable stereotypes of Latina/os. Indeed, in the following discussion, the expression "media representations of Latina/os" can be substituted with "*stereotypical* media representations of Latina/os."

All HIs and all but two LIs (Enrique and Leonardo) recognized that media representations of Latina/os can affect Latina/o students' college experiences to various degrees. HIs perceived media representations of Latina/os as playing a more significant role in their college experiences than LIs did. For the most part, LIs stated that media representations of

Latina/os did not affect their college experiences; as Leonardo (LI) succinctly said using only three words: “not at all.” However, as I kept asking different questions revolving around media and college experiences in general, LIs did think of a few scenarios in which they conceded that media might affect their or other Latina/o students’ college experiences. While LIs mostly used hypothetical situations to establish a relationship between media portrayals of Latina/os and Latina/o students’ college experiences, HIs referred to personal anecdotes to illustrate their arguments.

Federico (HI) and Hernando (HI) both associated media representations of Latina/os with students expecting them to know how to dance. For instance, Federico stated, “whenever I say I’m Hispanic or Latino everybody automatically thinks like for instance, like, I can, I can do the dances or whatever,” and Hernando said, “everybody expects me to be able to dance like you know, *salsa* and *merengue* and all that stuff.” These comments confirm Alcoff’s (2006) argument regarding media influence on white Americans, making them expect all Latina/os to eat spicy food. Hernando offered a similar explanation to Alcoff’s as to why “everybody expects” him to know how to salsa:

People expect me to dance it because that’s what they see on TV, or that’s what they, you know, hear about, um, they expect me to be suave just because that’s what the majority of Latinos are on you know, TV and stuff like that. My experience here [at SEPU] is just that.

Hernando’s (HI) comment clearly illustrates the relationship between media portraying Latina/os dancing and being “suave,” and people’s expectation that Hernando behave in the exact same fashion. Eduardo (HI) also referred to how media representations of Latina/os influence people’s expectations regarding his place in society, stating, “[people think] that I

shouldn't be here [at SEPU] or that I should probably already be working." According to him, media lower expectations for young adult Latina/os who "shouldn't be" attending college.

Merskin (2011) warns that the constant repetition of Latina/o media stereotypes can generate low expectations of Latina/os. Eduardo's comment also suggests that he might not feel welcome studying at SEPU because people expect him to "already be working." When I asked Eduardo how his college experiences might have been different without these (stereotypical) media portrayals of Latina/os, he used very concrete examples to illustrate the isolation he sometimes feels study studying at SEPU:

I think that if those media portrayals weren't there um, I think that, I guess more people would be willing to branch out of their networks and get to know other people. For example um, let's say um, people wouldn't have to wait until um, let's say I go up and speak to them but they would also be willing to come up and speak to me. Um, I think that um, [8-second pause] as far as, [5-second pause] as far as like, I guess study groups, I think that more people would be more willing to, I guess include me, in study groups because if the media portrayal wasn't there, and they had no reason to base anything on, um, they would just, they would be more willing to accept that, I do belong here I guess, and that I'm capable of providing useful ideas.

In his comment, Eduardo (HI) describes two particular instances in which he feels that media representations of Latina/os have affected his college experiences. On a social level, he feels that people are not "willing to come up and speak" to him unless he goes "up and speaks to them." Based on how he and other participants described Latina/os in the media, Eduardo does not seem surprised that people do not take the initiative to speak to him. Similarly, on an academic level, Eduardo feels that his peers only reluctantly include him in their study groups. He assumes that his peers think he does not "belong here" and is not "capable of providing

useful ideas.” He believes that “if the media portrayal wasn’t there” his social and academic experiences would have been enhanced. Eduardo’s comments are not unusual for students from stigmatized groups who often “worry that people in their schooling environment will doubt their abilities” (Steele, 1997, p.624). Indeed, Aronson (2004) explains that many people believe in stereotypes, which are then used to evaluate others. Citing results from opinion polls, he stated that “about half of white Americans endorse common stereotypes about Blacks and Latinos, which, among other images, portray them as unintelligent” (Aronson, 2004, p.15).

Similarly, Mauricio (HI) used a concrete example to suggest he also sometimes does not feel welcome on campus. When answering one of my questions about media representations of Latina/os and his college experiences, Mauricio, referring to white students, stated, “when you walk around campus, um, and then like you happen to see someone, like you happen to make eye contact with someone, and then they’ll either like um, they’ll either just look away or they’ll just keep walking.” Mauricio attributes this behavior to the lack of “positive images portrayed by the media” about Latina/os. His description of how certain white students react when he makes “eye contact with someone” is similar to how Miguel (HI) described the “body language” and “facial expressions” of white students in his presence or that of other racial/ethnic minorities, which I discussed in earlier in this chapter. Here however, Mauricio establishes a link between “images portrayed by the media” and white students who “look away” or “just keep walking” instead of returning his “eye contact.”

These experiences described by Eduardo (HI) and Mauricio (HI) could mostly be attributed to a combination of two factors. First, the predominantly white racial composition of North Carolina and the high number of in-state undergraduate students at SEPU limit the number of interactions between Latina/os and non-Latina/os. Second, the omnipresence of media in our

everyday lives and the constant repetition of stereotypes lead to mediated relationships between non-Latina/o audiences and Latina/os portrayed in the media. This in turn results in most people learning about Latina/os from the media as opposed to learning about Latina/os from personal experiences (Ford, 1997; Grossberg et al., 2006; Kellner, 2011).

*“Nothing in the media really helps portray us in a positive light.”*

According to HI participants such as Eduardo and Mauricio, the behavior of certain white students at SEPU towards Latina/os students seems to be guided by what the media have taught them about Latina/os. Using a similar reasoning, Hernando (HI) expressed how he perceives media to influence white Americans’ thoughts about Latina/os and the effect such thoughts have on interracial relationships:

Nothing in the media really helps portray us in a positive light. That affects all of the negative aspects of like, even just like interracial relationships. That affects how people interact in those kinds of ways like you can’t expect um, white, a white female like my first girlfriend, you can’t expect a white female that is interested in a Hispanic guy that you know, she’s like, ‘oh he’s cute, oh let’s, you know, see what he’s about’ and then their parents are like, ‘no, no Latinos because we don’t want them.’ You know that, that maid in the family, we don’t want him to be a gardener you know. He’s good for nothing, he’s never going to amount to anything because he’s Hispanic. You know, there’s no way that we can overcome that until something like you know, in the media changes until we’re actually portrayed in a positive light, until Latinos are thought to be um you know, successful.

Hernando (HI) blames media representations of Latina/os for white people’s stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os as well as for discouraging “interracial relationships.” He assumes that white people think Latinas are “maids” and Latinos are “gardeners” because media

predominantly depict Latina/os as such, thus implying they are “good for nothing” and will not “amount to anything.” These perceptions are affecting Hernando’s college experiences because he feels they limit the potential relationships he could develop with white students, especially “white females.”

Similar to many communication scholars who have been advocating for more Latina/o counter portrayals in the media (Kellner, 2011; Merskin, 2011), Hernando is also advocating for Latina/os to be “portrayed in a positive light” to change these perceptions. Television images are often used as a basis for judging others, especially when audiences lack personal experiences with a particular group of people (Gerbner 1998; Shrum, 2009). Hernando’s comment also illustrates what Faber and his colleagues (1987) had forecast more than 20 years ago regarding the relationship between media portrayals of racial/ethnic minorities and white people’s reluctance to interact with members of racial/ethnic minority groups.

In his account, Hernando (HI) uses his first girlfriend to prove the validity of his assertion. In our first interview, Hernando had told me that when he was in high school, he tried to date a “white girl,” recalling, “her mom said that her dad was in Iraq, that he’s going to have to wait until later to decide or whatever, but [...] I realized it was, they didn’t want me to date her because I was Hispanic.” Hernando said the “white girl” then went on to date white boyfriends, whom Hernando qualified as “white trash,” thus concluding that in this case, parents were “not taking into account the actual person and what they’re capable of, but just looking at the color of their skin.” According to Hernando’s account, it is better for a “white girl” to date a low-achieving White than a high-achieving Latino. In other words, when it comes to white parents approving of their daughter’s boyfriends, “the color of their skin” trumps “what they’re capable of.” While Hernando made no reference to media when he told me about his experiences

with his first girlfriend, his previous comment suggests a link between media representations of Latina/os and the way his girlfriend's mother treated him.

Comments from HIs provide clear examples that illustrate how they perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their college experiences. These examples are also consistent with communication theories regarding the role media play in perceptions of "the other" and interracial interactions. Communication scholars have demonstrated that high levels of exposure to stereotypical media representations of Latina/os coupled with low levels of meaningful personal interactions with Latina/os, result in stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os. Based on HIs' responses, media representations of Latina/os seem to be constantly present in their minds during their social interactions on campus and their academic experiences in classrooms. As Miguel (HI) said, referring to how media representations of Latina/os affect his interactions with white student, "it stays on the backburner." In other words, when Miguel interacts with white students, he is not only thinking about their conversation, but also about media images.

*"Probably because of media but I mean, I don't think it's had a large effect."*

While HIs explained how media representations of Latina/os affect their college experiences, especially their interactions with white students, LIs said that media *may* play a minor role in their college experiences and thought of hypothetical scenarios in which media *may* also affect other Latina/o students' college experiences. For instance, Alejandro (LI) said, "I'm aware that maybe they [white students] think those things [stereotypical media representations of Latina/os] and they have those ideas maybe probably, probably because of media but I mean, I don't think it's had a large effect." Alejandro's repetitive use of the adverbs "maybe" and "probably" indicates that he doubts media representations of Latina/os can really have much



weight on his college experiences. He nevertheless acknowledges that white students may “have those ideas” about Latina/os, but they do not act upon them enough to have “a large effect” on his experiences. Referring to media representations of Latina/os, Cristian (LI) made a comment similar to Alejandro’s:

I would say it affects, like not in a big manner, I think if it, if it has kind of affected me, it’s kind of in a personal, like meeting, like friendships or whatever relationship you have with a friend or person you know, just because of the stereotypes they carry with them, because like I said I doubt these people have lived, like lived through it and seen all these ‘oh, this is a stereotype ‘cause I lived it’ um, I’m pretty sure like a lot of it comes from the media.

Cristian (LI) also evokes the “stereotypes” other students have about Latina/os that “come from the media” as potentially affecting “friendships or whatever relationship.” Cristian’s and Alejandro’s (LI) comments are similar because they both agree that media are responsible for the stereotypical views people hold of Latina/os in general. As Cristian said, people usually do not “live” or experience a particular stereotype but rather get it “from the media.” However, like Alejandro, Cristian refuses to recognize that media representations of Latina/os are directly responsible for the quality of his “friendships,” which is implied by his use of “if” and “kind of.” This seems to imply that Cristian does not feel comfortable making such a strong claim about media effects.

Alejandro (LI) said that media representations of Latina/os did not have “a large effect” on his college experiences, and Cristian (LI) confirmed that these representations did not affect him “in a big manner.” Other LIs did not perceive that media representations of Latina/os contributed to their college experiences either. After having asked Javier (LI) a series of

questions regarding this relationship, he thought of a broad hypothetical scenario in which media representations of Latina/os “could possibly” affect Latina/o students’ college experiences:

I think it might, might um, could possibly create some negative interactions with other non-Latinos, or maybe um, maybe discourage non-Latinos from trying to interact with Latinos, and if they already had that idea in their head, then maybe they’ll just stay with ‘oh well, I’ll just talk to this group, this group of people who I already know, I’m like them’ so it might kind of, affect their, their interactions.

As do most other previous quotes, Javier’s (LI) comment focuses on the negative effects of media on non-Latina/o students’ interactions with Latina/os, or on the lack of interaction.

Indeed, Javier states that media representations of Latina/os “could possibly create negative interactions” or “discourage non-Latinos from trying to interact with Latinos.” Also similar to previous comments by LIs is Javier’s caution with his word choice, using terms such as “could,” “possibly,” “if” and “maybe.” Most LIs qualified any comment they made regarding the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and their college experiences.

Interestingly, while Leonardo (LI) first categorically refused to acknowledge a relationship between media representations of Latina/os and his college experiences, he was the only LI who provided a personal example pertaining to the existence of such a relationship. Referring to Molly, one of his girlfriend’s roommates whom he suspects does not like him because he is Latino, and whom I mentioned earlier in this chapter as an example of white students’ racist behavior on campus, Leonardo suggested that media influence Molly’s racist thoughts:

I think that the media does affect her a lot because, um, I’m guessing that based on what my girlfriend said about her not really hanging out or talking with anyone that’s a minority, and then, her having a preconceived, you know, idea about me, even though she doesn’t know anything about the minority, and, or and me, so I’m like, I’m guessing that’s the only other place she could have gotten that idea from.

Leonardo's (LI) comment reflects many comments from HIs who claimed that white students' media consumption and lack of interaction with Latina/os make them perceive the latter in terms of stereotypes. Indeed, because Molly is "not really hanging out" with Latina/os but is nevertheless holding "preconceived" views of them, media represent "the only other place she could have gotten that idea from." This is a good illustration of the mainstreaming effect of cultivation theory, which states that heavy television viewers with no direct experience with a particular group of people will use media images to judge others (Gerbner, 1998). Alejandro (LI), who had previously said that media did not have "a large effect" on his college experiences, nevertheless made an insightful comment regarding this relationship. His comment was less personal and straightforward than Leonardo's, but it offered an explanation regarding how media can affect Latina/o students in different ways. Indeed, when I asked Alejandro (LI) if he thought his experiences at SEPU would have been different if media portrayed Latina/os in more flattering ways than what he had described, he provided a broad answer, speculating on other Latina/o students' college experiences:

I'd say maybe the Latino experience as a whole, like Latino students, maybe if it [media portrayal of Latina/os] was more positive, definitely then um it could probably make for a better experience or less like a more comfortable transition, a more, less stressful definitely, just in terms of like 'cause I mean if you're portrayed as positive in the media and people have those ideas about you then it makes it a little, a little easier at least to meet people, at least especially if you're cognizant of it.

Alejandro acknowledges that media representations of Latina/os can play a role in Latina/o students' college experiences, especially on a social level, allowing them "to meet people." Alejandro states a condition under which such media effects might occur, that is, if Latina/o students are "cognizant" of media representations of Latina/os. Likewise, Miguel (HI)

commented on how media portrayal of Latina/os “stays on the backburner” during his interactions with white students. In chapter 5, I discussed how HI and LI participants described media representations of Latina/os. HIs, who perceive media to affect their college experiences, appeared to be more “cognizant” of such representations and emphasized the “negative” ones more than LIs did. According to Alejandro, Latina/o students’ level of cognizance regarding media representations of Latina/os is related to how they perceive these representations to affect their college experiences. This study’s findings support Alejandro’s theory.

*“People do not come thinking that we’re somehow out of a movie, or out of like the news.”*

While most LI participants conceded that media “could possibly” affect their college experiences, Enrique (LI) was the only participant who categorically denied the existence of such a relationship, however minor it be. Enrique continuously responded that media representations of Latina/os did not affect any aspect of his college experiences. He felt so strongly about his answers that toward the end of our last interview he joked about it, saying, “I wish I could provide a more like crazy answer but no.” Indeed, “no” could summarize all of Enrique’s answers regarding this relationship. Enrique, however, did elaborate on why he thought media representations of Latina/os do not affect his college experiences:

I don’t think it does and I know, I mean like, it, I kind of like just keep repeating myself but no, I don’t think, I don’t, it’s never even like close to, I mean to be honest with you, the only time I ever think about it is in these conversations, Like I, when I speak to, to a person, a white person or whatever, like for me the things that might affect the conversation is just like how they, like if they’re, if they’re a very, very like talkative person, like they would like to control the conversation that I might just let them go for it and let them talk. If they’re shy then I might like try to get them to talk a little bit more so I’ll be the talk, so like yeah I’ll just treat it like any conversation.

In addition to reiterating that media do not affect his college experiences or interactions with other students, Enrique (LI) said that the only time he ever thought about media representations of Latina/os was during our “conversations.” His comment also reinforces Alejandro’s theory about being “cognizant” of media portrayals to potentially be affected by them. I asked Enrique if our previous “conversations” had inclined him to think more about media representations of Latina/os, but he responded negatively, stating, “even after talking with you, I’ll watch shows and it doesn’t even come through my mind, it’s just, I just watch the shows for the entertainment.” Enrique does not seem to be “cognizant” of racial stereotypes either in the media or in people’s minds. Therefore, in the same way that he watches “shows for the entertainment,” he also treats his social interactions with others “like any conversation.”

This discussion reveals that contrary to HIs, LIs do not perceive media representations of Latina/os to affect their overall college experiences. Indeed, Javier (LI) stated, “I just don’t think that media’s like responsible for others’ actions,” thus indicating that media do not affect how others treat him. He then added, “I don’t really think if media was different my experiences would be different at all,” thus expressing that as far as he is concerned, media representations of Latina/os have no effect on his “experiences” at SEPU. Even Leonardo (LI), the only LI who attributed a personal instance of racism to media representation, stated, “I think that doesn’t affect it at all,” referring to the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and his college experiences. Leonardo emphasized his claim stating, “people do not come thinking that we’re somehow out of a movie, or out of like the news, that like, you know, they see an immigrant, you know, like I’m pretty sure that they [non-Latina/o students] don’t see us that way.” His comment reveals that even though Leonardo is aware that media portray Latina/os as “immigrants,” these representations do not play a role in his overall college experiences. Ricardo

(LI) made comments similar to those of other LIs, but he also explained why he thought media representations of Latina/os have no effect on college experiences. In his fairly long response, Ricardo differentiated between academic experiences and social experiences:

I don't think the media really has a big difference on how we interact. I mean typically when we interact in class I mean, it's more on the academic level, um, so I mean and it doesn't really matter I mean, what the media is saying because I mean, like I was saying I mean you're here, here in the class you deserve that right, you've earned that right. Hum, so I mean I don't think that they think of me any less when I interact with them. I mean I feel as though they just see me as another student, just like I see a white or black or Asian that's just another student. [...] on a more social level I mean, I don't again, I don't think it really has a, a, an effect if any. Um, I mean it's just because people are so open I mean people are kind here. I mean [SEPU] is a really nice place so um I, I really don't think here it, it affects you. Maybe elsewhere, I'm not sure. Hum but here it, it really doesn't affect it.

Ricardo (LI) rationalizes why he thinks media do not affect his college experiences. From his perspective, other students “just see [him] as another student” and neither media nor race/ethnicity makes a difference at SEPU “because people [at SEPU] are so open.” Ricardo is adamant that media do not play a role in his college experiences at SEPU. However, he wonders if media “maybe” affect students studying “elsewhere,” on campuses where people are not as “open” and “kind” as he perceives them to be at SEPU. Despite this brief thought, Ricardo makes sure that I understand that for him, “it really doesn't affect it.” As the previous discussion indicates, participants were clearly divided on the role media representations of Latina/os play in their overall college experiences. Comments from HIs suggest media cultivation effects mostly affect how their white peers interact with them, or rather limit their interactions with Latina/o students. However, such strong cultivation effects did not emerge from LIs' comments. Indeed, while a few LIs acknowledged that media representations of Latina/os “could possibly” affect their college experiences, they did not perceive media to have a “large effect.”

*“Racist conservative, really, really conservative people lack that education.”*

Regardless of their personal experiences, all participants agreed that education made people more understanding and accepting of others. For instance, they often compared average white Americans’ perceptions of Latina/os to those of white college students, contending the latter were less likely than the former to perceive Latina/os in terms of stereotypes. Only three participants (Hernando, HI; Alejandro, LI; and Ricardo, LI) also mentioned that age or generation differences contribute to young people being less prejudiced towards others. Nevertheless, Arturo summarized participants’ thoughts regarding the role education plays in interracial interactions when he said, “I think more educated people are more tolerant.”

Three HIs (Arturo, Eduardo and Miguel) and two LIs (Enrique and Javier) stated that media’s influence on audience’s perceptions of others diminishes for educated people. Eduardo noted that educated people know better “than just having television tell you what to do,” and Miguel said that they “see beyond a lot of these media portrayals.” Arturo explained why he thought the influence of media was limited for educated people, stating, “when you become educated, these [media] images break down and you become more tolerant, and begin to, begin to know what’s real and what’s not.” According to these participants, educated people possess media literacy skills that enable them to differentiate media scenarios from real life ones. Enrique also explained how media differently affect “ignorant” and “well-educated” people:

You obviously have more ignorant people where they’ll just believe whatever they see on TV or read in books or magazines or whatever, but I think that more well-educated people will, will know to, to take a lot of those images with a grain of salt.

Enrique (LI) believes that education prevents audiences from taking media images at their face value. While education does moderate the relationship between media images and

audience's beliefs of these images' accuracy, media scholars have demonstrated that interpretation of media images varies the most based on how much time audiences dedicate to thinking about these images. Shrum (2001) was among the first to explore the relationship between audiences' thought processes and their cultivation effects, that is, how audiences' perceptions of a particular group of people or societal topic match media representations, as explained in chapter 2. After having exposed college students to similar media messages, Shrum (2001) found a cultivation effect when students were instructed to answer questions off the top of their minds without extensive elaboration, whereas he found no cultivation effects when students were instructed to provide the most accurate and thoughtful answers possible. Shrum's results have been successfully reproduced with various types of media messages (e.g., Harris & Barlett, 2009; Shrum, Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2005). Shrum (2001) claimed that when people form their judgment, "close scrutiny of all or even most of the relevant information available to a person in the course of decision making may be the exception rather than the rule" (p.115).

If educated people were not influenced by media images, participants would not have said in other parts of our interviews that media representations of Latina/os affected their interactions with white students, whose enrollment at SEPU attest to their education level. Arturo (HI) made an interesting comment in that respect: "I think a lot of these racist, conservative, really, really conservative people lack that education and lack these classes that I'm taking now." Arturo was referring to women's and gender studies classes that made him realize that "stereotypes in [his] head are so wrong." He also used media representations of women to illustrate how he now perceives certain media images as "really misogynous" and "demeaning women." Therefore, students enrolled in these classes learn how to think critically about media images and might be more likely to use this thought process when interacting with others. On the



contrary, students who do not take such classes might continue to think about others as represented in media.

*“We’re in school together [...] people might forget that like in social aspects.”*

In the same way that Shrum contends that encouraging people to think before making a judgment diminishes media’s influence, more than half of the participants claimed that the environment affects the judgments white students make of Latina/os. LIs were more likely to make such comments than HIs. The latter believe that white students perceive them as less intelligent, whereas LIs believe white students perceive them as equals. Therefore, HIs are more likely to think that white students perceive them in the same unfavorable fashion in most settings, while LIs are more likely to think that white students’ perceptions of them change when the setting is not an academic one. Alejandro (LI) said white students’ perceptions of Latina/os would differ according to the setting. He said that in class, students “will judge what you say based mainly on what you say, not like on who’s saying it,” adding, “it’s a lot more intellectual whereas maybe like a social setting it’s not so intellectual.” Alejandro feels less threatened by white students’ stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os in class than in a “social setting,” where the judgment might be based more on his race/ethnicity than on his intellectual capabilities. Alejandro (LI) might also feel more secure in a classroom because of the behavior most students follow in the presence of a professor. On the contrary, students’ behavior at a party, for example, with more friends and no authority figure, is usually less inhibited than in a classroom. Hernando (HI) expressed his concerns regarding how a group of white students might act differently in an academic setting than in a social setting:

During the day they're [white students] one way, at night it's just like since they're around their friends they can be influenced by, you know, maybe some of their more racist friends or whatever. They just kind of um, definitely change [...] Obviously we're, we're in school together, we're actually getting an education, people might forget that like in social aspects like you just say 'Oh you're Hispanic hey, get out of here.'

According to Hernando (HI), the same white students may be cordial to him on campus during the day, but they may refuse to associate with him in other settings. This implies that Hernando may feel that most white students tolerate the presence of Latina/os on campus because they have no choice in the matter, but when given the choice to interact with them or not, they decide not to. Hernando held the exact same view regarding dating a white woman, stating her friends might discourage her from dating a Latino. HIs seem to question whether white students think they belong to SEPU. Lopez (2005) noted that "perceptions of a hostile racial climate (e.g., racial tensions, discrimination, and marginalization) are directly and negatively associated with students' sense of belonging" (p.361). He explained that Latina/o students' perceptions of belonging to a university are negatively related to their social and academic integration. Indeed, minority students' perceptions of campus racial climate directly affect their satisfaction with the university (Fischer, 2010). Tinto (2006) also emphasized the important role college environment and student involvement play in students' decision to stay or leave. Explaining his model of student retention, Tinto stated, "central to this model was the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college" (2006, p.3). Focusing specifically on racial/ethnic minority students, Fischer (2010) explained that because "the majority of a student's life on campus takes place outside of the classroom," students' persistence depends on "the degree of satisfaction students have with this social side of campus life" (p.37).

Three LIs (Cristian, Enrique and Ricardo) stated that white students do not perceive Latina/o students at SEPU in the same way as they perceive Latina/os off campus. For instance, Ricardo (LI) stated that “white college students wouldn’t perceive um, wouldn’t perceive the Latinos who aren’t in college as equals.” As previously mentioned, all LIs declared that white students perceive them as intellectually equal because of their enrollment at SEPU. However, Ricardo suggests that white students might perceive Latina/os who are not at SEPU as inferior. He elaborated on this thought:

I feel as though they [white students] see me as um, I mean, um kind of more of an equal I mean that, um we do what it takes to get in [at SEPU] and I mean I feel as though that’s the same with like all college settings. However if you see a Latino who is, I mean just walking down the street you would think that they’re on their way to work and that they’re taking a work break and they’re working out in like manual jobs.

Ricardo’s (LI) comment reflects what other LIs said regarding white students’ perceptions of Latina/os based on the setting. If white students encounter Latina/os their age “walking down the street” outside of campus, the thought of that person going to college would be the last one on their mind. Despite these comments, LIs continue to feel that their white peers consider them “equal” because they are studying at SEPU. Interestingly, LIs do not seem to see anything wrong with these assumptions. Ricardo (LI) may also suggest that he associates more with Whites than Latina/os because he considers the former to see him as “an equal.” As mentioned in chapter 2, Bonilla-Silva (2004) posits that certain Latina/os perceive themselves as “honorary Whites” for two main reasons: “honorary whites may be classifying themselves as ‘white’ or believing they are better than the ‘collective black’” (p.937). I don’t think that Ricardo believes he is better than others because of the latter’s race/ethnicity. However, he may think of himself as sharing more in common with Whites than with Latina/os because of his level of

education, the student associations he is involved in, which are not Latina/o organizations, and the race/ethnicity of many of his SEPU friends, the majority of whom are white. Race scholars hypothesized that upper-class and/or light-skinned Latina/os would be more likely to think of themselves as honorary Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Murguía & Saenz, 2002). In Ricardo's case, he comes from a working class family and has a brown complexion. Similar to Ricardo (LI), Enrique (LI) said, "if they [white students] just saw me out on the street maybe I guess they would assume like, not that I'm a bad person or anything but just that, that I'm probably not someone headed to [SEPU]." He even justified white students' stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os, stating, "you don't usually see like a ton of Latino students or a ton of minorities around campus." Enrique, who also thinks white students see him on campus as the "cream of the crop," may have no problem accepting this paradoxical view of young Latina/os because he does not associate himself with low-achieving Latina/os and therefore may feel that these stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os do not affect him.

HIs such as Hernando contend that white students' behavior towards Latina/os changes according to the setting but that their perceptions do not. On the contrary, LIs believe that white students view Latina/o students as equals but might also be justified in second guessing the academic achievements of young Latina/os they see off campus. Given participants' comments, it is interesting to keep in mind that all maintained that being educated results in more tolerance towards others, despite providing some examples to the contrary.

*"My goals are gonna be what my goals are [...] whatever the media is saying about Latinos."*

While HI and LI participants respectively acknowledged that media representations of Latina/os did or did not affect their college experiences, their thoughts were more divergent regarding the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and participants' goals.

Indeed, HIs were divided on how much they perceived media to affect their goals, whereas all but one LI (Cristian) reported that media do not influence their goals. In one instance, Cristian mentioned a movie he had seen that motivated him to “make good grades”:

I can’t remember the name of it, but the fact that like parents are like ‘you need to study, you need to work’ and like the Latino kid is just like, he doesn’t care, he’s just gonna go around do whatever he wants, and to me like, it kind of shows, like it portrays it, I see the film, on screen I see like the work that the parents are putting in and the fact that I’ve lived it, like my parents, they work all the time, like ‘go to school’ and all this, and I think it pushes me, like it’s that constant reminder that like, like I can’t just not make good grades and just drop out ‘cause that means everything that your parents have worked for, everything you see on TV is just gonna keep happening and you’re just gonna be another one of those kids.

The movie Cristian (LI) describes acts as a “constant reminder” for him to “make good grades” because he does not want to disappoint his parents by dropping out of school and becoming “another one of those [Latina/o] kids.” In this particular example, media motivate Cristian, pushing him to do the opposite of what “the Latino kid” did in the movie. Cristian’s comment also illustrates that despite the unfavorable ways in which media mostly portray Latina/os, Latina/o audiences can nevertheless positively identify with certain characters. In his comment, Cristian identifies his parents with the parents of “the Latino kid” who both “work all the time” and encourage their sons to “go to school.” Cristian then said that this movie “motivated” him to “do the opposite” of what “the Latino kid” did and “work hard.”

Cristian mentioned this particular movie because it reminded him of his own family. While this media text was fictional, it appeared real to Cristian, who seemed to have identified with “the Latino kid” character. As mentioned in chapter 2 when discussing cultivation theory, media messages have a stronger effect on audiences’ thoughts and attitudes when these messages reflect our lived experiences (Gerbner, 1998). This phenomenon, named “resonance,” is clearly

affecting Cristian's attitudes towards education. Cristian was the only LI participant to perceive that media representations of Latina/os have influenced his goal to "make good grades."

Other LIs stated their goals could not be related to media. Ricardo (LI), for instance, was very clear when he said, "my goals are gonna be what my goals are," adding, "whatever the media is saying about Latinos, I mean, it doesn't really affect me." Alejandro (LI) used his business career goals to claim that media and his goals were independent from each other. Referring to the fact that media usually do not portray Latina/os in white-collar positions, he stated, "I feel like maybe if it did I wouldn't be going into business." Some HIs shared these thoughts and reported that they too, did not perceive a relationship between their goals and media representations of Latina/os.

Mauricio (HI), in a comment resembling Ricardo's (LI), said, "I always try to um like set my own goals." Similarly, talking about media representations of Latina/os, Miguel (HI) said, "I don't feel like it did affect me" because "I had my goals and there was really nothing that was gonna get in the way of that." Contrary to Mauricio and Ricardo, Eduardo (HI) was not as adamant regarding the lack of relationship between his goals and media, stating, "I don't think that media would actually make me choose a certain career over another one." However, he then added, "media has an impact of making me want to um, work harder," which is similar to Cristian's (LI) comment quoted above. Eduardo also commented on how seeing doctors on television contributed to his goal of becoming a doctor:

Growing up watching um, Univision, they always had a segment about health care, and they had, they had a doctor um, they had a doctor that was I think, Puerto Rican and um, seeing that, like every other day and then seeing no one at the hospital like really, I guess had a, had a big impact on my understanding of who was um really in charge I guess, in um, especially in rural places where there's not that many, that much of a Hispanic population or that, that there is a Hispanic population but there's not that many Hispanic

doctors. And I guess through, through watching um, Univision and other doctor shows like *House* or stuff like that um I think that shaped my understanding and motivated me even more to want to um to strive to become a doctor.

Eduardo (HI) describes how media introduced him to the medical profession while he was “growing up” watching a show on Univision, a Spanish-language television network, and then watching *House*, a medical drama, which has been airing since 2004, when Eduardo was 13. These two shows, one informational with a real Puerto Rican doctor and one fictional with a white male doctor as the main character, “shaped” Eduardo’s “understanding and motivated [him] even more to want to um to strive to become a doctor.” Even though Eduardo, who is of Mexican descent, could not fully identify with either doctor’s race/ethnicity, seeing them on television motivated him to “strive” to emulate them. He told me that when his family moved to a rural part of North Carolina, his father worked in construction for a hospital, explaining “on certain weekends I’d actually go with him and um, help him clean up or do small stuff like that.” During these times, Eduardo said, “I actually got to interact with certain doctors and the only thing I, that I never saw was like a Hispanic doctor, never around, and I would see Hispanic patients, but never a Hispanic doctor.” Eduardo recognized the importance of having Latina/o doctors by saying that if Latina/o patients “don’t understand a certain prescription or what’s wrong with them, that can have a really big impact on their lives.” At this point in his life, the only Latina/o doctor Eduardo knew was the Puerto Rican doctor from Univision.

*“There’s not a lot of portrayals of successful Latinos in the media.”*

According to Eduardo (HI), the lack of diversity he witnessed at the hospital was clearly reflected in *House*, which Eduardo said had “no Latinos.” Despite U.S. media representations of doctors as non-Latina/os, Eduardo was able to learn about the profession on television. In

addition, his experiences in the hospital made him realize the need for Latina/o doctors in the U.S. Like Cristian (LI), Eduardo also contends that his personal experiences and media representations of Latina/os as not belonging in medical fields have influenced his goal “to strive to become a doctor.” In both cases, Cristian and Eduardo are, to a certain extent, using media representations of Latina/os as motivation to “do the opposite and work hard,” to use Cristian’s words.

Federico (HI) also said that unfavorable media representations of Latina/os have motivated him to excel. Referring to these representations, he stated, “all that stuff drives me, drives me to be different and show, prove to people otherwise. So, um like, yeah that threat pushes me to be different, and be more successful.” Federico wants to “be different” from the way media have mostly been portraying Latina/os and wants to “prove to people otherwise.” In this sense, media serve as a “threat” that shows Latina/os their potential future if they do not strive to “be more successful.” Of all participants who established a relationship between their goals and media, Arturo (HI) was by far the most outspoken on that matter. Referring to media’s unfavorable representations of Latina/os, Arturo stated, “basically my career goal stems out of that, that we’re better than this.” Arturo wants to show Latina/os and non-Latina/os that all Latina/os are not the way media portray them to be.

As other participants previously suggested, Arturo (HI) said that he did not see any Latina/o role models in the media: “There was nobody on TV or in the media, there was nobody that, in my immediate family, that ever went to college, so I never had that role model.” Due to this lack of representation, Arturo added: “I want to be famous, to be that right person, that right person Latinos can go to and be like ‘I want to be like that role model’ because as of right now, we don’t have any role models.” Arturo felt similar to other participants, who revealed that



media reflected certain aspects of reality. Prior to attending SEPU, Arturo did not know any Latina/os close to him who “ever went to college,” nor could he see them in the media. This lack of representation thus motivated Arturo “to be different,” to use Federico’s (HI) words quoted above. Arturo reiterated this idea when he explained his ideal career:

Hopefully to counsel these kids um, in the sense the media um, these comical jokes of Latinos um, can’t speak English um, they’re, they’re only good for taking care of children, stuff like that, just made me like, we’re better than this.

In a straightforward manner, Arturo (HI) suggests that media representations of Latina/os affect young Latina/o audiences to such an extent that they would need counseling. As I discuss in the following section regarding the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and participants’ self-esteem, communication researchers have explored how media representations of a particular group influence members of this group to perceive themselves. Arturo’s comment suggests that the repetition of images portraying Latina/os who “can’t speak English” and are “only good for taking care of children” may affect Latina/o youths’ psyches. These media images motivate Arturo to dedicate his career to helping them understand that they are “better than this.”

Even though Arturo (HI) previously said he “never had that role model,” either in his immediate family or in the media, to show him that higher education was a viable option for Latina/os, he shared an anecdote towards the end of our last interview involving a person he heard about in the media, who Arturo said became an “inspiration” to him.

There’s not a lot of portrayals of successful Latinos in the media but there is I think one, that affected me a lot, he was a doctor, I forgot his name, he’s a brain surgeon that works in John Hopkins, I forgot his name, well he’s a Latino doctor, and he came to this country

as an immigrant picking tomatoes, went to college, worked and went to community college, then he went to undergraduate school, then he went to graduate school, and now he's, he's the biggest neurosurgeon in the world, and he was a Latino, and for him to tell a story like that, for him to, to see him in the media, especially in the Latino channels, um, was a, was inspiration to me, and I'm a student, so I was like, if he can do it, in the schools he went to, I'm going to [SEPU], one of the biggest universities in the nation, I can do it too, so it was a really motivating thing.

Arturo's (HI) anecdote illustrates the role media can play in introducing people like him to a person he could not only identify with but also emulate because he was enrolled at SEPU. This Latino immigrant's success story became "a really motivating thing" for Arturo, a "thing" that could not have occurred without media. The Latino doctor Arturo is talking about is Dr. Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, a Mexican immigrant who attended Harvard medical school and is a professor of neurosurgery, oncology, neuroscience, and cellular and molecular medicine at Johns Hopkins University. In 2008, *The New York Times* featured a conversation with Dr. Quiñones-Hinojosa titled "A Surgeon's Path From Migrant Fields to Operating Room," which mirrors Arturo's account of Dr. Quiñones-Hinojosa's educational and professional achievements (Dreifus, 2008). Arturo has experienced a mediated relationship with Dr. Quiñones-Hinojosa, whose story has become an "inspiration." Based on Arturo's previous comments, he too wishes to become an "inspiration" for the Latina/o youth who also "never had that role model." Arturo is not alone in deploring the lack of role models for minorities in the media. Many scholars argue that the only role models the media present to minorities are athletes (Burdsey, 2007; Harrison & Lampman, 2001; May, 2009). May (2009) used the example of African-American basketball players, stating that they act as role models due to a "lack of *direct* role models—role models who have sustained interpersonal contact with the subject—in many of the desolate urban communities from which these young men hail" (p.445, italics in original). Arturo made a

similar comment when he said that growing up in a working class neighborhood, he had no “direct role models” to talk to him about higher education.

As Arturo (HI) said, it is important for Latina/os and other racial/ethnic minorities to see someone like them succeed. Burdsey (2007) recounted how 2004 Olympic silver medalist boxer Amir Khan “went from being an unremarkable British Muslim amateur boxer from northern England to being widely regarded as a role model for multiethnic Britain” (p.612). Khan’s performances inspired minority youth and helped ameliorate negative perceptions of Muslims in Britain, even though it did little to fight anti-Muslim racism (Burdsey, 2007). Unfortunately, athletes often appear in the media for their run-ins with the law, which then overshadows their positive impacts (Harrison & Lampman, 2001).

HI’s comments on role models illustrate how they want to inspire Latina/o youth to have a better future by encouraging them to pursue their education. Role models in the media can also generate social change. Bond and her colleagues (1997) explained how they used role models in print stories to lower the risk of HIV infections of young urban women. They created tailored “real-life” stories to “closely match the HIV risk behavior and life situation of the women” and found that the stories “highlight the successes of other women in the community who have lowered their risk for HIV, thereby reinforcing the message that ‘if she (the woman in the role model story) can do it, so can you’” (pp. 289-290). The effect of the stories on the women is exactly what HIs wish to accomplish with Latina/o youth. As Arturo (HI) stated above in reference to Dr. Quiñones-Hinojosa, “if he can do it [...] I can do it too.”

*“I didn’t know a lot of Latinos, or as, as Latino, we, we had the power to, to do that [...] so I was really impressed.”*

Responses regarding how media representations of Latina/os affect self-esteem revealed a pattern similar to that which emerged in the above discussion about the participants’ perceived relationship between media representations of Latina/os and their goals. Indeed, all but one of the LIs (Cristian) reported that media did not affect their self-esteem. Cristian was also the only LI to acknowledge a relationship between media representations of Latina/os and his goals. Most HIs mentioned specific examples explaining how media influenced their self-esteem as U.S. Latinos. Miguel was the only HI to state that media did “absolutely not” affect his self-esteem because of the “way [he] was raised.” Apart from Miguel, HIs differed in how they perceived media to affect their self-esteem. Indeed, some perceived a positive relationship while others perceived a negative one.

Whereas HIs mainly used examples from entertainment media to explain how they perceived media representations of Latina/os to affect their goals, they used examples from news media to talk about their self-esteem. For instance, Arturo (HI) and Eduardo (HI) talked about the nation-wide demonstrations that took place in spring 2006 to protest against an anti-immigration bill that culminated with a one-day boycott of U.S. businesses by Latina/os, referred to as the “great American boycott” in the news media. Arturo and Eduardo explained that seeing those images in the news made them see Latina/os in a new perspective. As Arturo said:

Boycotts from Latinos and rallies, rallies all over the, the nation, um, and, and, and that really like, I was really shocked ‘cause I didn’t know a lot of Latinos, or as, as Latino we, we had the power to, to do that, to boycott, to rally, to, to, to go into the streets and, and do some stuff, um so I was really impressed by that.

Arturo (HI) probably said that the images of “boycotts” and “rallies” in the news “impressed” and “shocked” him because they showed representations of Latina/os he was not accustomed to seeing in the media. Indeed, Arturo had described Latina/os in the news as involved “in crimes and in violence.” The 2006 demonstrations, however, revealed to Arturo the “power” of Latina/os to better their condition. According to Arturo, he was 14 years old when he first saw an image of Latina/os he interpreted as favorable and as having positively influenced his self-esteem. Eduardo (HI), who said that the news images of the 2006 demonstrations gave him a “really good impression” of Latina/os as people who “do care” and “are working toward making progress,” also referred to other media images about a non-fictional person that enhanced his self-esteem as a U.S. Latino:

The University of Southern California’s quarterback, Mark Sanchez, he’s out playing for um, the New York Jets um, on his mouthpiece he actually had the Mexican flag on it, like painted on it and like ah, that really did have actually, like a big impact on me too because I guess it showed that um, like a sport that was usually like played by white males, especially that position, quarterback, um wasn’t um, I guess limited to um, a certain race. And also like it showed me that um, he made a good impression on me too because it showed that he really didn’t, like, he knew where he came from too, just because he was playing um a popular sport, like he didn’t let other people like I guess brainwash him into being someone he really wasn’t. I guess, I guess he really appreciates where he comes from too and recognizes that.

Seeing media images of Mark Sanchez proudly displaying his Mexican heritage positively influenced the self-esteem of Eduardo (HI), who is also of Mexican heritage. This particular image might have made Eduardo realize he could be proud of his heritage and still be successful in positions that have been “limited” to “white males.” In other words, Latina/os can resist being “brainwashed” and still succeed. Indeed, as previously mentioned, Eduardo, who aims to attend medical school, commented on the fact that he was usually the only Latina/o in his

science classes among white students, whom he perceived as not trusting his intellectual capabilities. The influence of Mark Sanchez on Eduardo is consistent with May's (2009) findings that professional athletes can inspire minority youth to pursue goals that are not related to sports, especially community service and giving back to the community.

The literature exploring the relationship between media and self-esteem is dominated by viewers' body image. Media influence people to associate beauty with unrealistic images of thinness, and thus negatively affect the self-esteem of the majority of viewers, especially women (Hobza et al., 2007; Fernandez & Pritchard, 2012; Polce-Lynch et al., 2001). However, the previous discussion on role models and media suggests that the latter can also positively influence one's self-esteem. By identifying with role models, audiences are inspired to enhance their self-esteem.

Education scholars have explored the factors that affect Latina/o students the most. They found that Latina/os who are the most at risk of low self-esteem are the ones who perceive a conflict between their families' expectations and their decision to pursue a higher education (Dennis et al., 2010). Because all participants' families support their academic goals, the fact that no participant reported low self-esteem is consistent with such findings.

Others have reported that racial/ethnic exploration and assimilation levels affected Latina/o students' self-esteem. Telzer and Vazquez Garcia (2009) argue that Latina/os who "felt more attached to their ethnic group" had a higher self-esteem than those who "felt less attached to their ethnic group" (p.370). On the contrary, Valentine (2001) found that Latina/os' "self-esteem is positively associated with their assimilation into mainstream American culture" (p.465). While these results may seem to contradict each other, they fit this dissertation's findings regarding HIs' and LIs' self-esteem, respectively. We can attribute HIs' self-esteem to

their attachment to their racial/ethnic heritage and LIs' self-esteem to their assimilation to mainstream culture.

*"When they are portrayed, they're the construction workers or the cleaning lady [...] it kind of hurts."*

Eduardo's (HI) reference to "brainwashing" and "being someone he really wasn't" mirrors the term Miguel (HI) used to describe Latina/os who associate themselves more with the white mainstream culture than with their Latina/o culture; he labeled them "non-Latino Latinos." Eduardo, who according to Miguel's categorization is a "Latino Latino," uses images he sees in the media from successful "Latino Latinos" to enhance his self-esteem. In the same way that these non-fictional media images seem to positively influence some HIs, other HIs perceived certain news media images to "hurt" their self-esteem, as Hernando (HI) and Mauricio (HI) both noted. Mauricio was less straightforward than Hernando regarding the effects on his own self-esteem but recognized that news images could hurt Latina/o students' self-esteem:

Like if I see a, a case where like maybe like a Latino's involved then, like definitely it hurts a little bit more, it's just like, 'oh man,' but um, like um, I can't really, um it won't hurt me like too much in that like I know that um, whatever happened like kind of, is not going to happen to me just, just on, on the basis that like I'm, I'm working towards like something good and I'm, I'm never like strayed away from that so. It kind of never like affects me but it just hurts me that like to see that happen to someone else. [...] Maybe for, for others it's just like they notice that um, like for Latinos they kind of like, they see them like, like let's say like, academically speaking, like let's say it's always like Whites that are smarter than some, like Whites, Asians, Indians and then like, it starts getting to like minorities like Hispanics or Blacks or like any other races. Like they, they notice that like, that placement, or that, and they kind of just assume their role.

Mauricio's (HI) comment is telling on various levels. He refuses to acknowledge that seeing Latina/os "involved" in a "case" in the news affects his self-esteem. He nevertheless

concedes that “it hurts a little bit” but not “too much.” He copes with these images by differentiating himself from Latina/o criminals portrayed in the news because he is attending SEPU and “working towards like something good” as opposed to being “involved” in a potential criminal “case.” However, the fact that Mauricio performs this mental exercise suggests that news media representations of Latina/os might affect his self-esteem.

Mauricio’s (HI) comment on how other Latina/os might interpret these same images links media to Latina/os’ self-esteem. Indeed, Mauricio claims that by not seeing Latina/os succeeding “academically” and being outsmarted by other racial/ethnic groups such as “Whites, Asians, Indians,” Latina/o youth might “notice” they have no “role” to play in educational settings. As previously mentioned in chapter 2, Vargas (2009) noted a similar phenomenon in her study exploring how media affect transnational Latina teens’ identity. She argued that Latina/o media stereotypes can infiltrate young Latinas’ subjectivity and make them conform to such images, thus influencing their self-perceptions. While Vargas’ study focused on Latinas, Mauricio’s comment reaffirms her findings, as Latina/os who drop out of school conform to Latina/o news media images because they “assume their role” as dictated by the media. Cristian (LI), the only LI who established a relationship between media and his self-esteem, also commented on the lack of favorable portrayals in media in general:

I think the impact it has is when they are portrayed, like I don’t think it’s the lack of being portrayed as much as when they are portrayed, they’re the construction workers or the cleaning lady, you know, like I can’t even count how many shows where the cleaning lady is some random Hispanic lady with an accent, and that kind of like, I don’t know, it’s kind of um, doesn’t necessarily make me angry, but it kinds of makes me realize like, this is, it’s, it’s, like it kind of hurts to an extent.



Cristian (LI) recognizes that the constant repetition of Latina/os portrayed as “construction workers” or as “the cleaning lady” can affect his self-esteem, that “it kind of hurts.” However, contrary to Cristian, all other LIs reported that media representations of Latina/os did not affect their self-esteem. Enrique (LI), for example, said his self-esteem was based on his “experiences” and “what goes on in [his] life,” which can either “boost” or “lower” it, whereas Ricardo (LI) said he is a “very confident, comfortable person” who does not “pay attention” to media representations of Latina/os. These LIs were not the only ones who reported paying no attention to media representations of Latina/os. Indeed, most participants agreed that their professors at SEPU did not rely on media images to judge their Latina/o students.

*“Professors are educated enough to, to kind of see beyond a lot of these media portrayals.”*

When I asked participants questions regarding how they perceived media representations of Latina/os to affect their relationship with professors, the overall consensus was that professors are educated professionals who would not be easily influenced by media images. This is one of the few topics we discussed in our interviews where HI and LI participants provided similar answers overall and where no major group distinction emerged. For instance, Federico (HI) stated, “I don’t think they’ll, I don’t think if a professor sees me they think of media,” and Enrique (LI) said, “I would think a professor wouldn’t let the media portrayals like affect them.” Mauricio (HI) claimed that professors do not judge students based on their race/ethnicity but rather “they judge your work.” It seems that participants expected professors to treat them “like any other student,” to use Miguel’s (HI) words, adding that “professors are educated enough to, to kind of see beyond a lot of these media portrayals, also understand that, you know, some of these things are true, but a lot of these things aren’t true as well.” According to Miguel, professors’ perceptions and/or treatment of Latina/o students are not influenced by media

because they are “educated enough.” In other words, professors are media literate and know how to interpret media images without generalizing them to all members of a particular group, which Miguel expresses in the second part of his comment.

Two LIs (Alejandro and Cristian) also provided similar answers to the ones quoted above, but their comments implied that professors might hide their potential bias as opposed to not being biased. Referring to professors, Cristian said, “I guess either they’re like really accepting or they’re just really good at their professionalism, you know, like if they do have an expectation, like a lower expectation or a higher expectation, I don’t think they show it.” Alejandro was more concise, stating, “even if they have personal opinions or stereotypes, they’re very good at keeping that away from what they do.” Similar to other participants’ comments on that matter, Alejandro and Cristian believe that media representations of Latina/os do not influence how professors treat Latina/o students. However, contrary to other participants’ comments, Alejandro and Cristian do not assume that media do not affect how professors perceive Latina/o students. It is interesting to point out that Alejandro’s and Cristian’s comments are some of the very few comments LIs made that were more thoughtful and critical about a particular aspect of their college experiences than the ones HIs made. Participants also agreed that the race/ethnicity of professors did not affect how they perceived professors to treat them or how they interacted with professors. Instead, some participants referred to professors’ personal character traits as influencing their behavior toward their professors. For instance, Miguel (HI) stated that “you monitor you know, the, the, you know how relaxed the professor is, how, how chilled the professor is, and you take it from there.” According to Miguel and other participants, these characteristics seem more important than professors’ race/ethnicity in terms of student-professor interactions.

Cristian (LI) was the only participant who stated that professors' race/ethnicity can influence how they interact with students. He talked about a Latina professor he took classes with saying that "she pushes a lot, like Latino students, but I think that's because she knows the reality that so many times it's like, it's potentially harder for them." He added, "I think she sees the value that like, the fact that Latinos, the ones that do make it to college, like the university level are like rare, and you don't want those to like drop out." Contrary to other professors whom participants said treat Latina/o students "like any other student," this Latina professor treats Latina/o students differently because she thinks college is "potentially harder for them." Indeed, as mentioned in chapter 2, education researchers have been documenting the additional barriers to graduation many Latina/o college students face compared to most of their white peers. While Cristian does not mention any of these barriers, he knows Latina/o students at "the university level are like rare" and interprets his Latina professor's attitudes towards Latina/o students as a way to prevent them from dropping out.

*"Professors are happy for us 'cause [...] you see these portrayals of gang members and bad poverty."*

In the same way that Cristian (LI) said his Latina professor "knows the reality" Latina/o students face to attend and graduate from college, two HIs (Arturo and Hernando) mentioned that professors in general, regardless of their race/ethnicity, were "happy" to see Latina/o students in their classes. Arturo suggested that based on certain media representations of Latina/os, one would not expect them to be pursuing a college degree:

I like to think that the professors are happy for us 'cause, 'cause um, you know, when, when you see these portrayals of gang members or bad poverty side that these Latinos

grow in and you see one of them or two of them in your class, you're like 'Oh my God, these two made it.'

Arturo (HI) implies that Latina/o "portrayals of gang members or bad poverty" might lower professors' expectations of seeing Latina/os at a university. However, Arturo also seems to imply that these portrayals do affect professors' expectations of Latina/o students' intellectual capabilities once they are in the classroom because professors understand that they must have "made it" to SEPU for a reason. Hernando (HI) made a similar comment regarding society's expectations of Latina/os in general, responding to a question I asked him about the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and professors' perceptions of Latina/o students:

Some of the professors that I've talked to it's like, you know, 'you're a Latino, you're, by standards, by you know um, by percentages and stuff like that you know, by, by the books, you're not supposed to be here right now, you're supposed to be working at you know, a car shop, or a McDonald's, or doing you know, doing the trash, but you're not. Where are you at? You're at one of the top universities in the school, um, in the nation,' you know what I'm saying. 'And you're actually getting a degree from here.' I mean, I'm a senior and they say that stuff like you know, 'you're almost done, like you've, you've beat the statistics. You don't have like three or four children running around the house already,' you know.

These professors Hernando (HI) refers to are proud that he "beat the statistics" by attending "one of the top universities," not having "three or four children running around the house" at age 21 and going against the expectation of working at "a car shop, or a McDonald's." The latter scenario would reflect media representations of Latina/os more accurately than "getting a degree" from SEPU. Hernando's description of where Latina/os are "supposed to be working" is similar to participants' descriptions of Latina/os in entertainment media. In addition, while not explicit in Hernando's comment, we can assume that the "statistics" he is referring to come from news media. Arturo's and Hernando's comments reveal that media representations

can influence professors' to perceive Latina/o students as having overcome adversity as well as deserving and capable of studying at SEPU. Overall, participants contended that professors' education prevents them from being overly influenced by media representations of Latina/os. These findings sharply contrast with how HIs reported these same media images to affect white students' perceptions of Latina/o students. Indeed, according to HIs, many white students did not differentiate Latina/o students at SEPU from Latina/os in the media.

These findings are *not* consistent with those of other studies exploring how Latina/o students perceive their professors. Many education researchers found that the majority of Latina/o students have negative perceptions of their white peers and professors (Chávez-Reyes, 2010; Guinn et al., 2010; Lopez, 2005). Indeed, Latina/o students are often victims of racial discrimination from their teachers and professors who believe they simply cannot be successful in school (Núñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008; Zalaquett et al., 2007). Flores Niemann and her colleagues (2000), for example, found that Mexican-American students' perceptions of professors varied based on the students' cultural identification. Mexican Americans who culturally identified with U.S. mainstream culture were more likely to perceive their social and professional interactions with professors as more positive than Mexican Americans who identified more with their Mexican heritage.

While this dissertation's findings show no difference between HIs and LIs regarding their perceptions of SEPU professors, such results can be explained by a study from Conchas (2001), who argues that academic achievement, not racial/ethnic identification, affects Latina/o students' perceptions of their professors. He states that Latina/o students who do not perform well segregate themselves and hold negative perceptions of any interactions with white people or

professors. Consistent with Conchas' findings, both HIs and LIs may have positive perceptions of their professors because both groups consist of high-achieving students.

## CHAPTER VII: RACE-ETHNICITY AND MEDIA IMAGES DOMINATE CAMPUS INTERACTIONS

In the previous chapter, I addressed how participants perceive media to influence their interactions with other students and discussed participants' college experiences in general, focusing on how they thought media representations of Latina/os affect their day-to-day activities on campus. In this chapter, I specifically focus on participants' social interactions with students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. I use quotes in which the interactions are based more on race/ethnicity than on media. Interactions represent a vital element of participants' college experiences and how they perceive these interactions influences how they perceive their overall experiences. As defined in chapter 1, symbolic interactionism posits that people rely on symbols to communicate and understand each other, and that society consists of people interacting with each other (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010). Blumer (1969) contends that "human groups or society *exists in action* and must be seen in terms of action" (p.6, italics in original). Through their interactions, HIs thus use symbols by which they want white students to define them. Goffman (1959, 1982) argues that people construct each other through their social interactions, which are often the result of ritualized norms and self-control, both necessary elements for the continuation of society. He explains that social interactions not only create, but also perpetuate society; therefore, people cannot be understood outside of their interactions. Participants' comments thus illustrate not only how they perceive themselves but also how they think others perceive them.

*“I can definitely relate and talk to African Americans for days.”*

Analysis of participants’ comments about their interracial interactions revealed two interesting patterns. First, participants found it difficult to provide specific examples of their interracial relationships and relied instead on broad comments that summarized how they felt about these interactions. Second, most participants compared their interactions with white students to their interactions with African-American students. The following quote from Alejandro (LI) exemplifies both patterns:

Minority students would probably be a little more um, sympathetic to the [Latina/o students], I don’t know, just ‘cause like in the case of African Americans, they’re also used to the same kind of portrayal in the media [as Latina/os] and um, I guess just being subjected to that, so I think maybe they would be a little more sympathetic to Hispanics and like not, I don’t know, like not view them negatively.

It seems that Alejandro (LI) conceptualizes the racial/ethnic composition of SEPU’s student body in terms of minority versus majority students and implies that any interaction with minority students would be easier than with white students. He singled out African Americans due to their “portrayal in the media,” suggesting that unfavorable media representations of African Americans and Latina/os create a special connection between them. Hernando (HI) also talked about the connection between African Americans and Latina/os but attributed it to the racial discrimination both groups face in the U.S., stating, “we’re in the same struggle basically as African Americans so that’s why we can relate more to African Americans than we can to anything else basically.” Alejandro and Hernando both grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods. Javier (LI), who grew up in a predominantly Latina/o and African-American neighborhood, also made a similar comment:



I do feel like the other racial minority students kind of um, kind of, kind of feel like where, where somebody else is coming from, like they um, they're going through the same, they have the same, well not the same thing, but they have similar experiences to what I'm going through. So they, they know what it's like to um, to be portrayed in a negative light or to have certain stereotypes.

Javier (LI) thinks that being a minority in the U.S. creates an inherent bond between members of minority groups. His comment is broader than Alejandro's (LI) and Hernando's (HI), who limited theirs to African Americans. Javier explains that similar mediated and personal experiences make it easier for minorities to connect among themselves than with Whites. Arturo (HI), who also grew up in a predominantly Latina/o and African-American neighborhood, had a more personal reason to explain his connection with certain minority students on campus, stating, "I relate more to my Latino people, but then again, I grew up with African Americans, so I relate a lot to them as well." He emphasized that he "can definitely relate and talk to African Americans for days," adding, "people who grew up with predominantly white people can speak to Caucasians for days, I can't really do that, I can't really relate." He also commented on the connection between African Americans and Latina/os due to their minority status:

When you're in another minority group who's almost um, in a sense, being stereotyped the same way as you are because you're not in the majority, so African Americans for instance um, you get along better I guess because you um, you probably haven't been through the same thing but you can almost empathize a little bit more and, and, and, and talk in the same language almost, understand each other better because you, in some way come from the same background and come from the same struggle, as um, other minority groups, um, as opposed to the majority group which is the regular I guess.

Arturo's (HI) use of "empathize" mirrors Alejandro's (LI) use of "sympathize."

However, contrary to Alejandro who connected African Americans and Latina/os via their media representations, Arturo implies that African Americans and Latina/os share the "same

background.” Alejandro’s parents live in an upper class neighborhood and both hold Master’s degrees, whereas Arturo grew up in a working class neighborhood and is a first-generation college student. During our interviews, Arturo did distinguish rich white students from poor white students, but he never made such a distinction when talking about minority students. I did not ask Arturo about this but maybe he assumes, as Hernando (HI) does, that minorities continue to face discrimination regardless of their social class.

The above comments suggest that participants perceive their interactions with white students to be different than with minority students. Federico (HI), who said he has friends from many different racial/ethnic backgrounds, said that many of his Latina/o friends “will mostly hang out with Hispanic people or black people.” Race scholar Beverly Tatum explains that “in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism” (2003, p.62). Participants’ references to the “struggles” of African Americans and Latina/os in the U.S. indicate they feel the need to group themselves to better cope with SEPU’s predominantly white campus and the racism they may experience.

*“In the back of their head, the stereotypes are there for what Hispanics do, what black people do.”*

Participants found it difficult to provide specific examples of their interracial relationships. Many of their examples dealt with language and how their word choice varied based on the race/ethnicity of their interlocutors. Before addressing this topic, I quote the three other concrete examples of interracial interactions Federico (HI), Enrique (LI) and Ricardo (LI) recalled that were not directly related to media and/or language. Federico mentioned walking on campus with one of his African-American friends when they ran into a common white friend:

Yesterday I was with James, he's, he's in a black fraternity, me and him were just walking on south campus and we saw this one white girl that we're friends with and we said 'hey' and she's like 'ah you guys are always together' and we're like 'yeah that's right, us minorities stick together' or something just stupid, something stupid. That's an example where he [James] um, he always says that like 'yeah us minorities always stick together, we gotta, gotta stay strong to raise our people,' and she's like, 'yeah, ok.' But just because, I feel like any minority is more, or from my experience, any minority is more accepting towards other minorities 'cause they feel they've struggled, quote unquote, even if they haven't, they know at least their people have.

Federico's (HI) account reveals the salience of race/ethnicity in everyday interactions and illustrates Tatum's (2003) "racial grouping" concept. The "white girl's" comment is based on Federico's and James' race/ethnicity, and the latter's response emphasizes race/ethnicity as the main reason they "stick together." Federico's explanation for this interaction resonates with other participants' comments regarding the bond among minority students at a predominantly white university. Ricardo (LI) also described his interactions with his African-American friends:

Sometimes my friends, I mean if we're like joking around with each other and things like that, I mean, they would, they would say something like 'oh, why don't you go eat some beans,' and I'm just like 'oh why don't you go eat some fried chicken' just like stereotypes like that, you know, and it's a joking manner, but like, it just makes you remind you that in the back of their head, the stereotypes are there for what Hispanics do, what black people do, and I mean, even though you may not say them all the time, I mean, people still know them.

Although Ricardo (LI) labels these kinds of interactions "joking around," he also suggests that stereotypes are often present in people's minds. Examining African-American teenagers' interactions, Tatum (2003) laments that "young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be Black, based largely on cultural stereotypes" (p.62).

Ricardo's comment suggests that these cultural stereotypes dominate his interracial interactions. Miguel (HI) made a similar comment in chapter 6 when discussing the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and students' perceptions of Latina/os. He said that media stereotypes "stay on the backburner" whenever he is interacting with white students, that is, he constantly has media stereotypes in mind during these interactions. Enrique (LI) also mentioned the use of stereotypes when he described his interactions with some of his white friends:

There'll be friends they'll say something just like messing around with me, like they, like a Latino thing, but then like later on I usually just get back, like 'you're a lazy white guy just like sitting on your couch,' like I don't know, for me it's just like a lot of banter back and forth, it's not something to take too seriously.

In contrast to Ricardo (LI), Enrique (LI) does not note the potential implications of regularly using stereotypical expressions. I did not ask Enrique for an example of "a Latino thing," but it is safe to assume it would be similar to what Ricardo's friends said. The use of stereotypical jokes may suggest a certain degree of intimacy between Ricardo and his black friends, and between Enrique and his white friends.

*"If I go to talk to a white person, I'm not gonna speak the way I speak with my black friends."*

The majority of examples participants provided about their interracial interactions on campus dealt with language. They consciously adapted their register to the race/ethnicity of the students involved in the interactions. The situation in which this change in register occurred was different for HIs and LIs. HIs mostly commented on it by describing their interactions with white students, whereas LIs were more likely to describe their interactions with African-American students. Ricardo (LI) explained that he feels more comfortable interacting with African-American students than with some white students, a feeling reflected in his language usage:

They're [white students] the more, um, like um, snotty, type people, um, uptight, so, I definitely um, I definitely act in a different way with them, I, I try not to be so, I mean, I'll watch what I say, kind of things, 'cause I mean, maybe to them, it's, it's offensive if I say some things um, so, but with the Blacks, with my black friends, I mean, I'm more carefree, definitely, I'll just speak, um, you know, and I mean, it's more of like, you can say what whatever you want, it's accepted.

Ricardo (LI), who grew up in a predominantly white area, nevertheless describes white students in terms of stereotypes. Ricardo had already told me that he was friends with the few but growing numbers of African Americans in his community. He also told me that he was not friends with the few other Latino students in his school because they were not as focused on academics as he was. During our interviews, Ricardo also said that when he arrived at SEPU he quickly met an African-American male student who introduced him to his African-American friends. Seemingly, Ricardo feels more at ease with his African-American friends than he does with certain white students, whom he describes in a way that suggests they might hold stereotypical views of Latina/os. Leonardo (LI), who grew up in a predominantly African-American neighborhood, also described the difference in language between his interactions with African-American and white students:

Ebonics, which is like um, the slang of like black people, I, the people I told you that lived in my community, they're all black, and because I've hung with them so much, I've started to speak like them, but I also know like, for example I'm in an interview right now, therefore like, I should not speak that way, you know. And it's not that that's wrong, it's just for, you know, me and my [African-American] friends, and then like also, if I go to talk to a white person, I'm not gonna speak the way I speak with my black friends because one, they might not understand it, two, they might think something about me that's not what it really is, you know. So like, I change like a little bit. I'm still like the same person, but I might change like the way I speak you know.

Leonardo (LI) seems to worry about talking in Ebonics to white students because they might “think something about [him] that’s not what it really is,” such as doubting Leonardo’s intellectual abilities. Cross, a race scholar who has extensively explored questions of black identity (see chapter 2), and his colleagues (2002) explained that “Blacks find themselves often moving in and out of situations that are dominated, controlled, or highly influenced by people who are not Black” (p.97). They posit that in such situations, Blacks perform “code-switching,” which occurs when “the Black person must ‘switch’ from his or her natural way of doing things to the way that is suggested or demanded by the situation” (p.97). Leonardo’s interracial interactions illustrate his code-switching, using Ebonics with his African-American friends and switching to English with his white friends.

*“When you talk to other white students um, it’s probably like writing a paper.”*

HIs also displayed code-switching behaviors when interacting with white students.

Indeed, all HIs who commented on language and interracial interactions emphasized this point, explaining that they consciously changed their English based on the race/ethnicity of the people they interacted with. They further stated that their word choice was related to how white students perceived them, as Hernando (HI) explained:

I feel like I want to be more well-spoken so they [white students] can see that I’m not just, you know I’m not just here to party and talk like this and that, you know what I’m saying, like I talk like, you know, I’m cool whatever but like I feel like when I talk to other people I feel like I have to talk in a more formal tone some, you know, and whatever situation I’m in like, if I’m talking to somebody that’s interviewing me for a you know, a position, a job, I speak more well-spoken, I act more, how do I say, I use more, people call it SAT words, like I use, they’re like SAT, I’ll use SAT words, like big words basically.

Hernando (HI) uses “SAT words” to protect himself from any pre-conceived views of Latina/os his interlocutors may have. Words represent indispensable tools for building relationships, which often start with a first interaction. Accordingly, Hernando uses language so others will take him seriously and not misjudge him. Code-switching requires Hernando to master the ways of white students (Cross et al., 2002). He accomplishes that by being “more well-spoken” in his conversations with them, as opposed to the more informal register he uses with his Latina/o friends. This also suggests a lack of intimacy between Hernando and his white peers. Tatum (2003) explained that it is common for members of a minority to interact with “the dominant group by de-emphasizing characteristics that might identify them as members of the subordinate group” (p.63). Hernando uses words to de-emphasize his *Latinidad*, not because he is ashamed of his heritage, but because he does not want to be perceived as a stereotypical Latino.

As mentioned in chapter 6, HIs think white students perceive their presence at SEPU as a result of affirmative action policies. Eduardo (HI) explained that using formal language enhanced his self-esteem, stating, “I try to sound more um, like more proper I guess with Whites than if I’m with just regular friends, especially um, and I think that has to do with, showing that I can also have that level of confidence.” He may feel more confident using “proper” English because he thinks white students would not judge him as much. Similarly, Mauricio (HI) described how he consciously made an effort to change his language when interacting with white students:

When I interact with white students, I just try to make sure that I don’t say as many, as many slang words that I would normally use, and when I say slang, like I, it’s just shortening words, like um, I’m trying to think of a good word, because I’ve noticed that like, I guess white people try to enunciate like the whole word, and um, sometimes, it’s

not that it's easier, but it's just, maybe, I don't know, cooler, just to not say the whole word, but definitely when I'm interacting with white students, I try to make sure that I say every single word, like how it's supposed to be said, as opposed to taking little short cuts.

Mauricio also displays code-switching behavior that allows him to change his "role" according to the situation (Cross et al., 2002). He chooses to take on the role of an articulate person among white students, whereas he takes on the role of a cool person among his other friends. He then added, "I feel like when you talk to other white students um, it's probably like writing a paper, and then when you talk to like other minority students it's definitely not like writing a paper, it's just normal." At that point, I replied the following to Mauricio: "you are making the assumption that all these white students you're talking to are, are very highly educated and they know those words you want to use." To which he replied, "I wouldn't say like they know the words that I wanna use, but it would just look better just to use them like to be safe."

Mauricio's (HI) code-switching behavior illustrates Goffman's (1959) idea of identity as performance. Goffman uses the dramaturgical metaphors of "frontstage" and "backstage" to explain how people behave differently depending on the context in which interactions occur. "Frontstage" performances take place in public to maintain a certain appearance whereas "backstage" performances take place in private and allow for spontaneous or relaxed behavior. Goffman (1959) argues that people construct their identities in reaction to others. Therefore, when on the "frontstage," a person's performance "may be seen as an effort to give the appearance that his[/her] activity in the [frontstage] region maintains and embodies certain standards" (p.107). When interacting with white students, they become an audience for Mauricio, who is on the "frontstage" and talks as if he were "writing a paper" because he wants to deliver a



performance in which he plays the role of an educated Latino. Mauricio's performance in the "frontstage" contrasts with his interactions with his friends, who create a "backstage" atmosphere where Mauricio can be himself and not think about his performance. Goffman (1959) describes the "backstage" as a place where "stage props and items of personal front can be stored," where "the performer can relax; he[/she] can drop his[/her] front, forgo speaking his[/her] lines, and step out of character" (p.112). This is exactly what Mauricio does when he says that interacting with other racial/ethnic minority students is "just normal."

It is hard to say if Mauricio (HI) subconsciously thinks white students are more likely than others to be highly educated or if he changes his English to avoid being perceived as an uneducated Latina/o. Regardless of the interpretation, HIs are aware white students may perceive them in stereotypical ways and consciously use a more sophisticated vocabulary when interacting with them. Participants' interracial interactions represent performances, and HIs are using language to perform in front of their white student audience, who will judge them according to their performance (Goffman, 1959, 1963). HIs use formal English during their interactions with white students to highlight specific characteristics about themselves "that might otherwise remain unapparent" (Goffman, 1959, p.30). Indeed, HIs believe that without performing in a certain language, their true academic capabilities would "remain unapparent" to white students. To use Butler's (1990) words, HIs thus create via these "performative acts" various identities that represent reality and vary depending on the context, or in this case, depending on the race/ethnicity of other students. For instance, in Mauricio's (HI) quote above, he wishes to display an "articulate" image of himself among white students and a "cool" identity among his racial/ethnic minority friends.

Participants' comments regarding their interracial interactions suggest that they have a different conceptual racial/ethnic map of campus. It seems as if HIs perceive campus as being divided between white students on one end and racial/ethnic minority students on the other. However, LIs seem to paint a picture of a campus in which Latina/o students are closer to white students than they are to other racial/ethnic groups of students. HIs reported having a more racially/ethnically diverse group of friends than LIs, who reported having more white friends than HIs (see chapters 5 and 6). The activities in which HIs and LIs are involved in on campus, discussed in chapter 6, also reflect this pattern. HIs were more likely to be heavily involved in racial/ethnic-oriented student organizations, whereas LIs were more likely to attend university sporting events, an activity that is not associated with a particular racial/ethnic group.

The above discussion also illustrates how HIs and LIs perceive white students differently. HIs clearly see themselves as members of a different group than the one the white students they are interacting with belong to. This is shown by their change of register when talking to their white peers. No LI reported such a behavior; on the contrary LIs' comments suggest a certain level of intimacy with their white peers. LIs' comments also imply that their presence on campus and their strong academic performances make them part of the same group white students belong to.

According to Butler (1990, 1993), participants' decision to use particular words among white students illustrates the influence of social norms on performance. These norms constrain HIs to perform using only certain words or risk performing outside of the norm, thus constructing a less favorable identity. By using formal English, HIs act against pre-conceived views white students may have of Latina/os, thus defying the "norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined" (Butler, 1990, p.17). In interracial interactions, HIs express the

identity they wish to present to white students via their performances. Therefore, using formal English when interacting with white students also serves to prove stereotypes wrong, an idea formulated by all His, which I discuss next.

*“I avoid that stereotypical stuff I see on the media.”*

All HIs and two LIs (Cristian and Javier) said they often consciously changed their behavior in the presence of non-Latina/o students, especially white ones, because they were concerned about validating stereotypes about Latina/os. Eduardo (HI) and Cristian (LI) used eating out with friends to illustrate how they control themselves in certain situations. Eduardo said the following:

If I was with my white friends and we were trying to get something to eat um, probably, um, I wouldn't necessarily say a Latin food or Hispanic food would be one of my top choices just because of the people I'm with.

Eduardo (HI) does not want his “white friends” to perceive him as a stereotypical Latina/o who only eats “Latin food or Hispanic food.” Similarly, Cristian (LI) said that if he would propose eating at a Mexican restaurant, his friends would respond, “oh of course you wanna go to a Mexican restaurant.” He then added, “I avoid that stereotypical stuff I see in the media.” This comment illustrates an aspect of the stereotype threat phenomenon discussed in chapter 2, which “derives from the broad dissemination of negative stereotypes about one's group—the threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfilling such a stereotype” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p.798). The concept of stereotype threat was originally developed to explain the achievement gap between African-American and white students, and was later refined to explore other situations when members of a particular group

are at risk of confirming a stereotype about their group. Hernando (HI) was the only participant who referred to his academic achievement as possibly reinforcing the stereotype that Latina/o students are not as intelligent as their white peers, stating, “my self-esteem gets down once in a while when like I feel like I do bad in a class I feel like, ‘Oh, man, I’m bad, I’m fitting like the stereotypes people have of Hispanics.’” Hernando, who plans to complete a doctorate program and knows that Latina/os are not less intelligent than any other student, displays a stereotype threat attitude because he worries that his own “bad” performance will confirm to his peers that all Latina/os “do bad in class.” As Steele and Aronson (1995) explain, one does not need to believe a stereotype to experience stereotype threat. In his studies with high school and college students, Steele (1997, 1999) noted that only students who perceived school achievement to be part of their identity displayed stereotype threat attitudes. This is particularly relevant here because although all participants are high-achievers who are proud of their academic performances, HIs were the ones who displayed the most stereotype threat attitudes. This also acts as a reminder that participants in this study are not representative of the majority of Latina/o students who do not graduate from high school or drop out of college (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a, 2011c).

Participants also mentioned other situations of stereotype threat. Most of them dealt with their interactions with white students they did not know well. During these interactions, participants explained that they altered how they would otherwise behave with their close friends, Latina/o or non-Latina/o, because they did not want their behavior to confirm stereotypes white students may hold of Latina/os. As discussed in chapters 5 and 6, participants reiterated their belief in the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and white

students' stereotypical perceptions of their Latina/o peers. Miguel (HI) explained how these media portrayals put him at risk of stereotype threat:

Anything, anything will, I feel like will 'cause someone to associate me with the media portrayal. Like I can be you know, I can, you know, I can act a particular way, you know, so I can be on someone's good side you know and they can, their image of me can be very positive until I do one thing that makes them associate me with their media portrayal and then it's just like 'Oh, Miguel, he's just you know a typical Latino, you know, that I see on TV.' So I mean, absolutely, you know I feel like, I feel like, you know I, I always act in order to defy media portrayal, in order to defy stereotypes.

Miguel (HI) displays a stereotype threat behavior because he is worried he will confirm stereotypes about Latina/os in general, which in turn will affect how he is perceived. Laar and her colleagues (2008) labeled this phenomenon "personal identity stereotype threat," which is "the concern that the self may be harmed by the stereotype and that stereotypic beliefs about the group will be confirmed in the self" (p.297). Miguel and other participants know they do not fit the media portrayal of Latina/os, but this image nevertheless compels participants to display stereotype threat behavior.

*"I wouldn't want to reinforce that stereotype that all Latinos dance."*

All participants, especially HIs, believed their interactions with non-Latina/os prevented people from perceiving Latina/os in stereotypical ways. Miguel, for instance, went as far as to say, "if I can change, even one person's perspective on Latinos just by them having an interaction with me, just one person a year, I'd be happy with that." When interacting with non-Latina/os, especially Whites, Miguel consciously adapts his behavior in the hopes of changing people's perceptions about Latina/os. Similar to "personal identity stereotype threat," this phenomenon is called "social identity stereotype threat," which refers to concern "that the group

will be harmed by the stereotype and that one may personally confirm the stereotypic views that others have about the group” (Laar et al., 2008, p.297). Javier (LI) provided an excellent example:

I feel like I have to, like be on my best behavior all the time it seems like, not, like I, I feel like I just have to, not that I represent my race but I’m aware of the fact that, um, if, if I do something negative, then it might have a negative impact on somebody’s view of, of Latinos as a whole. But I mean that’s just in the back of my head, I, I try to do the right thing whenever I can so it’s not really just because I’m Latino, it’s just because I wanna do the right thing but that’s also another factor I think.

Javier (LI) displays “social identity stereotype threat” attitudes by being on his “best behavior all the time.” Although he seems to lessen the role his Latina/o heritage plays on his interracial interactions by stating, “I try to do the right thing whenever I can,” he nevertheless acknowledges that his heritage represents an additional “factor” to act in a particular manner. Miguel (HI), on the contrary, was adamant that changing people’s stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os was his main goal in acting the way he does. While stereotype threat is “presumed to influence all members of the stereotyped group,” not all members of the same group are affected to the same degree (Steele, 1997, p.617). This explains why both HIs and LIs reported instances of stereotype threat. However, Ployhart and his colleagues (2003) found that “one who highly identifies with the group would experience the most threat” (p.254). This finding was also confirmed by participants’ comments because HIs were approximately three times more likely to discuss situations of stereotype threat than LIs. For instance, Eduardo (HI) provided another concrete example:

I think that definitely does have an effect um because, I guess, with my Latin friends, um listening to different types of music, um I’ll probably um, I’ll do the footsteps for a

dance, whereas when I'm around um, white friends, I wouldn't necessarily do that because I guess they don't, they're not used to listening to that music or seeing just um, people um, like, just dancing I guess, and I wouldn't want to reinforce that stereotype that all Latinos dance.

Eduardo (HI) restrains from fully being himself because in this particular situation he thinks he is at risk of confirming a stereotype. He worries that his "white friends" will see dancing as an inherent characteristic of all Latina/os. Hernando (HI) also illustrated how stereotype threat affects his interactions with white students, stating: "I feel like I have to act better than what they [white students] see [in the media]. I have to act um, what is it called, I have to, in a sense, hold back on my Hispanic, what is it called, like attributes I guess." He mentioned his voice as one of his "Hispanic attributes" he "holds back on," stating, "in public, when I'm like around people, I feel like I should have to calm that stuff down after like, I guess kind of lower my voice."

Due to the salience of their Latina/o heritage on their identity, HIs are more likely to display stereotype threat attitudes than LIs. Most stereotype threat experiments have primed participants' racial/ethnic identity simply by asking them to indicate their racial/ethnicity background at the beginning of a study. Participants who were made more aware of their race/ethnicity displayed stronger stereotype threat attitudes. HIs need not be reminded of the salience of their race/ethnicity because it is always salient to them. Croizet and his colleagues (2001) posit that "stereotype threat is a general self-threat that triggers effortful attempts to restore a sense of self-integrity" (p.306). As shown above, participants respond to stereotype threat by trying to prove the stereotypes wrong.

*“I do think that experience would trump mostly anything.”*

All participants insisted that their interactions with non-Latina/o students positively affect how the latter perceive Latina/os in general. Several studies reported that interracial interactions lead to more positive racial attitudes (Allport, 1954; Emerson, Kimbro & Yancey, 2002; Pettigrew, 1998; Sigelman & Welch, 1993). In chapter 5, I discussed how participants worried that lack of meaningful interactions with Latina/os, coupled with unfavorable media representations, result in stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os. In this section, I address how participants believe that interacting with white students may change these perceptions. Arturo (HI) explained that “Whites usually really don’t have bonds with Latinos, or have really small bonds, or have bonds that are um, boss like to employee, or stuff like that, that only brings up more stereotype and reinforces the negative perception of Latinos.” All participants agreed that moving beyond these “small bonds” represents the best way to counter stereotypical perceptions many people hold of Latina/os. Mauricio (HI) stated that “once they [people] get to know um, like a certain individual, that’s when things change and like perceptions change and um, you no longer look at them like how, um, a given stereotype like portrays like Latinos in this case.” Similarly, Enrique (LI) said that personal experiences with Latina/os, regardless of their quality, influence perceptions about Latina/os:

So if in, if in their school they [Latina/o students] were very um, trouble-making and like never like did well in school and just like bad, like overall not good individuals, then they would probably come to college thinking that’s how like a lot of Latinos are. Um, whereas if you go to a school where, where they [Latina/o students] might achieve better or just like if maybe they [non-Latina/o students], they even went to a school with like mostly Latino or minority population, just based on where you go and at that point I would assume you might see the other ones.



Enrique (LI) seems to classify Latina/o students as either good or bad students. He suggests that contact with the former leads to more favorable perceptions of Latina/os as opposed to contact with the latter. He then stated, “I would think that their own experiences um, they would draw much larger conclusions than something they just see on TV or film [...] I do think that experience would trump mostly anything.” Enrique’s comment summarizes participants’ beliefs regarding the importance of positive interpersonal interactions to counter stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os. Psychologist Gordon Allport noted that meaningful interactions between members of different groups enhance perceptions of out-group members. He is credited to have developed the “contact hypothesis,” which suggests that interpersonal interactions between members of minority and majority groups lead to stereotype reduction. He differentiated “casual contacts” from “true acquaintances,” asserting that only the latter “lessen prejudices” (Allport, 1954, p.264). He also warned that interpersonal interactions do *not* automatically change people’s perceptions about out-group members as “certain personalities resist the influences of contact” (p.279) and established the conditions under which the positive effects of interracial contact would occur:

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by *equal status* contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of *common goals*. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by *institutional supports* (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of *common interests and common humanity* between members of the two groups (p.281, emphasized added).

While we can argue that when Latina/o students interact with their white peers both groups are of equal status because they all are SEPU students, it is hard to establish if interracial interactions meet the other conditions of the contact hypothesis. SEPU does encourage all

members of its student body to respect each other, but it cannot force students to behave in a particular way. As for common goals and interests, I would need to interview white students to explore how dedicated they are to enhancing race relations on campus, which is one of HIs' main goals when interacting with white students. Despite the limitations of the contact hypothesis, education researchers also share participants' optimism regarding improving race relations via contact. Indeed, "white students who have more contact with other groups have improved racial attitudes and reductions in out-group stereotypes relative to white students with less contact with other groups" (Fischer, 2010, p.39). HIs reported that they actively tried to change people's perceptions of Latina/os by "proving them wrong" through their actions, whereas LIs seemed more complacent about the current state of race relations on campus. In contrast to HIs who make the efforts to behave in particular ways or initiate friendships, LIs believe that being themselves or simply seeing Latina/os enrolled at SEPU is enough to alter people's stereotypical perceptions of Latina/os.

*"Hopefully they'll see me as a reflection of other Hispanic people."*

As with previous topics discussed in this dissertation, HIs' comments indicated a more thoughtful perspective than LIs'. HIs described concrete actions they took to change people's minds about Latina/os, whereas LIs' comments were broader, which may suggest that LIs had not thought about people's perceptions of Latina/os as much as HIs had. HIs also believed it was their duty to cast themselves in a different role than the one presented in the media. Miguel (HI) emphasized how important this is to him, stating, "I think it's always been my main objective to prove people wrong, to show them that not all Latinos are like that." He then added, "I always make sure that like in every conversation that I have, at least with the initial conversation, that I come across as an educated individual, as a respectful, considerate individual." Miguel thus aims

to “prove people wrong” via his vocabulary and manners. In the following exchange, Eduardo (HI) explained the role media play in shaping white students’ perceptions of Latina/os and what he does to limit media’s effects:

*Eduardo:* I’m not sure if I even like, I even knowingly do it, but I definitely um, try and change those stereotypes they [white students] always carry of Latinos. It’s something that I strive to change, or that try to make them understand that not everybody is like that. So for example if you see um, I don’t know, [9-second pause] if, if the only thing you see I guess is, like people, um, Latinos working in the fast food industry or something, then like that’s what you’re gonna, assume everybody does. Especially on TV because that just reaches so many people, but I guess the thing I try to let others understand is like, that’s TV, you know, it’s like not the real life.

*Joseph:* So how would you do that? You just, how, how do you go around changing their mind?

*Eduardo:* Um, I would say the biggest thing you can do is just um, get to know them [white students] and let them get to know you.

Media’s influence on audiences is increased by the lack of counter portrayals both “on TV” and in “real life” (Gerbner, 1998; Morgan et al., 2009). If Latina/os have meaningful relationships with white students, white students may change their perceptions of Latina/os. Federico (HI) calls these relationships “meeting each other for real.” Talking about the potential positive outcomes of building such relationships, he stated, “[white students will] see me as Hispanic and welcoming and hopefully they’ll see me as a reflection of other Hispanic people.” He even impersonated how white students would react after an interaction with him: “I feel like I change people’s views on the stereotypical Latino, or Latinos in general, they’ll be like ‘Oh, Federico’s a Latino and he doesn’t do this’ or ‘Federico’s a Latino and he does do this.’”

*“Their only interaction with a Latino isn’t going to be what they see in Scarface.”*

LIs do not see the need to act in any particular way when interacting with non-Latina/o students. LIs believe that non-Latina/os have already been exposed to enough non-stereotypical

Latina/os in school and therefore do not perceive Latina/o students based on media representations. I addressed similar findings in chapter 6, when I discussed that LIs were more likely to believe that white students had favorable perceptions of them than HIs did. LIs reported that seeing Latina/o students on campus positively affected white students' perceptions of them and used the same reasoning when interacting with white students, as Javier (LI) explained:

I feel like the university students are just more um, like they're exposed to more diversity so they just see, their, their only interaction with a Latino isn't going to be what they see in *Scarface*. They're going to be able to directly interact with another Latino so they, their um, their view isn't going to be based solely on what they see on TV.

In contrast to HIs, Javier (LI) thinks that Latina/o students do not need to change their behavior when interacting with other students to prove media representation wrong. He believes that being "exposed to more diversity" is enough to do so. Similarly, Emerson and his colleagues (2002) found that even limited contact in multiracial settings led to stereotype reduction. Cristian (LI) shared this view when he stated, "I do feel I've met enough people that um, it breaks the stereotype, and I think the same way for me, that people have met enough [Latina/o] people that don't fit that mold." According to him, the burden to change white students' perceptions of Latina/os in general does not rest on his shoulders because past Latina/o students have already dealt with it. However, Alejandro (LI) explained how people might change their perceptions of *him*:

Maybe I guess when I, when I meet people and then they hear my name they might initially like, think like 'oh he's Hispanic' and then they have whatever ideas they have, but then I think like I said before, the personal experience of meeting someone, I think like most the people I've met, once they get to know me, once I start, like once I meet them then they realize like, ok, like I don't know, like 'he doesn't fit the stereotype that I

have' or like um, they kind of just, they, they make their own, um, I guess judgments about me rather than like based on what they already knew.

Alejandro (LI) seems more concerned about what people think of him as opposed to what people may think of Latina/os. His comment nevertheless suggests that people have a pre-conceived image of Latina/os, that is, people “already know” something about him when “they hear [his] name.” Despite his comment, nothing in our interviews suggested that he was actively trying to change people’s perceptions of Latina/os. Similar to other LIs and contrary to HIs, Alejandro does not change his behavior when interacting with non-Latina/os because he assumes that being himself is enough to break any stereotypical view others may have about him. The above discussion suggests that LIs are less concerned than HIs about white students’ perceptions of Latina/os. In their study on identity perception, Ho and Sidanius (2010) found that “students who do not believe others hold the negative stereotype about their group would be less concerned about being perceived in terms of the negative stereotype” concerning their group (p.61). LIs’ comments reflect such findings. Accordingly, LIs feel they can act in the presence of non-Latina/os as they would in any other situation. All participants, however, agreed that personal interactions with Latina/os “would trump” any stereotype they might hold based on media representations of Latina/os, to use Enrique’s (LI) expression. Their agreement also confirms what researchers like Fischer (2010) have found, that increased interactions with minority students lead to a decrease in white students’ stereotypical perceptions of their minority peers (Fischer, 2010).

While all participants expressed optimistic thoughts about the effects of the contact hypothesis, a few of them said that establishing interracial contact at SEPU is no easy task. As Miguel (HI) explained, “once people interact with each other, they realize, ‘hey, you’re not that

bad,' you know what I mean [...] but getting them to talk, that's the hardest part." Therefore, the contact hypothesis seems to have an eponymous challenge: contact. As Alejandro (LI) stated, "I think personal experience can be a lot more powerful than like what you perceive in the media but until you really have that, then I guess what you perceive in the media it kind of prevails." With Latina/o students representing only 5.4% of SEPU's undergraduate student body, Miguel and Alejandro imply that media representations of Latina/os may continue to influence white students' perceptions of their Latina/o peers.

HI's comments suggest that they were more pro-active in changing people's perceptions of Latina/os, whereas LIs made more general comments agreeing that personal interactions can influence people to perceive Latina/os in more favorable ways than how media portray them. LIs also thought that being themselves was enough to counter media stereotypical representations of Latina/os. By contrast, HIs consciously acted with the aim of showing people a different image of Latina/os. To use one of Tatum's (2003) terms, HIs perceive themselves as "emissary" because they consider their "own achievements as advancing the 'cause of the racial group'" (p.64).

*"You've grown up with it your whole life, you're not gonna get rid of it in like a year or two."*

During our interviews, I noted a few comments from five participants, Federico (HI), Miguel (HI), Cristian (LI), Javier (LI) and Ricardo (LI), that made me feel less optimistic than all the participants were regarding the positive outcomes of the contact hypothesis, that is, of white students' contact with Latinos. These participants either mentioned that people do not let go of stereotypes very easily or that others may not perceive them as representatives of Latina/os in general, but as honorary Whites. Both scenarios nullify the contact hypothesis as Latina/o-White interactions may change white students' perceptions about the Latina/o students directly

involved in the interactions but not about other Latina/o students and/or Latina/os in general. In the following exchange, Miguel explains how deeply rooted stereotypes are in people's minds:

*Miguel:* After we kind of, we take that initial first step and like we're kind of past that first conversation, um, I think, I think they [white students] see me for who I am, but there's always that, that kind of like, that, I don't know, just maybe they don't use, they don't use those media portrayals to judge me but, they'll, they'll look for connections. So like 'yeah Miguel is very different from like the typical media portrayal' but maybe one day I could do something that is like, 'Huh I kind of saw that in a movie once' or like 'this Latino cursed out this white guy' or something like that, you know and so, I don't know, really it hasn't happened much with me so.

*Joseph:* No but that's just interesting to hear you, you know, think about the general...

*Miguel:* Yeah I do, I do sincerely do think of that um, even if it doesn't impact your interaction with that individual, stereotypes about the group that the individual belongs to is always going to lay in the back of your mind.

Miguel (HI) previously said that his "main objective" was "to prove people wrong, to show them that not all Latinos are like" media portray them. However, here Miguel suggests that regardless of how hard he tries to prove media portrayals wrong, he will never erase Latina/o stereotypes from "the back of your mind." Cristian (LI), who also believes that "at like university level, you meet so many people that aren't the stereotype that you just kind of like lose that [stereotypical] expectation," nevertheless acknowledges the limits new interactions can have on perceptions. He stated, "I still feel like it's [the Latina/o stereotype] there because I mean, you've grown up with it your whole life, you're not gonna get rid of it in like a year or two."

By the time students enroll at SEPU, they've been exposed to media stereotypes for approximately 18 years. In addition, the racial demographics of North Carolina might have provided non-Latina/o students with only a few opportunities to develop meaningful friendships with Latina/os. Meeting a few Latina/o students at SEPU would affect how they perceive them, but white students might not apply these perceptions to Latina/os in general. As Steele (1997)

explained, because “stereotypes are widely disseminated throughout society, a personal exemption from them earned in one setting does not generalize to a new setting” (p.168).

Comments from some other participants also seemed to weaken the long-term effects of the contact hypothesis. They talked about examples of interactions with white students during which the latter openly expressed their stereotypical views of Latina/os despite knowing at least one Latina/o who did not fit these stereotypes. In the following quote, Federico (HI) recalled asking a white female student what she thought of Latina/os after having heard her make racist comments about African Americans. Federico, who has a white skin complexion, thought the white student did not know he was Latino:

Then I asked her what she thinks about Hispanics, this was before she knew I was Hispanic, and she was like ‘I mean yeah there’s, like all those Mexicans move over and they don’t know English and they just like always stare at me and whistle at me whenever I walk by them at a construction site or something like’ and she just, she had some very tough words about Hispanics and I was like ‘You know I’m Hispanic right?’ She’s like ‘yeah but you’re not Hispanic like them,’ and I’m like ‘Hispanic like them? I mean you’re right I’m not, I’m not Mexican but I’m still proud to be Hispanic, I still hang out with lots of Latino people,’ and she’s like ‘yeah, well you’re just different or there’s a difference between you and them’ and then I just, I thought it was interesting because if she had seen me with my friends she’d have probably just thought like ‘oh, it’s just a bunch of damn spics,’ I’m like ‘what?’ like that’s, it boggles my mind how some people can be, like obviously if you’re at [SEPU] you’re educated, and how someone can be so educated but yet so ignorant.

The white female student probably said that Federico (HI) was “not Hispanic like them” because he is pursuing his education at a prestigious university. She thus perceives him to be an outlier rather than a representative of the intellectual capabilities of Latina/os. According to her, Federico, a SEPU student, has nothing in common with the Latinos she sees “at a construction site.” Javier (LI) described a similar example that took place while he was in high school:



The other white kids in the class, there were a few that were, they'd be like 'oh, oh, those black kids and those Hispanics are so dumb, oh but not you Javier, you're, you're different.' So it kind of made me feel like, like what does that even mean? Like they're attacking this entire group but here I am proving that that's not true but at the same time they, they don't see that. They say 'oh, you're different, you're, I mean you are different, you're not part of like that group.'

Javier's (LI) white friends' comment echoes the one the white female student expressed toward Federico (HI). In both cases, neither Javier nor Federico is perceived as representative of Latina/os in general and is thus incapable of changing these students' stereotypical beliefs about Latina/os. Javier even thought he was "proving that that's not true," which should have been effective if the conditions of the contact hypothesis were met. However, Wilson (1996) found that "the four types of contact [workplace contact, neighborhood contact, church contact and home contact] considered in this study reduce social distance but for the most part have no effect on stereotypes" (p.53). Such findings are coherent with Federico's and Javier's accounts because white students felt socially close to them but nevertheless held on to their stereotypes about Latina/os.

In a concise comment, Ricardo (LI) summarized other participants' thoughts quoted above and reinforced the limitations of the contact hypothesis to change white students' perceptions about Latina/os: "white college students wouldn't perceive um, wouldn't perceive the Latinos who aren't in college as equals." As mentioned in chapter 6, participants said white students would also stereotype Latina/o college students they encounter outside of campus. While all participants were optimistic about the effect of the contact hypothesis, these few comments suggest that changing people's perceptions of Latina/os might be more complex than solely interacting with them.

This chapter and the previous one illustrate the role media representations of Latina/os play in Latino students' college experiences. While HIs' campus lives and everyday interactions are more influenced by media images than those of LIs', all participants commented on how media influence their social and academic activities at SEPU. In the next chapter, I explore how these same media images affect participants' identity development, focusing on how they make sense of their identity as high-achieving Latino students when the dominant media representations of Latina/os involve negative connotations.

## CHAPTER VIII: FROM IDENTITY STRUGGLES TO A NEW LATINA/O IDENTITY

Most Latina/os in the U.S. share a collective notion of identity, often called “*Latinidad*” (Avila-Saavedra, 2010; Dávila, 2008) or “U.S. Latino panethnicity” (Rodriguez, 1996). These terms imply “that all U.S. Latinos, Latin American immigrants and their descendants, are one unitary group, regardless of differences of national origin, race, class, or U.S. immigration history” (Rodriguez, 1996, p.60). This Latina/o collective identity has been driven by marketers to sell advertisers a “Latino market” in which Latina/os’ racial/ethnic differences would be overshadowed by their *Latinidad* (Dávila, 2008; Rodriguez, 1996). To create an attractive market to advertisers, marketers emphasize U.S. Latinos as being part of the middle class (Dávila, 2008). This has led to some contrasting media portrayals of Latina/os, as a “growing preeminence of a so-called booming and profitable market at the same time that they continue to be stereotyped as illegal and a burden to the nation’s economic welfare” (Dávila, 2008, p.71). Dávila refers to these conflicting media images as “one of the most intriguing conundrums in contemporary representations of Latinos” (p.71). However, as discussed in chapters 5 and 6, it is important to keep in mind that when asked to describe media portrayals of Latina/os, only a few participants could think of favorable representations and that overall, participants’ answers reflected media stereotypical representations. Regardless of media representations, Avila-Saavedra (2010) notes that “collectivity in itself is a complicated notion, given the cultural and racial diversity of the millions of people called Latin Americans” (p.137). He explains that “the

diversity in terms of race and class among U.S. Latinos prevents achieving a cohesive discourse like those achieved by other ethnic minorities (p.137).

As mentioned in chapter 2, a person's identity does not depend solely on that person's self-perception but also on how this person thinks other people perceive him/her. These two aspects of identity refer to a person's "public identity" and "lived subjectivity." Alcoff (2006) defines "public identity" as "how we are socially located in public" and "lived subjectivity" as "how we understand ourselves" to be (pp. 92-93). In this chapter, I explore how HIs and LIs perceive their public identities and lived subjectivities as U.S. Latinos and whether or not they see themselves fitting in the panethnicity paradigm created by the media. As in the previous chapters, participants' answers are influenced by their level of racial/ethnic identification as well as by their critical analysis of media representations of Latina/os.

*"It made me realize how special and how specific my identity was [...] being introduced to all these different cultures."*

Prior to attending SEPU, most HIs associated Latina/o culture with their parents' customs, which differed based on their country of origin. For instance, Federico (HI), who is half Cuban and half Puerto Rican, grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and attended a predominantly white high school, stated, "coming to college, I saw this venue where I could um, I guess get, get in touch with my Hispanic roots more." He said, "[I was] a little more close-minded in my view of the Hispanic life" before college, and added, "when I thought of Hispanic before [attending SEPU], it was like either what I know from my family or what I see in the media, like all the Mexicans, like yeah Mexicans eat *tacos* and *burritos*." Not only does Federico's comment reinforce the relationship established in the previous chapters between

media representations of Latina/os and audience's perceptions of Latina/os, but it also reveals how meeting other Latina/os in college helped Federico better understand the Latina/o culture.

Hernando (HI) said that attending SEPU and meeting other Latina/os put his identity in perspective. He stated, "Latino encompasses much more than his "Puerto Rican identity." He also gained a better appreciation of his identity because "it made [him] realize how special and how specific [his] identity was in, in itself that, how unique it was, being introduced to all these different cultures." Meeting Latina/os from other cultures, made him better understand not only Latina/o culture in general, but his own Puerto Rican culture as well. Mauricio (HI), whose parents are Mexican, expressed a similar thought in more detail using one of his friends from Colombia:

Victor, he's a Colombian, so um, like he talks about Colombia, or like Colombian dishes, or like Colombian holidays, and then we have like me, I'm Mexican, I talk about my Mexican like dishes, my Mexican holidays, and we kind of compare contrast, and then we then kind of like, just um, kind of see the pros and cons, not pros and cons, but like um, we see the like, we either 'oh my God, that's really cool that you guys have that' or it's like 'oh, I don't know if I would like doing that' and um, I don't know, just sharing that with um, kind of similar background people, or like people that kind of went through the same struggles as you, definitely helps you identify with them, and kind of keep your identity.

Mauricio (HI) did not know anybody from Colombia until he came to SEPU. Talking with Victor about traditional dishes and holidays helped Mauricio understand the richness of the Latina/o culture, which he had mostly associated until then with Mexican traditions. In her study with immigrant Latina teenagers in North Carolina, Vargas (2009) observed a similar cultural exchange between Latinas from different countries. Vargas uses genres of music to illustrate how Latina teenagers learned more about Latina/o culture and refers to such exchanges as "cultural practices" (p.194).

Even though Victor and Mauricio (HI) are from different countries, Mauricio still considers Victor to be from a “similar background” because they are both Latinos in the U.S. currently pursuing their education. As discussed in chapter 6, all but two participants (Alejandro and Leonardo, both LIs) mentioned they were “excited” to have met other high-achieving Latina/o students at SEPU because they were the only or among the few Latina/o student(s) in their high school honors and AP classes. Mauricio’s comment suggests that meeting other high-achieving Latina/os also affects his identity because it shows him that he can be Latino *and* academically successful. Likewise, Javier (LI) said, “seeing more high-achieving, high-achievers in the Latino community kind of made me a little, um, more proud to be, to be Hispanic.”

Some HI participants also mentioned that meeting other Latina/os introduced them to some aspects of the Latina/o culture they have adopted as their own. For instance, Federico (HI) said, “I didn’t really know *bachata* before I came to [SEPU] and I love the, the music now.” Similarly, Eduardo (HI), talking about one of his friends from the Dominican Republic, said, “he’s really into *bachata*, so that, um that just helped incorporate that kind of music into um, what I listen to.” While these Latina/o students enriched HIs’ knowledge of Latina/o culture in general, the latter also met high-achieving Latina/os at SEPU who were not as interested in these intra-cultural exchanges.

*“They act like they’re white basically.”*

In chapter 6, I mentioned that HI participants divided Latina/o students at SEPU into two main categories based on how much they “embraced” their Latina/o heritage: “Latino Latinos” and “non-Latino Latinos.” HIs claim that membership in these groups affects college experiences because it influences the types of friends and activities that students seek. While this distinction is similar to the one I make between HI and LI Latina/os, I consider LIs to be Latina/os; I do not

deny them their *Latinidad* but rather claim that their Latina/o heritage is not a salient part of their identity. Leonardo (LI) made a comment that illustrates how I conceptualize LIs: “I’m not ashamed to say I’m Latino, you know, like I am, I am Hispanic, I am from Honduras, like, that’s, like, that’s never gonna change, but at the same time that’s not what defines me.” Leonardo, as other LIs, sees himself as a Latino but his whole persona is not “defined” by his race/ethnicity. However, HIs are not as flexible in their definition of “non-Latino Latinos” and for the most part consider the latter to be Whites. Hernando (HI) bluntly stated the difference between him, a “Latino Latino,” and “non-Latino Latinos”:

I see a lot of like Hispanics that turn into like you know, the whitewashed ones, like turn into you know, they act like they’re white basically [...] Some people don’t really embrace their Hispanic culture like others. So if they see me and I’m like wearing a Puerto Rican flag, or I’m like talking Spanish or I’m walking around with my friends that are Hispanic then I guess you can say that ‘Oh, he’s one of the ones that’s like overtly Hispanic with his other friends.’

For Hernando (HI), the contrast between him and “whitewashed” Latina/os is flagrant because he is openly displaying his *Latinidad* while others are hiding it to the point of acting “like they’re White.” He wears a T-shirt with “a Puerto Rican flag” to display his “ethnic loyalty” to his Latina/o heritage, which Flores and her colleagues (2000) label “ethnic pride.” I asked Hernando if he could estimate the percentage of Latina/os at SEPU in each group. He responded, “It would either be 60-40 or 70-30, and the majority would be the ones that blend.” In other words, Hernando perceives himself and other “Latino Latinos” to be a minority on campus, where they are not only surrounded by 70% of white undergraduate students, but also by students from their own racial/ethnic background who prefer to associate with white students. Arturo (HI) said that Latina/os who “forget their roots, how to speak Spanish” are “not real Latinos.”

Several studies have reported that Latina/os who strongly identify with their cultural heritage often criticize other Latina/os who do not, especially regarding the latter's lack of fluency in Spanish (Dennis et al., 2010; Gibson, 1995; Holleran, 2003). Indeed, such Latina/os may be looked down on because they are perceived as becoming too "Americanized" (Gibson, 1995) and denying their Latina/o culture (Holleran, 2003). In her study of high school Mexican-American students, Holleran discovered overt tensions between the monolingual Spanish-speaking students and the bilingual or monolingual English-speaking ones, labeled by the former as "sell outs." Although no participant in the present study openly expressed any social tension between HIs and LIs, regardless of Spanish fluency, Arturo's (HI) comment regarding the "not real Latinos" is consistent with Holleran's findings.

The above discussion suggests that HIs and LIs also vary in their degree of assimilation and acculturation to U.S. society. Assimilation assumes that the longer immigrants, or children of immigrants, are exposed to U.S. culture, the more likely they are to adopt an American identity and lose their cultural heritage (Gibson, 1995; Rong & Brown, 2001). Hernando's (HI) comment regarding some Latina/os who "act like they're white basically" can be interpreted as referring to a form of assimilation. However, as mentioned in chapter 6, LIs say they are proud of their Latina/o heritage even though it does not represent a salient aspect of their identity. Therefore, different levels of acculturation may more accurately reflect the difference between HIs and LIs than differences in assimilation. While assimilation implies the loss of one's original culture, acculturation rejects this "either or" approach to favor a combination of two cultures (Cano & Castillo, 2010). Acculturation occurs when immigrants gradually learn about and adopt certain aspects of U.S. culture while maintaining certain aspects of their culture of origin (Cano



& Castillo, 2010). LIs' acculturation levels are dominated by U.S. culture whereas HIs' acculturation levels are dominated by Latina/o culture.

When HIs talked about “non-Latino Latinos” during our interviews, I sometimes sensed resentment in their voice regarding LIs' public identities. For instance, referring to “non-Latino Latinos,” Arturo (HI) stated, “there's only so much of us [in college] and you're, you're a traitor [*he chuckles*].” While Arturo laughs off his comment at the end, his comment illustrates that HI Latinos are struggling to understand why some Latina/os would choose to “forget where they came from,” as Mauricio (HI) said. It seemed as if HIs were saying that “non-Latino Latinos” were ashamed of their roots and refused to be associated with their Latina/o heritage. With such comments, HIs may be denying LIs their right to claim their Latina/o heritage or their definition of being Latina/o. This perspective contrasts with Rosaldo's (1994) notion of “cultural citizenship,” which “refers to the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (Rosaldo, 1994, p.402). Rosaldo is concerned about the rights and the place of U.S. Latina/os who wish to be active participants in the U.S. democratic life while maintaining their Latina/o culture. He posits that “the enduring exclusions of the color line often deny full citizenship to Latinos and other people of color in the United States” (Rosaldo & Flores, 1997, p.57). HIs seem to take issue with LIs' right to be different, claiming a different *Latinidad* than theirs. However, as Flores (2003) explains, “groups define themselves, form a community, and claim space and social rights,” all key aspects of a democratic society where people can develop a sense of belonging (p.89). In contrast to Rosaldo (1994), who views cultural citizenship as the demand of marginalized people for full citizenship recognition despite their cultural differences, HIs' comments imply that Latina/os who do not behave as they do should not be recognized as Latina/os.

Neither the participants nor I discussed the concept of “passing.” In this context, however, it is hard to avoid drawing a parallel between passing and HIs’ comments. Passing refers to “the process whereby minorities avoid their ethnicity and hide themselves in the appearance and lifestyle of dominant group members” (Montalvo, 2005, p.37). Passing thus allows members of a group to be “perceived as part of a specific group from which they would normally be excluded” (Villares, 2008, p.78). It may be that HIs perceive LIs as passing as Whites because they hide the Latina/o aspects of their identity.

Another interpretation of HIs’ comments is that they suggest a more subtle form of passing, one in which “the passer does not want to join ‘them,’ but to become invisible and slip through a crowd unnoticed” (Montalvo, 2005, p.37). Indeed, as mentioned in previous chapters, both HIs and LIs said they were proud of their Latina/o heritage. The main difference between the two groups of participants is the role they attribute to their Latina/o heritage in their everyday lives. LIs, who do not define themselves in terms of their racial/ethnic heritage, are thus more likely to “slip through a crowd unnoticed” without necessarily wanting to be part of that crowd. During my interviews with LI participants, I did not ask them to respond directly to HIs’ comments; LIs nevertheless made several comments directly addressing that topic. These comments revealed that their identity as LI Latinos is more complex than simply deciding to hide their Latina/o heritage. The following discussion focuses on LIs’ subjective identities as Latinos who do not strongly identify with their Latina/o heritage. While Miguel (HI) and other HIs provided their own definitions of “non-Latino Latinos,” I now use LIs’ words to explain their low level of cultural identification.

*“Apart for like the skin tone, like there was really no connection.”*

Alejandro (LI) and Javier (LI), the only participants who are not fluent in Spanish, said they felt language separated them from the Spanish-speaking Latina/o students. Alejandro,

whose parents immigrated to mainland U.S. from Puerto Rico, mentioned his childhood, stating, “I grew up here [in mainland U.S.] and so I don’t really, like I don’t have like an accent from my parents or anything. I didn’t, I don’t, like I speak English like very comfortably and that was like my first language.” Alejandro compares himself to his parents, who are fluent in Spanish and speak English with an accent. However, his comment ignores the fact that most Latina/os who were born in the U.S. to immigrant parents speak English without an accent and are also fluent in Spanish. Indeed, none of the participants spoke English with a Spanish accent. In addition, most participants referred to their parents’ speaking limited English or having an accent. Javier also said that not being fluent in Spanish hindered the friendships he could have developed with other Latina/o students at SEPU:

Going to those [Latina/o Student Association] meetings, um, I did kind of feel out of place because, I think just the way that um, the way that I acted wasn’t, wasn’t the, the same as, as these other people. It just um, I don’t know I guess the same, the same vibe like I felt like I wasn’t Hispanic enough to hang out with some of these people, like um, just that I didn’t speak Spanish or um, I think that was the main issue to be honest about that. I didn’t speak Spanish, I didn’t feel comfortable.

Javier (LI) attributes feeling uncomfortable in the Latina/o Student Association meeting to his lack of fluency in Spanish, which, according to him, “was the main issue.” Nevertheless, language alone cannot explain why some Latina/o students do not feel strongly connected to their Latina/o heritage. Indeed, four of the six LIs are fluent in Spanish. For instance, Leonardo (LI) maintains that despite speaking Spanish and being proud of his Latina/o heritage, the latter is not a salient part of his identity:

I’ve never felt like, a very super strong tie to, like my Latino identity like, I, like, I have always been like Hispanic and I speak Spanish and all that, but like, I don’t have the pride that some people have in their, their race, not because I’m ashamed or anything, I,

I'm proud to, but like, I know, I've met some people who are like, just like, they're the best and whatever.

Leonardo (LI) compares himself to other Latina/os who take "pride" in their Latina/o heritage, such as Hernando (HI), who mentioned above that he wore a T-shirt with a Puerto-Rican flag. According to Leonardo, being Latina/o is more a state of mind than a display of cultural symbols. Indeed, while Alejandro (LI) and Javier (LI) are not fluent in Spanish, they nevertheless consider themselves Latina/os; they are U.S. Latina/os who are more comfortable speaking in English than in Spanish, but are Latina/os nonetheless. Leonardo's comment also illustrates that U.S. Latina/os can speak Spanish but still identify more with the white mainstream group than with their own racial/ethnic group.

Enrique (LI), who grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods where his family was the only Latina/o one, stated, "I just feel like individually, I don't really see myself having much in common [with other Latina/os], just like in terms of interests and stuff, even like just like our culture, being Latinos, I just feel like we have different interests." Enrique compares himself with the few other Latina/os he knew from high school, who, as he previously said, were not as high-achieving as he was. Enrique's comment suggests that we should not expect Latina/os to share the same "interests" simply because they share a similar racial/ethnic background. Ricardo (LI) shed light on that point when talking about one of the few other Latinos in his high school, stating: "we didn't really hang out um, per se, I mean we knew each other or whatever, but it wasn't just 'oh, you're Hispanic, I'm Hispanic, we should be like buddy-buddy.'" Cristian (LI), who also grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood, said he felt different from other Latina/os, stating, "apart for like the skin tone, like there was really no connection" with other

Latina/os. Indeed, while Cristian was physically different from white students, he nevertheless felt closer to them than to Latina/o students:

I definitely realized in high school it's like the people I hung out with, like middle class, white people, and it's kind of like the crowd I feel like I grew up with, or like most associated with because these are the people I've seen in my classes, these are the people I play soccer with, I do stuff after school and those were just like, became my friends.

Apart from his family, Cristian (LI) had no meaningful interactions with any other Latina/os. Therefore, he assumes it is normal for him to “associate with” white students because they were always together, whether in class or on the soccer field. In addition, even though Cristian is from a different race/ethnicity and from a lower social class than “middle class, white people” he added, “they [white, middle class students] never pointed out that I was different or anything.” He thus felt integrated in this environment and established a “connection” with white students. His experiences in a predominantly white high school are similar to those of all of the other LI participants, who also felt integrated with their white friends. His experiences are also similar to those of other high-achieving Latina/os who would rather befriend Asian and white high-achievers than Latina/o students they perceive as low-achievers (Conchas, 2001).

Half of the participants grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods (four LIs and two HIs), whereas the other half grew up in predominantly Latina/o or predominantly Latina/o and African-American neighborhoods (four HIs and two LIs). Therefore, contrary to what one may assume, growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood does not seem to lead Latina/os to identify less with their Latina/o heritage than growing up in a predominantly non-white neighborhood. Since all participants attended predominantly white high schools, it seems that the racial composition of their schools did not directly affect their level of cultural identification. For

instance, Leonardo (LI), who grew up in a predominantly Latina/o and African-American neighborhood, said he adapted easily to his new environment in high school when his family moved to a predominantly white neighborhood:

The first friends I made were the ones that lived in the new community I moved into, and they all went to the same high school with me, and so I like tended to hang out with them. And then they introduced me to their friends or whatever, and it never leaked into like, Hispanics, um, crowd.

Leonardo (LI) explains that he became friends with people who were geographically close to him, even though they were culturally distant. Similar to all other participants, Leonardo did not befriend other Latina/o students because they were not performing as well academically. Similar to all other LIs, Leonardo also enjoyed his high school experiences despite being one of the few high-achieving Latina/o students. This discussion suggests that LI participants' subjectivities are of Latinos who feel somewhat distant from their Latina/o heritage. They nevertheless recognize their heritage as part of their identity, just not a salient part of it. LIs feel comfortable among white students because they see the latter as people with similar interests rather than people of a different race/ethnicity. While HIs perceived the public identities of "non-Latino Latinos" as Latina/os who are not proud of their heritage and want to act like white people, this discussion reveals a more complex image. Indeed, during our interviews, LI participants said nothing that made me think they were ashamed of their heritage or wished they were not Latina/os. On the contrary, all but two LIs (Cristian and Ricardo) clearly stated they were proud of being Latina/os.

Half of the LI participants (Alejandro, Enrique and Javier) mentioned their family to emphasize their attachment and pride in their Latina/o heritage. They mentioned certain family

activities they took part in that reinforced their Latino identity. For instance, Alejandro talked about parties his parents would organize, stating, “playing like the loud music, the loud Spanish songs and um drinking rum and coke [...] and I’m like dancing with my mom.” Enrique referred to the overall atmosphere of his parents’ house, saying, “whenever I’m home like that’s all we do is speak Spanish, the food that we eat is all very Latino, very Mexican.” Javier also mentioned the importance of family when he said, “we would always visit my Grandma, we had a ton of cousins, we would always hang out at her place. She would cook um, beignets, rice and beans.” These “Latino activities,” as Alejandro calls them, illustrate that even though LIs do not consider their Latina/o heritage to be a salient part of their identity in their daily activities on a predominantly white university campus, they accept their cultural heritage and actively engage in “Latino activities” with their families. As previously mentioned, while HI participants may perceive LIs as being White, LI participants do not consider themselves White. Thus, regularly visiting extended family, eating Latina/o food and listening to Spanish songs are important reminders for LIs of their Latino identity.

*“You’re always gonna have to mold to your superiors.”*

LIs seem to find solace taking part in “Latino activities” with their families, away from their non-Latina/o friends. In these particular instances, their Latino identity becomes more salient to them. However, when they leave the boundaries of their family homes, they also seem to leave behind many aspects of their Latino identity and go back to identifying more with the mainstream culture. Three HIs (Arturo, Hernando and Miguel) tried to explain this process, stating that “non-Latino Latinos” may perceive the white culture as more fit for academics and professional careers than the Latina/o one. Hernando used the example of a Latina news anchor to illustrate his thought:

I don't remember who it was that they changed their last name to like a more Americanized name so it doesn't look like, they could have changed it from like Rodriguez, Rodriguez to like Richards or something or Richardson or something like that, just so it doesn't look Hispanic. And I mean to be honest, I guess it's just like some people believe that if you're Hispanic you're not going to be taken as seriously as if you're, you're, you know, you'll be taken more serious if you look like a white woman than you do a Hispanic woman, I believe so.

While Hernando's (HI) example does not apply to any particular participant, it exposes the steps certain people are willing to take to be perceived as less Latina/o. This was a standard practice in Hollywood, where famous Latina/o actors such as Anthony Quinn and Raquel Welch concealed their birth names (Antonio Rodolfo Quinn Oaxaca and Jo Raquel Tejada) to be more attractive to American audiences. Rodríguez (2008) explains that Latina/o actors "de-ethnicized their image" because they "couldn't afford to be too different" (p.138). Hernando's comment also illustrates one of the main stereotypes regarding Latina/os who are not "taken as seriously as" white people. HIs express their concerns about this stereotype when they claim that their white peers perceive them as less intelligent, as discussed in chapter 6. Many participants also mentioned that Latina/os were not portrayed in "main roles" (Arturo) or as "authority figures" (Hernando) in the media, which contributes to perceiving Latina/os as less serious and capable than white people.

Miguel (HI) talked about the "business façade" he has to put on in some of his classes to conform and be taken seriously. This "façade" is yet another example of minorities performing "code-switching" in predominantly white environments, as discussed in chapter 7 (Cross et al., 2002). Miguel, who is extremely proud of his Latina/o heritage and is actively engaged in Latina/o activities on campus, also understands that he needs to present himself in a particular way in more professional settings. He explained that if he wants to be successful, the only option is to conform: "when you're on the business track especially, you're always gonna have to



change, always, always, always, always, ‘cause you’re always gonna have to mold to your superiors, your managers, the corporate execs.” Although Miguel does not state it, the majority of these “superiors,” “managers” and “corporate execs” are white. Miguel’s belief that to succeed in a predominantly white field such as business he has “to mold” himself to his superior is common among racial minorities. Indeed, many racial minority students believe that social mobility is only possible through adaptating the of majority’s cultural traits (Conchas, 2001).

Conforming to the mainstream culture while maintaining their Latino identity has forced HIs to think about their identity in new ways. Even though HIs seem to condemn LIs for “cutting off all their Hispanicisms,” as Hernando (HI) said, they also understand that LIs might do it to enhance their chances for a better future. As previously explained, all participants are aware of the unfavorable media representations of Latina/os and of the consequences such representations have on people’s perceptions of Latina/os. By identifying more with the mainstream culture, LIs believe white students perceive them more favorably. Education studies have reported that Latina/os who identify less with their heritage are more likely to attend and graduate from college (Hurtado & Gauvain, 1997). This might explain why certain Latina/os think they have to conform to succeed. Indeed, no participant wished to be perceived based on media representations of Latina/os. They also found ways to differentiate themselves from these images.

*“I’d see those portrayals and then I kind of try to distance myself from that.”*

In chapter 5, I talked about how participants felt different than the few other Latina/o students in their high school because the latter were “getting into trouble” (Federico, HI), “smoking drugs” (Cristian, LI) and “dropping out” (Arturo, HI). In the same way that participants refused to associate themselves with low-achieving Latina/os because they felt their

goals differed, participants also differentiated themselves from Latina/os portrayed in the media. It is important to keep in mind that participants' descriptions of media representations of Latina/os was mostly stereotypical and ignored the more recent and favorable images of Latina/os as affluent consumers as described in chapter 2 (Dávila, 2008). Alejandro (LI) stated, "I'd see those portrayals and then I kind of try to distance myself from that, like mentally, you know so I'm like 'ok, well I'm not like that person.'" Although he could not ignore media representations of Latina/os, he felt unaffected by them because he knew he was different from "those portrayals." Alejandro's comment suggests that he nevertheless thought about media representations of Latina/os and processed them in a way that shielded any potential effect they might have on him. Hernando (HI) was more straightforward, stating, "I look at the portrayal on TV and it isn't, I'm like 'that's not me right there.'" He does not need to think twice about media representations of Latina/os to realize they do not reflect who he is. Similarly, Arturo (HI) described how Latina/o students are portrayed in the media to show that he is different:

The media depicts the typical Latino by statistics, by um, that we are more likely to drop out, more likely to get pregnant at a young age, more likely to get involved in, in criminal, in crimes and in violence. Um, and I, I really don't like labeling that as a typical Latino, but, um, that, that really is a typical Latino um, in many American eyes. A, a Latino student is, is that kid who, who, who I guess grows up wrong 'cause his parents are out there working um, both parents are out there working really hard and he grew up alone and sought more to the streets, I guess or at least where I'm from, um cope with a lot of things and ended up, you know, not doing so well in school.

Arturo (HI) knows he does not fit this description found in the media because he is a first-generation college student at SEPU. Based on his childhood account, Arturo may relate to a family life with "both parents are out there working really hard," but unlike the Latina/os in the media, he did not seek friends in the street and did really well in school. His educational

achievements thus differentiate him from the Latina/os in the media. Miguel (HI) and Cristian (LI) also talked about the difference between them and Latina/os in the media. Miguel said he is “a person who’s not fulfilling those media portrayals,” whereas Cristian stated, “[media] definitely points out to me like, how I’m different.”

Participants already knew from taking Honors and AP classes in high school that they were different from other Latina/os who did not perform as well in school. Now that they are attending such a selective university as SEPU, the difference between participants’ experiences and the experiences of Latina/os portrayed in the media widens even more. As Hernando (HI) pointed out, referring to white students, “I’m a Latino that got to the university, I’ve, I’ve moved, I’m, I’m better than what they’ve [white students] seen on TV, like they just think of Hispanics as these lowly workers, construction workers, maids and stuff like that.” Hernando is proud to be different from the media stereotypes. This feeling positively affects his self-esteem because even though white students may still perceive Latina/os’ public identities, including his, in terms of media stereotypes, Hernando knows that he’s “better” than that.

Participants could not relate to most Latina/os they met in their predominantly white high schools because the latter did not excel academically. Concomitantly, participants do not relate to the Latina/os they view in the media because they are portrayed in stereotypical ways. Prior to attending college and meeting other high-achieving Latina/o students, most participants, especially HIs, who felt less comfortable among white students than LIs did, often thought of themselves as different from any other high school student. Indeed, their subjectivities are different from the dominant group because of their race/ethnicity, and from their racial/ethnic group because of their academic achievements. In addition, Arturo (HI) and Miguel (HI)

mentioned several times that they felt most white students did not understand Latina/o culture, thus intensifying their feeling of not belonging in higher education.

*“That’s what they see on TV, that’s how they view our culture.”*

Arturo (HI) said that “a lot of people still don’t understand how beautiful this [Latina/o] culture is, um, you know, they view it as what they know, like Mexican restaurants, or salsa dancing, that’s what they see on TV, that’s how they view our culture.” According to him, most people view Latina/o culture through the lenses of media representations of Latina/os, who mostly eat and dance. This stereotypical understanding of Latina/o culture mirrors participants’ comments regarding television viewers perceiving Latina/os in terms of their media representations, as discussed in chapter 5, when most participants stated that with no personal experiences with Latina/os, most media consumers perceive Latina/os as “criminals,” “gangsters,” “illegal immigrants” or “maids.” Although Arturo does not explicitly connect both thoughts, if viewers have a stereotypical view of Latina/os, it seems normal that they also have a stereotypical understanding of Latina/o culture. Such views further alienate Latina/os from the mainstream culture. Miguel (HI) explained how a lack of understanding of Latina/o culture also affects perceptions of Latina/os’ educational goals:

I don’t feel like the average American feels like Latinos don’t have the adequate education due to lack of resources, which is in many cases the case. Um so, majority populated neighborhoods areas, sorry um, majority Latino populated areas and neighborhoods don’t have good schools because the resources at those schools are poor, right? But the average American doesn’t think about it like that. They don’t see like ‘Oh Latinos, the majority of Latinos aren’t educated because they have a lack of resources.’ The way they see it is they don’t wanna learn, they drop out, they wanna be drug dealers, they drop out ‘cause they, they get pregnant. That’s, that’s the way they see it.

According to Miguel's (HI) comment, "the average American," previously defined as "white middle class," believes that Latina/o culture does not value education. Unfortunately, this has been a common theme in the education literature. Some educators believe that Latina/os do not value education and do not encourage their children to do well in school (Auerbach, 2006; Brown et al., 2003; Cavazos et al., 2009). Working class Latina/o parents' efforts to help their children succeed in school, such as exempting them from daily household chores or finding an after school job, or providing them with a quiet place to study, are often not valued by white teachers and parents. Instead, the latter usually notice that many Latina/o parents do not visit or volunteer with the school, ignoring potential work conflicts, lack of transportation or limited English (Auerbach, 2006; Cavazos et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). However, the unfamiliarity of some Latina/os with the U.S. education system and their misconception about American universities do not equal a lack of interest or value in formal education.

Instead of recognizing racial discrimination and the institutional inequalities between rich, white neighborhoods on one hand, and poor, minority ones on the other (Núñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008), "the average American" thinks Latina/os voluntarily decide to "drop out" and become "drug dealers." Similarly, "the average American" refuses to acknowledge that the educational system might be failing Latina/o students, mainly because media continue to portray Latina/os as performing poorly in school. While Miguel (HI) does not mention media in the above comment, his previous comments on media representations of Latina/os and audiences' perceptions of Latina/os suggest that media influence white audiences to devalue Latina/o culture.

*“In my pre-school I realized that my family looked a lot different than others.”*

All participants recalled the instance in which they realized they belonged to a racial/ethnic minority group. This racial awareness or “encounter,” to use Cross’ (1971) term, occurred in school, when participants were “not really seeing too many people who were the same” as them in their classrooms, to use Ricardo’s (LI) words. Indeed, it is very common for Latina/os to realize they belong to a racial/ethnic minority group when they find themselves surrounded by white students who may overtly or subtly point out their differences (Chávez-Reyes, 2010). Arturo (HI), Javier (LI) and Leonardo (LI), the three participants who moved from a predominantly minority neighborhood to a predominantly white one before starting high school, recounted the racial awareness they felt when attending a predominantly white school for the first time. Arturo, who was born and raised in a Latino and African-American neighborhood in New York City, stated, “it wasn’t until I moved to North Carolina that I consciously became aware of my racial identity. It was the first time, per se, I felt like a racial minority.”

Similarly, Leonardo (LI) became aware he looked different when he moved from New Jersey to North Carolina. When I asked him if he thought he looked Latino, he replied, “Hispanics don’t have a look.” He then used examples of his family members “who are full blown Honduran,” such as his uncle who “looks kind of Asian,” and his brother who “looks black.” However, Leonardo concluded his answer about “looking Latino” stating, “when I moved down here [North Carolina], people started telling me I did [look Latino], though. Like when I was surrounded with Caucasian people, they started telling me ‘yeah, I knew you were some type of Hispanic or something.’” This comment suggests that while Leonardo thinks Latina/os “don’t have a look,” “Caucasian people” in North Carolina made it clear that for them, Latina/os have a distinguishable look, thus making Leonardo aware of his status as part of a particular racial/ethnic minority group.

Even for participants who were born and raised in predominantly white neighborhoods, their racial encounter occurred in school, away from their family. For instance, Ricardo (LI) recalled that when he was in elementary school he asked his parents, “why isn’t there many people here that speak Spanish and stuff like that,” to which they replied, “well, here in America there’s not really people like that, especially where we live.” Ricardo then added, “from a very young age, I definitely knew, I’m a minority here, um, especially in my community back home when I was growing up.” Even though Ricardo was living in a rural white town, he became racially aware in school, by “looking around [his] classroom.” Federico (HI), who was also born and raised in a predominantly white neighborhood, recounted a similar story that involved his older sister:

When I was very young, in my pre-school I realized that my family looked a lot different than others, especially in North Carolina. My sister is a lot darker than me and looks more ethnic than myself and I remember when she was in second grade, the year before I went to kindergarten, she came home talking about a kid making fun of her for being Mexican.

Federico’s comment illustrates how his racial awareness occurred not only when he noticed he was “different than others” but also when others pointed out these differences to his sister. Strauss (1995) and other researches have pointed out that interactions with others shape a person’s identity (Strauss, 1995). In addition, identities are often brought to “our consciousness through a second-person invocation” (Alcoff, 2006, p.75). Therefore, participants’ racial encounters have given them a new view of themselves, one in which they saw themselves for the first time in the context of a white society (Parra et al., 2004). The above comment also reinforces a theme discussed in chapter 5 regarding the perception of all Latina/os as Mexicans. For instance, both of Federico’s parents are half Cuban and half Dominican. Participants’

comments are consistent with race scholars' claim that "by the age of 6, virtually everyone in our culture is aware of a variety of cultural stereotypes" (Aronson, 2004, p.15). While all participants mentioned becoming aware of their race/ethnicity in school due to their looks, Alejandro (LI) was the only one who said his name also made him feel different from his peers.

Alejandro (LI), referring to when "a new professor" or "a substitute teacher" called roll, stated, "they can say everybody else's name and then they get to my name and it's different and then they can't say it or they don't say it well." He then added, "right now I don't care anymore but like um, especially when I was younger I would just get like a little embarrassed or upset and just feel different." It seems that he gradually became comfortable having a "different" name and accepted his Latina/o identity. However, he was reminded of his racial/ethnic status every time his name was mispronounced, which made him feel "embarrassed or upset." Hernando (HI) and Cristian (LI) expressed similar thoughts about accepting their Latina/o identity. Hernando said that he was not always the "proud" Latino he is now:

There are times like I wish I wasn't Hispanic so I could actually blend in. That was when I was like in elementary school, stuff like that. And then actually after a while when I started realizing, you know, I'm Puerto Rican you know, I speak Spanish, I started embracing my culture and I was proud that I was different from the crowd.

Hernando (HI) seemed to have struggled to accept his identity as a Puerto Rican until he realized how valuable it was. Similar to other participants, he felt different than the other students but decided to embrace his culture. Cristian (LI), on the contrary, seemed to have struggled more to come to terms with his Latino identity in a predominantly white neighborhood and school:



As I've grown older, because you just kind of, or I've realized that um, it just, like it's something, like it's part of who, it's like who I am, and as I like search for jobs, and I go on through college, it's kind of, it's not something I can choose to like, you know, not put on my resume or something, it's not something you choose to hide or like really showcase that much.

Cristian (LI) appeared to have accepted his Latino identity because he had no other option. I assume he says he cannot "hide" his *Latinidad* because he looks Latino and his last name sounds Latino. Therefore, anybody interviewing him for a job would know he is Latino, regardless of how little he identifies with his Latina/o heritage. Contrary to Hernando (HI), who embraces his culture, Cristian believes he cannot "really showcase" his identity. As previously mentioned, this represents the main difference between HI and LI participants; LIs recognize their Latina/o culture as part of their identity but it does not define who they are. Cristian thus finds himself in a situation where people will perceive him as a Latino first and foremost even though this is not how he perceives himself. Cristian's situation illustrates the difference between "public identity" and "lived subjectivity" mentioned earlier in this chapter. In his case, it seems that his public identity is affecting his lived subjectivity. I elaborate more on how participants perceive both their public identities and lived subjectivities in the following discussion.

*"This is our identity, the sense of losing our identity."*

All participants are first-generation mainland U.S.-born Latinos whose parents are all rooted in their Latina/o culture. They thus have a bi-cultural identity; as Arturo (HI) said, "I'm an American, you know, trying to, trying to, to be Salvadoran in a sense but also maintain I guess, being American." Deaux and her colleagues (2007) argue that a person's ethnic identification process has evolved from being "coterminous with the categorical definition, that is, if you were born of Italian parents, then your ethnic identification was as an Italian" to being "a subjective

state as well as, and perhaps more importantly than, an objective characterization” (p.387).

Arturo expresses this sentiment the best by commenting on how today’s U.S. Latina/os are trying to create their own identity that is different from that of their parents. He was the most adamant in expressing the identity struggles he believes he shares with many U.S Latino youth. I quote him at length because his comments suggest that he has given considerable thought to these matters. He offers insight into how a young college-educated Latino perceives himself and the internal struggles he faces when deciding to attend college.

Arturo seems torn between allegiance to his ethnic/racial roots and acculturation to the majority culture (Holleran, 2003). Indeed, U.S. Latina/os may be caught between the traditional values of their parents and the individualistic U.S. values they are exposed to through school and the media (Dennis et al., 2010). Latina/o students thus experience conflict regarding their cultural identification as a result of incongruities between Latina/o and white cultural norms and expectations (Cano & Castillo, 2010). Arturo feels American because he was born and raised in the U.S. His everyday interactions with his Salvadoran parents and his American friends, regardless of their race/ethnicity, affect his identity. However, Arturo explained that in some cases, the American identity may take over the Latina/o identity.

A lot [of U.S. Latina/os] are just lost in identity, trying to find which group we fit in, so when we come here [SEPU], um, you know, we find a lot of Latinos that haven’t really, haven’t heard about *salsa*, or haven’t heard about um, or don’t even know how to speak Spanish, because we’re lost, I feel like.

Arturo’s (HI) comment echoes Miguel’s (HI) description of “non-Latino Latinos” because these Latina/os are perceived as having “lost” their Latina/o identity. However, while Miguel used this term to illustrate the different levels of cultural identification among Latina/os,

Arturo's idea of being "lost in identity" reveals a deeper identity struggle. Arturo thinks some Latina/os are "lost in identity" for two main reasons: on one hand, they are not fully Latina/o because they do not speak Spanish or are not familiar with traditional Latin music; on the other, they are not fully American because their parents were born in another country. Even though Arturo strongly identifies with his Latina/o heritage, speaks Spanish and dances *salsa*, these attributes do not shield him from also feeling "lost in identity." As he explained, "there are people just like me that have immigrant parents, that are in the same situation, feel the same way I do, and losing their touch, losing their identity, but this is our identity, the sense of losing our identity." Arturo is "lost" between his identity as the son of immigrant parents and his identity as a student educated in U.S. schools. He thinks many Latina/os are "losing their touch" with their culture because they are raised in a predominantly white society. For those like Arturo who are aware of their identity struggles, feeling "lost" becomes part of who they are.

Among the scholars who have explored Latina/o identities, Jean Phinney offered one of the most comprehensive models of Latina/o identity that includes four identity "categories." Latina/os can choose "assimilation," which means that they renounce identifying with their culture of origin and seek membership in the mainstream culture. However, there is no guarantee that they will achieve group membership and will be recognized as assimilated by Whites. Phinney and her colleagues argue that this option isolates Latina/os from their families and communities and produces high stress and low self-esteem. The second category is "integration," which means that Latina/os keep certain aspects of their culture of origin and adopt other aspects of the mainstream culture. This option provides Latina/os with the most social rewards compared to the other categories, as well as with a large support network.

The third category is “separation,” which means that Latina/os refuse to adopt any elements of the mainstream culture and reinforce their identification with their culture of origin. Phinney and her colleagues contend that this option enhances Latina/os’ pride in their ethnic identity, but it also produces situations of high stress when Latina/os find themselves in contact with white people. The last category is “marginalization,” which means that Latina/os have lost their attachment to their culture of origin and are not involved with the mainstream culture.

Based on these four categories, Phinney and her colleagues (1992) did not have Arturo’s “lost in identity” concept when they proposed four different ways in which Latina/os can participate in U.S. society. They contend that each of these “categories” affects Latina/o students’ perceptions of their social and professional interactions with white students and professors. Yang et al. (2009) recently showed that these “categories” are still applicable today. Considering these four categories of racial/ethnic identity, I propose that LIs belong to the “integrated” category because they have many white friends, feel comfortable in predominantly white settings and maintain certain aspects of their Latina/o culture because of their family. However, I posit that none of the four categories seems appropriate for HIs who strongly identify with their heritage but are not separated from U.S. society. Categorizing HIs as “integrated” would undermine the strong bond they continue to have with their culture.

Scholars have also used the term “biculturalism” to refer to minority groups who may feel more comfortable retaining certain aspects of their culture without diminishing the quality of their interracial interactions. The concept of biculturalism implies that adopting aspects of U.S. culture does not automatically mean abandoning aspects of their culture (Valentine, 2001). Indeed, Valentine (2001) argues that culture of origin and mainstream culture should be viewed as two entities that can coexist. Latina/os can select which aspects of their culture they wish to

retain and which aspects of U.S. culture they wish to adopt (Yang et al., 2009). Biculturalism seems more appropriate for HIs because they consider their Latina/o heritage and cultural practices to be part of U.S. society. However, it is crucial to emphasize the role education plays in Latina/os' identity. For instance, Arturo's (HI) comments suggest that his pursuit of a college degree contributes to feeling "lost in identity." Indeed, because U.S. Latina/os have historically been denied access to higher education, college has become associated with the dominant culture. Arturo fears that such thoughts are so engrained in people's minds that he stated, "the more you try to be educated, to be more professional, the less and less you can be, your, not your culture but, what people perceive, used to perceive you as." Arturo suggests that people can only perceive him as Latino or as educated, but that the two are incompatible.

Concerns similar to Arturo's (HI) have been documented by education studies focusing on Latina/o students. For example, Flores Niemann and her colleagues (2000) found that Latina/o high school students of Mexican descent who strongly identify with their heritage may be reluctant to pursue a college education for fear of being alienated from their communities. Students were also "aware that by spending a significant amount of time in a predominately White academic environment, they may be perceived as joining those who are seen to have racist and discriminatory views toward Mexican Americans," as well as being perceived as elitists (Flores Niemann et al., 2000, p.50). In his seminal study of working class youth in England in the 1970s, Paul Willis (1981) posits that formal education represents a counter culture for working class families. School, with its buildings, rules and hierarchy, embodies state authority, which working class families perceive as being against their interests. Working class youth perceive education as a means for the state to control them, and thus resist by not attending

(Willis, 1981). Latina/o families may share similar concerns as they want to resist having their children controlled by a system they perceive as being discriminatory against Latina/os.

According to Cano and Castillo (2010), “Latino students may perceive an association between the pursuit of academic success and assimilating to the educational expectations of the dominant culture, resulting in a form of cultural genocide” (pp. 221-222). Arturo and the other HI participants are proof that Latina/os can identify with their heritage *and* be educated, but Arturo nevertheless needs to convince himself of it. The following quote explains how Arturo found his way out of his “lost” identity:

It’s really difficult to go through some type of transition like that, but at the end of the day, I was like, I am, I’m studying, I’m being educated, I’m educating myself to help my Latino community out, and I was part of a Latino community that used to point fingers at the people that tried to help them. So now I’m, I’m on the other side of the fence, and I feel like, you know, a lot of people are just like, um, you know, ‘Arturo is becoming a little bit more whitewashed,’ I feel like, but I feel like, it’s not whitewashed, it’s more educated, in a sense. Um, so I guess for them, I don’t perceive them more as whitewashed anymore, more of a just like, trying to fit in, trying to be educated, in their own sense. Um I think that’s where the whole transition came in for me, of being in acceptance of myself that I’m, that I’m not becoming whitewashed, I’m becoming more educated, and I’m trying to balance two cultures at the same time, trying to go through the American education system, while still keeping my heritage back home.

Arturo (HI) also used to believe that Latina/o culture and education did not belong together. He thought that being educated would result in being “whitewashed” and losing his Latina/o identity. Similarly, he thought that other Latina/os would perceive him as “whitewashed” because of his academic aspirations. Arturo thus found a new identity for Latina/os in his position, that of educated Latina/os. Three other HI participants (Federico, Hernando and Miguel) also talked about their identity as educated Latina/os and explained that it

is a new type of identity for young U.S. Latina/os, one that makes “you re-think what you know about Hispanics,” as Hernando (HI) said.

*“I’m what a modern day Latino professional is.”*

Federico (HI) said he was proud to be an educated Latino: “I always feel great about myself because I think I’m a Latino student in college, in a university, so I’m a leader of the Latino community.” According to him, his identity as an educated Latino is recognized by the Latino community. However, Miguel (HI) made several comments that reveal a more complex picture of the “educated Latino” identity than Federico’s straightforward comment suggests. In the following exchange, Miguel explains how his identity as a Latino has evolved during his four years of college:

*Miguel:* The Latino identity has changed a lot.

*Joseph:* How so?

*Miguel:* Cause before, before, you know, at this point in my life I don’t think, four years ago I wouldn’t have considered myself Latino right now, like today.

*Joseph:* I don’t understand.

*Miguel:* Yeah, ‘cause four years ago, for me being Latino was someone who spoke Spanish, someone who like, loved eating Spanish, like the very like typical like, um, artificial things that people would equate with being Hispanic. So if you didn’t listen to Spanish music, didn’t eat Spanish food, and didn’t speak Spanish, then you weren’t Hispanic to me, you know what I mean, and if you weren’t all about being Hispanic and you couldn’t, you know, like for me, like at this point, I don’t even speak the same that I spoke when I came in [to SEPU], you know what I mean, and I would never be able, even if I tried to speak that way, and so that, I think I would have even seen it as a loss of identity four years ago, um but it’s not that, it’s just you have to figure out a way to adapt to your environment.

Miguel (HI) changed the picture of Latina/os he had in his mind because he could not see himself in it anymore. This mental process allows him to pursue his education and career, and to continue to identify as a Latino. Flores Niemann and his colleagues (2000) explain that some

Latina/os believe that attending college will force them to adopt U.S. mainstream ways of life that will prevent them from being fully integrated in their community of origin. However, just like Arturo (HI), Miguel realized he could keep his Latina/o identity and be educated as well. Miguel stated that after four years of college, he does not “speak the same” way as people from his Dominican neighborhood do. Prior to college, Miguel might have considered such a change in manner of speaking a “loss” of Latina/o culture. However, he now perceives it as “a way to adapt” to mainstream society while maintaining his Latina/o identity.

Miguel (HI) makes sense of his new identity as a Latino based on the new “environment” college provided him with, stating, “I’m what a modern day Latino professional is, you know, and I mean how could I even know what that is four years ago?” His comment brings to mind the lack of U.S. Latina/o role models in the media many HI participants mentioned and that numerous Latina/o leaders have denounced, as discussed in chapter 6. Miguel did not see any “modern day Latino professional” in his family or in the media, which might be why he stated, “four years ago I wouldn’t have considered myself Latino right now, like today.” College introduced Miguel to a new form of Latina/o identity that he embraced: “I know that there are other Latino professionals out there, you know, I have that Latino professional network now that I didn’t even know existed four years ago.” Being a “Latino professional” has become a major part of Miguel’s identity. He added that “developing all these professional tools, skills, just completely took over my demeanor.”

This new “Latino professional” identity seems to represent the pinnacle of Latina/o biculturalism for HIs because it enables them to stay rooted in their Latina/o culture while participating in the U.S. society. Education, once reserved for the dominant group, has become a key part of the “Latino professional” identity. Yang and his colleagues (2009) argue that “rather



than being precariously suspended between two cultural traditions, these [Latina/o] students are beginning to selectively use what they perceive as valuable from each tradition and trying to ignore the rest” (Yang et al., 2009, p.122). Focusing on the benefits of their education and ignoring what other Latina/os might have said about it seems to allow these HIs to resolve their own identity struggles.

HIs have rejected the identity most media representations have ascribed to them and instead developed their own achieved identity. McGlone and Aronson (2006) emphasize the important role achieved identities play for marginalized students, stating, “that contemplating positive achieved identities one possesses can mitigate the anxiety one may feel as a result of the negative stereotypic expectations associated with an ascribed identity” (p.491). Referring to and perceiving themselves as “educated Latinos” helps HIs reverse the potential educational effects of the ascribed identities they assume white students give them.

This discussion suggests that LIs and HIs experience different lived subjectivities. LIs recognize their Latina/o heritage as being part of who they are and how others may perceive them, but they do not perceive their heritage to influence their identity or their everyday interactions. LIs’ lived subjectivities refer to their status as high-achieving students in a predominantly white university. Overall, LIs’ public identities as Latinos do not seem to affect their lived subjectivities. On the contrary, HIs’ lived subjectivities are dominated by their identification with their Latina/o heritage. HIs find themselves in a situation where they recognize that their public identities as Latinos are likely to influence how others perceive them. This in turn affects their identity and everyday interactions because they want to project an image of themselves that is different from the stereotypical media representations of Latina/os. In addition, HIs also recognize that their public identities as attending a predominantly white

university are likely to influence how off-campus Latina/os perceive them. To cope with this struggle, HIs' lived subjectivities refer to their status as educated Latinos. As such, HIs defy media representations of Latina/os while maintaining their Latina/o identity.

## **CHAPTER IX: UNIVERSITY-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP**

As opposed to the chapters on college experiences and the previous chapter on identity, in which I established a relationship between two independently well-researched phenomena, this final findings and analysis chapter of the dissertation is more exploratory in its approach. I studied how participants perceive SEPU by incorporating in my interviews a traditional quantitative scale from public relations research, which I further explain below. I felt that a dissertation on the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and Latino students' college experiences would have been incomplete had I ignored how the students perceive the university they attend. Interestingly, findings suggest that participants' thoughts on that topic are more homogeneous than on any other topic addressed in my research. In this chapter, I use the organization-public relationship (OPR) model to explore how Latino students perceive their experiences and their relationship with SEPU. Hon and Grunig (1999) developed a scale to measure the relationship between an organization and its publics. The scale contains six dimensions and is helpful for defining the organization-public relationship concept. These dimensions are control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship (see chapter 2, page 66, for detailed definitions of each dimension). While this scale was developed to measure relationships in a corporate context, Hon and Brunner (2001) adapted it to measure residing students' perceptions of their relationship with the University of Florida.

Latino students represent an internal public to SEPU, which is invested in maintaining a positive relationship with all its publics. However, only a handful of published studies have examined the concept of organization–public relationship in the context of academic institutions in higher education (Hon & Brunner, 2001; Jo et al., 2004; Sung & Yang, 2009). In addition, Bromley’s (2001) and Henderson’s (2001) calls for researchers to use a qualitative approach to the organization-public relationship model have remained unanswered. Therefore, findings in this section should be interpreted as exploratory because they represent my attempt to adapt the OPR scale to the context of higher education in an in-depth interview format, as explained in chapter 2. While I asked participants questions dealing with the six dimensions of the OPR scale, only three dimensions emerged from participants’ responses: satisfaction, trust and commitment. Such findings are coherent with the two published studies conducted in U.S. universities with the OPR to explore the university-student relationship (the third study referred to above took place in South Korea).

Hon and Brunner (2001) found that the relationship between a university and its students relied on satisfaction and trust, which are the two dimensions that emerged most often from participants’ responses in their study. Jo and his colleagues (2004) found that the OPR dimensions of trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality are closely related to each other. The findings explain why participants’ responses in Jo and his colleagues’ study revolve around three of these dimensions. Both studies used a quantitative approach, but while Jo and his colleagues did not report the demographics of their participants, Hon and Brunner surveyed a predominantly white sample in their study. I found no published studies using a qualitative approach to the OPR. In addition, quantitative OPR studies were conducted with large predominantly white samples.

*Satisfaction: “Everyone is like a family.”*

Half of the HIs (Arturo, Federico and Miguel) and half of the LIs (Alejandro, Enrique and Javier) elaborated on their college experiences at SEPU, using qualifiers such as “positive” (Arturo and Javier), “great” (Alejandro, Enrique and Federico) and “wonderful” (Miguel).

Regardless of their cultural identification, participants overall were very satisfied with the quality of their education at SEPU and how it would positively impact their lives. Miguel (HI) mentioned the “plethora of resources um, that over all creates for a really great college experience, solid college experience and education.” Thinking post-graduation, Federico (HI) stated, “the world is at my disposal, I can do anything because I’m at [SEPU].” Alejandro (LI) went as far as describing his college experiences as “kind of like a utopia,” which illustrates how satisfied he is with SEPU. Two of the aforementioned LIs (Enrique and Javier) felt so comfortable and welcome on campus that they referred to their experiences at SEPU as feeling part of a family. Enrique explained why:

Even though it’s a big school, I feel like everyone really identifies themselves as part of like the [SEPU] family, through like the sports, um, stuff like that, performances that they have in the [main campus court], stuff like that, just like there’s a lot of unity within the school [...] Like for me it represents a family, like it’s not, I mean obviously the school, the school is very great, academic and stuff and I feel it would prepare me very well for the future, but I do think more than anything, it’s a family, like, I hate to like talk about other schools when I’ve never been to other schools, I don’t really know them, but like, just from viewing other people and their parents, or people at other schools, like it just doesn’t seem, like even though they do love their school and everything, it doesn’t seem like there’s the same like, family, that I feel like there is here.

In this passage, Enrique (LI) says the word “family” four times to describe how connected he feels to SEPU. He is so satisfied with his experiences at SEPU that he claims no other university could provide him with this feeling. Javier (LI) expanded the family metaphor further to describe his experiences at SEPU:

I think it's kind of like, a big community or even, even like some sort of a family where um, you know, you might have people that you don't necessarily, or groups that you don't necessarily like, or um, you might not, I don't know, like hang out with every student, but kind of when, when the time is right you're all united in the same thing and, you know, if somebody from [name of rival campus] comes walking on campus, nobody's gonna care who's next to them, everyone's just gonna start booing, like you're all united against that, you know you're all, one big family where you can have your own troubles but when, when the time comes, everyone is like a family, you know.

Javier (LI) mentions a specific example to illustrate how he feels being part of the SEPU family. The rivalry between SEPU and the other campus he mentions is mostly based on sports. In chapter 6, I discussed how sports represent an important aspect of all LIs' college experiences and how supporting the SEPU teams made them feel integrated with the school community. In his above comment, Javier mentions a sports rivalry to describe how sports unite students in "one big family" and also contribute to his satisfaction with SEPU. While HIs also stated their satisfaction with SEPU and talked about their positive experiences, none of them used the family metaphor. Instead, they focused on their academic enrichment and some of the people they met.

*Satisfaction: "If you're not white and you want to come here, don't worry about it."*

Javier (LI) did not limit his satisfaction with SEPU to sports. He also commented on the "diverse" student body, stating, "I love it here, I mean just the different amounts, the different um, types of people you'll meet are just really diverse and, and even among people of the same race you'll see people from completely different backgrounds here." He was not the only one to be satisfied with SEPU's diversity. Indeed, all but two participants (Hernando and Miguel, both HI) positively commented on the student body's demographics. In chapter 6, I discussed how HIs felt that they were victims of overt and covert instances of racism on campus. Despite this, HIs also reported feeling very satisfied with their experiences at SEPU because of the "broad

spectrum of people” they have met on campus, “from really, really um, liberal people to really, really conservative to really, really spiritual to really atheist,” to use Arturo’s (HI) words. He then added that “there’s a whole bunch of people in the school and, and somewhere in between you’ll find your niche.” Mauricio (HI) summarized this feeling when he said he met “people from different cultures, backgrounds, who are very welcoming.”

LIs agreed with HIs regarding the diversity in SEPU’s student body and the inclusiveness of the campus. For instance, Leonardo (LI) echoed Arturo’s (HI) comment, stating, “[SEPU] represents a great environment for all people, I think that like anyone could go here and fit in.” He also said that even though “the majority [of students] still might be white people,” that should not stop prospective non-white students from applying: “if you’re not white and you want to come here, don’t worry about it.” Enrique (LI) reinforced this idea saying, “I don’t think [SEPU] fosters to any specific, um, ethnicity or anything, I think it’s all about, it’s all about [SEPU], it’s not about just like [SEPU] white people or [SEPU] black people, it’s like everything is for everyone.” These comments should not obscure HIs’ feelings about experiencing racism on campus. On the contrary, these comments illustrate the complexity of Latino students’ college experiences. They also expose the limitation of how the OPR scale measures satisfaction because it would have ignored instances of racism, thus providing a misleading view of campus. The questions from the OPR scale are intentionally broad. However, I decided to ask about a Latina/o Center recently opened at SEPU as a specific example to explore how satisfied participants were with the center. I use the Latina/o Center to symbolize the importance SEPU dedicates to Latina/o matters on campus. It was opened in 2009 and is located away from the main campus on the ground floor of a dormitory.

*Satisfaction: “They just gave us a shitty, a shitty little, you know, space to work with.”*

All HIs were very vocal in expressing their thoughts about the Latina/o Center, which they mostly saw as “a step in the right direction” toward establishing a stronger relationship between Latina/os and the university community but also as “having a lot of room for improvement,” to quote Mauricio. Despite these words of encouragement, HIs were critical of the limited resources SEPU allocated to the Latina/o Center, which they saw as a symbolic measure as opposed to a genuine concern about the needs of Latina/o students. Eduardo (HI) expressed ambivalence about the Latina/o Center, stating, “I’m both satisfied and really not satisfied because I guess they [SEPU administrators] noticed that the Latino population on campus might be growing [...] it’s really inconvenient especially for students off campus so I guess I’m really dissatisfied about the location.” He also wondered if the Latina/o Center was established to provide Latina/o students with specific resources or to help SEPU meet its diversity mission because the Latina/o Center “makes the university look good because they have the [Center] for Latino students.” However, Federico (HI) was adamant that the limited resources made available to the Latina/o Center meant that “diversity isn’t a priority” at SEPU. He compared SEPU’s Latina/o Center to the one at a neighboring university as well as to other organizations at SEPU to strengthen his argument:

If you look at [name of neighboring university], I think their Hispanic organization gets like \$30,000 right off the bat and that’s ridiculous to me. Or if you look at how much money like some of the white groups at [SEPU] have, it is through the roof, but it’s because they have a better foundation here on campus and they’re able to get more support from the students whereas the [Latina/o Center] is not.

Federico (HI) is disappointed in the lack of financial support to the Latina/o Center from SEPU. He also condemns the financial gap between white and Latina/o organizations. HIs



acknowledge that having a Latina/o Center on campus, regardless of its location or budget, is better than nothing, but all HIs were disappointed that SEPU seemed unwilling to do more.

Miguel (HI) expressed the most vocal criticism of the Latina/o Center:

They [SEPU administrators] gave, they just gave us [Latina/o students] a shitty, a shitty little, you know, space to work with, and it was ultimately, I think the idea was, make the best out of this space, you know, if you can utilize this space, you'll show us that you maybe need a resource, and then, you know, maybe subsequently we'll keep on increasing your space [...] The fact that the [Latina/o Center] you know, really gets no funding, [*he chuckles*], you know what I mean, it's more like, it's more like, giving, you know, a kid is hungry, what do you do, you just give him a piece of candy so he can shut off, for the next like, you know, 20, 30 minutes, you know what I mean? They're not addressing the issue of hunger, you know, it's the same thing, you know, here, take this stupid little, [*he chuckles*], like space and just leave us alone and then come back in five years and complain but we'll address it in five years, [*he chuckles*].

Similar to other HIs, Miguel (HI) is very dissatisfied with the Latina/o Center's location. In agreement with other HIs, his comment suggests there is plenty of "room for improvement." Miguel's comment is telling because it suggests SEPU opened the Latina/o Center to appease Latina/o students' demand for a Latina/o Center. He implies that by doing so, SEPU avoided "addressing the issue" of the lack of resources for Latina/o students on campus. SEPU did however, address the issue of Latina/o students' concerns about not having a center. The Latina/o Center is emblematic of the larger struggles Latina/os face in U.S. schools and universities. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional with its landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Despite this ruling, Latina/o students were either segregated in bilingual schools or integrated in schools offering no bilingual education (Weill, 1999). In institutions of higher education, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that Latina/o studies programs started to emerge as a product of civil rights struggles (Dávila, 2008). The presence of Latina/o studies department and Latina/o centers symbolize the

importance universities give to the discipline and to their students. Unfortunately, Valdivia (2008) argues that the establishment of a Latina/o studies program is often met with resistance, while Dávila (2008) posits that ethnic studies have never left the bottom of universities' hierarchical structure. Dávila also states that more and more universities offer Latina/o studies classes, even though universities often use these classes more to fulfill diversity requirements than to enhance scholarship.

Latina/os continue to face obstacles in education, and the history of their oppression in and contribution to the U.S. remains a controversial topic to teach. Recently, Arizona closed the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson high schools and banned 80 books from the curriculum (Sten, 2012). While such drastic measures are not the norm, Latina/o studies programs at various universities are also threatened by budget cuts. I think HIs understand the larger context in which SEPU opened the Latina/o Center, which is why they are pleased SEPU has taken action even though they keep hoping for a better center. In contrast to HIs, who were all very familiar with the Latina/o Center, only two LIs (Cristian and Ricardo) had heard about the Latina/o Center, which at the time of our interviews had been open for three years. Cristian (LI) had heard about it because of a class project that required him to get in contact with staff from the Latina/o Center, but he did not know where it was located. Ricardo (LI) went to the Latina/o Center "a couple of times just to visit some friends" and said that "it's a really good thing." When I asked him if he could think of any potential negative aspects of the Latina/o Center, he simply replied, "can't think of any."

Participants' level of cultural identification was related to their awareness of SEPU's Latina/o Center. This reinforces one of the findings discussed in chapter 6, that HIs actively seek out Latina/o organizations on campus as opposed to LIs, who are more interested in taking part

in sporting activities as a way to belong to SEPU. Of the participants who knew about the Latina/o Center, HIs expressed more thoughtful comments than LIs, another recurring finding from this study. Apart from diverging knowledge about the Latina/o Center, all participants appear to be satisfied with their overall experiences at SEPU, and all are extremely satisfied with the quality of their education.

*Trust: “[SEPU] is doing a disservice to Latino students by not trying to increase that number [of Latina/o students].”*

The OPR dimensions of satisfaction and trust represent the foundation of the university-student relationship (Hon & Brunner, 2001). The first of three components of the OPR trust dimension is integrity, which refers to “the belief that an organization is fair and just” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3). Most participants had mixed feelings regarding how SEPU treats Latina/o students, mentioning both positive and negative aspects of their college experiences. For instance, Alejandro (LI), Eduardo (HI) and Miguel (HI) talked about the help they received from teaching assistants and faculty. Arturo (HI), Cristian (LI) and Mauricio (HI) talked about some programs on campus specifically tailored toward Latina/o and/or minority students.

Cristian (LI) referred to SEPU’s Latina/o studies program as an example of SEPU being “concerned enough to set up a department.” He added, “having [Spanish] courses that are for native speakers, ‘cause I mean that’s a small class size and, during budget cuts, you know like, honestly, I’m surprised those haven’t been immediately cut.” Overall, LIs were also more likely than HIs to state that SEPU treated Latina/o students “with the same respect, dignity” as other students, as Ricardo (LI) said. Eduardo was the only HI who explicitly commented on the fair treatment Latina/o students received at SEPU:

I don't see any barriers that they [SEPU administrators] place on Latino students that they don't place on anyone else. I feel like um every, every student has the same opportunities on campus, um to partake in different, to join different clubs or to like join um, club sports or anything like that. Um, so I don't see um any discrimination in that sense.

The end of Eduardo's (HI) comment is important because it reminds us of the instances of racism HIs reported in chapter 6. Eduardo himself said he felt discriminated against by his peers who thought of him as less intelligent because of his Latina/o heritage. However, the previous discussion on participants' satisfaction with SEPU and the current discussion on their trust of the university reveal that HIs do not hold SEPU responsible for the way other students think or behave. Despite perceiving the behavior of certain white students as racist, HIs are satisfied with their college experiences and trust SEPU to treat them as "fairly and justly" as any other student. When I asked participants for examples of SEPU not treating Latina/o students well, HIs were more vocal than LIs, only two of whom (Cristian and Javier) mentioned an example of unfair treatment of Latina/o students. All HIs' comments either dealt with the low representation of Latina/os in SEPU's student body or the lack of funding for Latina/o initiatives. Federico (HI) explained that SEPU needed to adapt to the U.S. demographic changes:

We [Latina/os] are the biggest minority in the United States, yet we represent one of the lowest minorities in higher education and I think that's ridiculous. Um, so that's the biggest thing I think [SEPU] should combat and, well I think [SEPU] is doing a disservice to Latino students by not trying to increase that number [...] [SEPU] is a public university, it should try to reflect the demographics of the country as well as it can.

Federico and other HIs argue that having few Latina/o students on campus means that SEPU is treating them unfairly. Javier is the only LI who also made this argument, stating, "just really representation, the fact that there are not Latinos um, in, as students, as faculty, um, I mean I think that's definitely one of the things that you could say, that they [SEPU administrators]

don't really care that much." Cristian (LI) said he wished SEPU was more directly involved in dealing with Latina/o matters on campus rather than "letting student organizations or other organizations reach out to them [Latina/o students]" because he does not think that "those organizations are really doing it to begin with that much, as much as they could or they should."

The other point of unfair treatment HIs addressed dealt with a lack of funding for Latina/o initiatives. Arturo (HI) and Miguel (HI) were the most vocal in expressing how unjust they thought this was. Miguel condemned the "lack of resources for Hispanic students on campus" compared to students from other racial/ethnic groups who "have a center or a building or whatever dedicated" to their culture. He did mention the Latina/o Center previously discussed, but its location on "the bottom floor of a dorm building" undermined its potential to help Latina/o students. Arturo tied the lack of resources for Latina/os on campus to their small representation:

A lot of organizations are for Caucasians, there's fewer but still a lot of organizations for African Americans, and there's a lot fewer for Latinos, and then again, that's because we're not, there's not a lot of us here, you can see by the make-up and the demographics of this university, there's a lot more Caucasians here [...] Latino organizations or minority organizations don't get as much funding as, as counter organizations, and I think one of the reasons is because our events are catered to the audience of Latinos, and since we don't have much, a lot of Latinos come out to our events, we can't really, we can't really like, show for the funding. If we take for instance, like organizations that are traditionally white, that get funding from the congress, student government, they, they hold huge events because they are capable to, because the support system and the bodies that come, it's huge, it's massive, um, we Latinos don't have that here.

Arturo (HI) suggests that the funding and resources SEPU allocates to Latina/o students is proportional to the number of Latina/o students on campus and to the number of students their events draw. While Arturo does not state that this system is unfair to Latina/o students, he does imply that SEPU penalizes Latina/o students for reasons the students cannot control. Lack of

representation and funding for minority organizations are the two main concerns HI participants raised regarding how they perceived SEPU to treat Latina/o students.

*Trust: “We need those resources now, and a lot of people don’t understand that.”*

Two other themes emerged from participants’ responses to the OPR trust dimension. One dealt with how much participants trusted SEPU to meet the needs of Latina/o students. The second one dealt with how much participants trusted SEPU to increase the number of Latina/o students on campus to enhance the latter’s college experiences as opposed to increasing diversity for “numbers sake,” according to Ricardo (LI) and because it has “no option but to,” as “they’d get sued if they didn’t,” according to Miguel (HI). These themes embody different components of the OPR trust dimension. When thinking about the needs of Latina/o students, Arturo (HI) and Eduardo (HI) talked about SEPU’s recent tuition increase as particularly affecting Latina/o students. Arturo said that “some Latinos can’t even afford the tuition right now, imagine tuition later on.” Eduardo stated that although “things like the budget or stuff like that [...] don’t really put one group over the other,” tuition increase nevertheless “does affect Latinos, especially those coming from low-income communities more than it would white students on campus coming from more privileged backgrounds.”

In this case, the needs of Latina/o students seem entirely intertwined with social class. During our interviews, many participants from both groups expressed their gratitude towards SEPU for giving them financial aid packages “beyond belief” (Mauricio, HI), which played a key role in their decision to attend SEPU. However, with the current budget cuts, Arturo (HI) and Eduardo (HI) worry that other Latina/o students may not receive the same opportunities. These financial concerns are part of the “integrity” component of the OPR trust dimension

because participants feel that SEPU's tuition increase would unfairly and unjustly affect low-income Latina/o students.

Participants also raised other concerns regarding Latina/o students' needs on campus. The following are part of the "competence" component of the OPR trust dimension, which deals with "the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3). Part of SEPU's mission is "to teach a diverse community of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students to become the next generation of leaders." Similar to their responses regarding SEPU's treatment of Latina/o students, participants from both groups were divided on SEPU's "ability to do what it says" in its mission.

Some participants, such as Mauricio (HI), thought that Latina/o students at SEPU are "given like sufficient attention when needed." Mauricio felt "that if, like Latino students needed help, um, there would be like someone there." He stated that he did not "feel that there's a lack of attention to Latino students." Similarly, Federico (HI) named various organizations, programs and scholarships "geared towards Latinos" as proof that SEPU was concerned with the needs of Latino/o students, stating, "[SEPU] is attentive to the, the needs, um and by attentive like I mean they understand and they are open ears towards the needs." Alejandro (LI) reported that academic and/or psychological support is available for Latina/o students who may need it, stating, "professors make it known that you can approach them and talk to them about anything. You can talk to I mean there's counselors, I think there's plenty of opportunities to talk to people if you're having a problem." Other participants such as Eduardo (HI), however, said that "more could be done" to meet the needs of Latina/o students on campus, especially by having "a more welcoming transition here." Eduardo explained that he "didn't know how to get the help" he needed and suggested getting "career services to reach out to students and not have just the

students have to come to them.” He also said SEPU should help Latina/o students with “time management” because they are far from their “close knit families” and “parents aren’t around to tell you what to do.”

Miguel (HI) and Cristian (LI) did not directly blame SEPU for not efficiently meeting Latina/o students’ needs. Cristian said, “to truly understand I think you just kind of have to live it, or just witness it and kind of see everything that goes on.” Similarly, Miguel was adamant that “no one can understand the needs of Latino students unless you’re associated somehow with Latinos or are a Latino yourself.” He also explained why SEPU administrators might overlook Latina/o students’ needs:

Some of us [Latina/os], not me, but like a lot of us went to bad schools growing up, so we may not have had the resources and we need those resources now, and a lot of people don’t understand that, they think that ‘oh, just because you got into [SEPU], you’re brilliant, you know everything’ no, [*he chuckles*], not necessarily, you know what I mean, [SEPU] does have this little quota that they have to fulfill minority students, maybe not all of those came from the best backgrounds, educational backgrounds, so there are certain resources that we need.

Miguel’s (HI) claim about SEPU’s quota represents his own opinion. While SEPU is openly committed to diversity, it does not have a minority quota to fulfill. Regardless, Miguel does not trust SEPU to meet Latina/o students’ needs because he feels that its administrators misunderstand Latina/o students’ pre-college experiences. Miguel attended an elite public school because his mother obtained her employer’s permission to use the latter’s address as her own. However, as Miguel implies in his comment, many Latina/os are not as fortunate as he has been. Cristian (LI) made a comment similar to Miguel’s in which he speculated how a non-Latina/o SEPU administrator might understand and address Latina/o students’ needs:



I think it's easy to say, like to give them [non-Latina/o SEPU administrators] facts, or like comment on problems, of like, these [Latina/o] students, 'their parents don't speak English,' or 'these students, like a lot of them are first generations,' or 'these students,' and I think it's easy for them to say like 'oh, well here's a program and here's the program for that.'

Cristian's (LI) comment echoes Ferdman and Gallegos' (2001) argument mentioned in chapter 2 about people usually looking for "simple answers" or "simple rules" when dealing with Latina/o matters (p.33). In this case, the "simple answers" rely on generalizing Latina/o students as children of non-educated immigrants. Federico (HI) briefly discussed the general comments that he believes SEPU administrators make and labeled them "cookie cutter answers." The above comments suggest that SEPU cannot meet the "competence" component of the OPR trust dimension because it lacks administrators who are knowledgeable about Latina/os' academic experiences. For instance, Eduardo (HI) praised the racial/ethnic diversity of SEPU's minority student recruitment committee because minority students "know from first-hand experience what should be included in recruitment weekends." The following exchange between Ricardo (LI) and me illustrates the importance of having Latina/os in administrative positions:

*Ricardo:* I know they have um, a Latino male who works in the multicultural diversity affairs. I can't remember his name but I feel like they have a good knowledge and background information, I mean just from um, his insights I'm sure that he provides, I mean, him being Latino as well, he probably can give um, good examples of, I mean, I mean he grew up once too, so maybe, I mean, I'm sure the needs have changed, but I'm sure that they know.

*Joseph:* So you're saying they understand the needs because they have him.

*Ricardo:* Exactly.

*Joseph:* Maybe if it wasn't for him they would not understand the needs?

*Ricardo:* Um, I mean I think they would have like a general idea, with him though, I feel like they would understand more, just so, I mean, his point of view is different than say a white or an African American point of view, thinking on what Latinos need, um I mean, he may or may not, I'm not sure if he really does, like understand the needs, but I'm, I'm, because he's Latino I believe that he does understand the needs.

Ricardo (LI) doubts that one Latino administrator is enough to fully understand Latina/o students' needs; however, it is at least better than having none. He implies that regardless of his background, this Latino administrator's "point of view is different than" that of other non-Latina/o administrators. While other participants also criticized SEPU administrators for misunderstanding Latina/o students' needs, Miguel (HI) is the only participant who mentioned using media to compensate for these administrators' lack of real life experiences with Latina/o students. Miguel was adamant that SEPU administrators not only failed to understand Latina/o students' needs because they were not familiar with Latina/o students' pre-college academic experiences but also seemed to pay little attention to Latina/o students' requests. I then asked Miguel if this lack of understanding "might have anything to do with how Latinos are portrayed in media." His lengthy response offers a perspective no other participant mentioned:

Um, this lack of understanding, um, the lack of understanding, no in fact the media should further, further their [SEPU administrators] understanding, 'cause if they really understood the media, 'cause I mean the media is not wrong, [*he chuckles*], you know what I mean, a lot of what the media's portraying is right, you know, single mothers, you know, um, you know, mothers having to work two jobs, kids not being braced, I mean you'll have, like there's students here, there's students here who literally their mothers had two jobs until they were 14, that they finally retired or were able to get government checks, so until 14 their mother had two jobs and weren't really involved, crazy involved in their students, in their kids' lives, you know what I mean, and after 14, whatever, like they came to [SEPU], but they don't understand that for the first 14 years of your life, not only that you have a single mother, but you had a single mother that was working two jobs, you know what I mean, so how does that play out, you know what I mean, um, for, for actual students, and the thing is you see those things on TV but they're actually happening, you know, they're actually, actually happening, so if actually, if they understood the media and really took in what the media was saying, um, they should understand what's going on, and they should understand what the needs are, um, because you know, some of the stuff although exaggerated is true, and some of the, even the exaggerated things is true, [*he chuckles*], you know, um, so um, I would say, to answer your question um, I really don't know how the media is impacting their decision 'cause, if they paid attention to the media, they'd understand what the needs are.

Miguel's (HI) comment represents the only time a participant mentioned media when discussing the relationship between SEPU and Latina/o students. Apart from this comment, all participants, including Miguel, used personal experience to reflect upon their relationship with SEPU. However, here Miguel argues that media could help SEPU be more competent in dealing with Latina/o students' needs. His idea reflects the comments he and other HIs made regarding the validity of certain media representations, discussed in chapter 5. For instance, Eduardo talked about the Latina/os in his neighborhood who had joined a gang; Mauricio said that his sister had her first child at 19 years old; and Miguel used his parents' professions to explain the veracity of certain media stereotypes. This is also similar to media scholars' claims that media experiences may in some instances replace real-life ones (Morgan et al., 2009).

Overall, participants from both groups trusted the quality of SEPU's education but also expressed concerns that the university may not fully understand the needs some Latina/o students may have. This view affected participants' trust in SEPU's "competence" to provide the same education to all students, regardless of their background. No differences emerged between HI and LI participants' responses. Similarly, while they praised SEPU for its diversity efforts, they also questioned SEPU's motives.

*Trust: "Once they have those numbers, I feel like they're not concerned."*

SEPU's diversity mission is "to build and sustain an inclusive campus community and to foster a welcoming climate that values and respects all members of the university community." All but three participants (Mauricio, HI; Alejandro, LI; and Enrique, LI) wondered to various degrees if SEPU was committed to diversity to enrich students' college experiences or to enhance the university's image. Their comments elicited all three components of the OPR trust dimension (integrity, dependability and competence). I previously defined "integrity" ("the belief

that an organization is fair and just”) and “competence” (“the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do”). “Dependability” refers to “the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3).

Participants questioned the integrity of SEPU’s diversity policies, stating that such policies are legally required. For instance, referring to SEPU’s treatment of Latina/o students, Miguel (HI) stated, “they [SEPU faculty and staff] have no option but to [treat them well], they’d get sued if they didn’t,” thus doubting the authenticity of the relationship between SEPU and Latina/o students. Similarly, Cristian (LI) commented on the true value of “all these minority support groups,” saying:

Honestly, I really don’t know what they [minority support groups] do, [*he chuckles*], but it’s just kind of like, it looks good on paper. [...] I just feel like, they [SEPU administrators] just, they see Latinos or any minority group honestly, as just, it’s, it’s diversity, which is good like I mean, I think they’re seeing the positive version of diversity in the classroom, but it’s also kind of ‘oh, diversity for any minority group is gonna make us look better, when people are applying’ you know ‘cause everybody wants diversity.

Cristian (LI) seems to suggest that diversity initiatives serve a double role by simultaneously enhancing students’ academic experiences as well as the university’s image. Compared to other participants who mentioned specific programs “geared towards Latinos” (Federico, HI), Ricardo (LI) was more skeptical regarding SEPU’s motivation to create diversity initiatives to benefit students, stating, “I think that they [SEPU administrators] are concerned, like, just so that they can say that their diversity um, but I mean once, once they have those numbers, I feel like they’re not concerned.” He justified his argument saying that SEPU “treats [Latina/os] the same as everybody else, um, as the other ethnicities.” According to him, SEPU mainly displays its concern about Latina/o students for recruitment purposes.

A few participants also commented on SEPU's "dependability"—"the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do"—to create not only a diverse campus, but an integrated one as well (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3). Javier (LI) said he felt SEPU did not fulfill his expectations of a culturally diverse campus:

When they [SEPU staff] hold those [recruiting] events, trying to get you here, it's more of, university pushing 'oh yeah, we do this, we do this' but when you get here, you kind of have to actively, put in work to seek out those events, it's a little harder to find those events on campus, where you can kind of group with other Latinos, you kind of have to make those events yourself.

Javier (LI) feels that the recruitment events he participated in when he visited SEPU led him to misconceive what life at SEPU would really be like, especially in terms of diversity matters. Attending SEPU, he realized that the purpose of recruitment events targeted at racial/ethnic minority students is to increase student body diversity. Similarly, Federico (HI) said he felt that SEPU was more concerned with recruiting more diverse students than with integrating these students into the student body: "[SEPU] has done a great job of getting more diversity here on campus. However [SEPU] has not done a good job of integrating those different groups once they're here on campus, and getting those different groups to work with each other." These comments suggest that SEPU is not "dependable" to "build and sustain an inclusive campus community," as stated in its diversity mission.

The last component of the OPR trust dimension is "competence"—"the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3). Earlier in this section, I discussed that some participants felt SEPU misunderstood Latina/o students' potential academic and financial needs. Participants also used the same argument to explain that SEPU lacks the ability to create an inclusive climate. For instance, Federico (LI) said the

predominantly white male administrators who run SEPU have not “actually gone into the field and like seen or interacted with [Latina/o students] very much.” Indeed, it would be impossible to create an inclusive campus if administrators were mostly concerned with increasing diversity numbers and did not inquire about racial/ethnic minority students’ concerns.

*Commitment: “They’re not going to be the only ones here that are Latinos, there are other students just like them.”*

SEPU’s effort to increase diversity numbers was nevertheless an important aspect of participants’ responses to their perception of the SEPU-Latina/o student relationship. These responses fit the OPR commitment dimension, which refers to “the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3). The commitment dimension includes two components, “continuance commitment” and “affective commitment.” The former represents “a certain line of action” while the latter represents “an emotional orientation” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.3). These two components emerged from participants’ responses in the form of two codes. “Continuance commitment” was reflected in the many comments participants made regarding SEPU’s recruitment programs specifically targeting Latina/o and/or other racial/ethnic minority students. “Affective commitment” was expressed when participants discussed their loyalty to SEPU.

All participants praised SEPU for its efforts to recruit racial/ethnic minority students. All but one HI (Mauricio) said they actively took part in recruitment events catering to racial/ethnic minority students. Participants viewed these events as evidence of SEPU’s commitment to diversity, which enhanced their perceptions of SEPU’s reputation. In their study exploring the relationship between a South Korean university and its students, Sung and Yang (2009) found that students’ views regarding the university’s reputation predicted their support of the

university. HIs' involvement with SEPU's recruitment programs can thus be interpreted as satisfaction with their experiences at SEPU. Participating in the recruitment of other minority students shows not only that HIs are confident these prospective students would enjoy attending SEPU, but also that HIs are concerned about the future of SEPU. Sung and Yang (2009) also found that universities need to cultivate a good relationship with their students for the latter to support universities' efforts. However, my interviews with participants did not confirm such findings. For instance, HIs said that SEPU's tuition increase as well as the way SEPU handled Latina/o students' demand for a Latina/o Center negatively affected their relationship with SEPU. As Arturo (HI) said, "we have a love-hate relationship with [SEPU]." Nevertheless, HIs continued their involvement with SEPU's recruitment programs.

Contrary to HIs, no LIs said they volunteered with minority recruitment programs. LIs talked about their experiences attending a SEPU recruitment event instead. This observation contradicts Sung and Yang's (2009) claim that if students hold a favorable image of their university, they would be more likely to support its initiatives. As previously mentioned, all LIs are very satisfied with their experiences at SEPU and have a high esteem for the university. Despite this difference in recruitment activities between HIs and LIs, many participants from both groups named specific programs that "cater solely to Hispanics," as Ricardo (LI) said. According to participants, these programs reflect SEPU's commitment to establishing a relationship between the university and Latina/o students. Eduardo (HI) expressed the importance of such programs for prospective Latina/o college students:

I think programs like that are really important because um, it just gives a chance to [Latina/o] high school students, it gives them a chance to see the campus and see that you know, they're not going to be the only ones here that are Latinos, there are other students just like them.

Eduardo (HI), as most other participants, was the only or one of the few high-achieving Latina/o(s) in his high school. Therefore, witnessing the poor academic performances of other Latina/o high school students probably made him think he would not meet many Latina/o students in college. Latina/o recruitment programs are thus important because they show high school Latina/o students not only that college is accessible but also that other Latina/os are already studying there. Similarly, Arturo (HI) expressed his satisfaction with SEPU's commitment to recruit racial/ethnic minorities:

From the minority standpoint, because I'm in a lot of recruiting for minorities stuff, I think it does a really good job, one of the, one of the few universities that, that really like, they go out of their way to help people out, they have programs in the summer where we bring up [racial/ethnic minority] high school students called [name of program], um, we show them around campus and they really enjoy the workshops.

While I did not ask participants if they attended any SEPU recruitment programs, many talked about their first visit to SEPU's campus and the recruitment event they were part of.

Eduardo (HI), Enrique (LI) and Ricardo (LI) said they took part in the specific program Arturo (HI) mentioned above when they were in high school. Enrique described his experiences in the program as "mind blowing or life changing," stating, "[name of recruitment program] really got me to see how diverse this campus is, how, how much they [students] really care about the school, what [SEPU] is, like the brand, and everything about it, so, that just really appealed to me." During the same time that I was conducting the interviews, I spoke to a high school Latina student who had taken part in this same recruitment event. She said that Arturo's workshop about being Latina/o at SEPU was the best of all and made her want to attend SEPU. Javier (LI) also recalled how impressed he was by the recruitment event he attended:



It was specifically for Latino students so um, it was, it was a group of us, all going there and, um, it seemed to me, they [SEPU staff] were definitely actively trying to recruit um, these high-achieving Latino students, so I think they definitely are trying to, trying to get more, more Hispanics in the university.

Similar to other comments, Javier's (LI) comment implies that SEPU's recruitment efforts show the university's commitment to increasing the number of Latina/o students on its campus. All participants perceive SEPU as actively engaged in "continuance commitment" with Latina/o students. They believe SEPU is "spending energy to maintain and promote" this relationship. They also expressed their "affective commitment" to SEPU when discussing their loyalty to the university. All of them attributed their loyalty to SEPU to their college experiences. Some focused on their satisfaction with their academic experiences whereas others focused more on their social experiences at SEPU. As with all the other themes discussed in this chapter, apart from participants' thoughts about SEPU's Latina/o Center, no difference emerged between HIs' and LIs' loyalty to SEPU. Of all participants, Enrique (LI) displayed by far the most "affective commitment" to SEPU:

Hopefully when I have kids and everything, I would be more than happy with them coming here [SEPU]. I'll be like those parents pushing their kids to go to [SEPU], I mean I'd love if um, I ended meeting a girl, maybe like junior or senior year and then, I think that'd be really cool to just have like a [SEPU] family.

After making this comment, Enrique (LI) added, "it's not like I wouldn't marry a [name of rival university] girl if she was cool." The fact that he has already thought about marrying a woman because she attended SEPU and that he felt the need to clarify he would consider marrying a woman from another university illustrates Enrique's high degree of "affective commitment" to SEPU. Apart from Enrique, all other participants provided similar responses

regarding their loyalty to SEPU. Many talked about their positive academic experiences or their support for SEPU's sports teams to explain their loyalty. Similar to the previous two OPR dimensions discussed in this section, participants' racial/ethnic identification does not seem to affect how they perceive their relationship with SEPU. While many HIs implied that the relationship between SEPU and Latina/o students could be strengthened, all participants focused on the positive aspects of their college experiences. The most flagrant difference between HIs and LIs emerged when discussing SEPU's Latina/o Center. As in previous chapters, HIs' comments about the center were more thoughtful and critical than the ones from the only two LIs who knew about the Latina/o Center. This variation in awareness about Latina/o organizations also represents one of the main differences between the two groups.

## **CHAPTER X: CONCLUSION**

The main purpose of this dissertation was to link two phenomena that have been separately dealt with extensively in previous research: media's racialization of Latina/os and Latina/o students' educational challenges in the U.S. The majority of media studies pertaining to Latina/o matters mostly deal with media representations of Latina/os and how these representations affect white viewers' perceptions of Latina/os in general. This dissertation thus contributes to the field of Latina/o media studies by exploring the influence of these representations on Latino college students based on their levels of cultural identification. I used a symbolic interactionism perspective to examine the relationship between media representations of Latina/os and undergraduate U.S.-born Latino students' perceptions of their overall college experiences as well as their social and academic interactions with students and professors at a predominantly white public university in the southeast of the U.S. I also explored how these students make sense of their identity in a society where the dominant representations of Latina/os are unfavorable. Lastly, I investigated how Latino students perceive their relationship with the university they attend.

Twelve Latino students took part in this in-depth interview study. These students were all born to Latina/o parents from various countries and social and educational backgrounds, and grew up in various parts of the U.S. Except for Javier (LI), whose father was born in New York, all the participants' parents were born and grew up outside of mainland U.S. While half of the

students grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods and the rest in predominantly minority neighborhoods, all attended predominantly white high schools and were enrolled at the same predominantly white university. I recruited participants based on their level of identification with their Latina/o heritage. Half of them were high-identifying Latinos (HIs), whereas the other half were low-identifying Latinos (LIs). I determined their level of cultural identification based on their involvement with Latina/o student organizations, their relationship with the Latina/o community on campus, the role they attributed their Latina/o heritage to play in their identity and everyday life, among other indicators.

#### *Importance of cultural identification*

Throughout the dissertation, I presented my findings based on similarities and differences both within and between the two groups of participants. Too often, universities seem to disregard individual differences when dealing with various groups of minority students. Similarly, most media studies involving minority participants often compare these groups to other groups, as opposed to looking for potential differences within minority groups. I decided to divide participants based on cultural identification because education researchers have suggested that it might affect Latina/o students' academic experiences (Flores et al., 2000; Iturbide et al., 2009; Roehling et al., 2010; Valentine, 2001). However, researchers have found mixed results. Some contend that high cultural identification increases self-confidence and thus positively affects academic outcomes, whereas others posit that high cultural identification increases social isolation and thus negatively affects academic outcomes.

It is important to keep in mind that all the participants in this study were high-achieving students who did well in their classes, and most of them planned on getting an advanced degree in the future. Therefore, their level of cultural identification was not directly related to their

academic performances. However, my findings indicate that the role participants attributed media representations of Latina/os played in their social and academic experiences on campus did vary based on their level of cultural identification. HI Latino students' college experiences were affected by media representations of Latina/os to a greater extent than those of LI Latino students.

Although this dissertation was solely focused on the overall college experiences of Latino students, as opposed to their actual performances in the classroom, it is conceptually similar to studies that have explored how students from diverse backgrounds perceive their social and academic experiences. For example, in an attempt to decipher the achievement-gap between black and white high school students, Steel (1997) investigated "how societal stereotypes about groups can influence the intellectual functioning and identity development of individual group members" (p. 613). His research does not directly address the role media play in the (re)production of these societal stereotypes but nevertheless asserts that stereotypes are prevalent in students' minds, regardless of their group membership. One of Steele's comments about the different academic experiences of white and black students captures the essence of the different college experiences between HI and LI Latino students at SEPU:

From an observer's standpoint, the situations of a boy and a girl in a math classroom or of a Black student and a White student in any classroom are essentially the same. The teacher is the same; the textbooks are the same; and in better classrooms, these students are treated the same. Is it possible, then, that they could still experience the classroom differently, so differently in fact as to significantly affect their performance and achievement there?" (p.613).

Similarly, the experiences of HI and LI Latino students would appear similar to most observers. It would actually be impossible to know how much a student identifies with his/her

cultural heritage simply based on phenotype. Most professors and students who do not know these Latino students personally are likely to perceive them as being similar to all other Latino students at SEPU and to assume that their college experiences are analogous. While the academic performance and achievements of Latino students in this study did not seem to be affected by media and societal stereotypes about Latina/os, their college experiences were affected, especially for HI students. Such findings are important because of the effects college experiences can have on retention and graduation rates. Indeed, several education researchers found that feeling welcome on campus and having a sense of belonging to the university community were more important than obtaining good grades in Latina/o students' decision to stay or drop out of college (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; McLaughlin González & Ting, 2008). Given that Latino students currently have the lowest college graduation rates, we need to better understand the role media play in their college experiences in order to improve these experiences.

Overall, the findings show that cultural identification affects how Latino students perceive the role media representations of Latina/os play in their college experiences. The heterogeneity that cultural identification imparts on Latino students, who have too often been perceived as a homogeneous group, exposes certain nuances that have been hiding in previous research about Latina/o students. For instance, Schneider and Ward (2003) asserted that most Latina/o students feel isolated and alienated at predominantly white universities, especially if the university does not overtly promote racial diversity and encourage minority students to participate in academic and social discussions. However, based on findings from this dissertation, this statement would mostly apply to HI Latino students. Similarly, other researchers reported that the majority of Latina/o students have negative perceptions of their

white peers, which causes them to alienate themselves and limit their social interactions to other Latina/o students (Chavez-Reyes, 2010; Lopez, 2005). While participants' cultural identification affected their perceptions of white students, with HI students having more negative perceptions than LI students, the findings suggest that students' social class also affects their perceptions of and interactions with white students. Indeed, low-income Latino students stated they felt more comfortable interacting with low-income white students than with white students from more affluent economic backgrounds.

The emphasis that I put on cultural identification should not overshadow the heterogeneity of the students who took part in this study. Indeed, their accounts also reveal differences within HI and LI groups based on their parents' country of origin, the types of neighborhoods they grew up in and their social status. All these factors are part of each student's identity and affect his everyday experiences. However, with regard to their academic experiences, their descriptions of media representations of Latina/os and their interpretations of such representations on white Americans' perceptions of Latina/os, participants' cultural identification is the main factor affecting their personal and mediated experiences.

Findings also suggest that factors such as participants' social class, their parents' level of education, and the racial/ethnic composition of the neighborhoods they grew up in did not directly contribute to their cultural identification. The families of HI participants were divided between working and middle classes, and the families of LI participants were divided between working, middle and upper classes. Three LIs and four HIs were first-generation college students. Lastly, half of both HIs and LIs grew up in racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods, whereas the others grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods. The purpose of this study was not to identify factors that contribute to cultural identification, and it is interesting to note

that none of the information above seems to have affected participants' levels of cultural identification, which contributed to different college experiences.

#### *Main differences between HIs and LIs*

Overall, HIs displayed a greater level of media literacy than LIs. The former were also more elaborate and reflective in their descriptions of media representations of Latina/os than LIs. While participants condemned media representations of Latina/os on the whole, HIs were much more likely to report that stereotypical media representations of Latina/os exist in real life and to express their concerns about the racial climate in the U.S. Similarly, when I asked participants how they thought media representations of Latina/os affect white Americans' perceptions of Latina/os in general, HIs provided longer answers and were more thorough in their explanations, thus suggesting that they may have reflected more about the effects of media on perceptions than LIs, who seemed to be giving this subject serious thought for the first time during our interviews.

Participants' comments revealed that they entered college with two very different mindsets. Compared to LIs, HIs perceived race/ethnicity to be a salient part of their identity, were more aware of stereotypical media representations of Latina/os and were more sensitive to media's effect on white Americans' perceptions of Latina/os. This different worldview affected participants' social interactions with other students. For instance, HIs were more likely than LIs to report having friends from various racial/ethnic backgrounds. Participants' accounts of how these friendships developed also differed based on their cultural identification: HIs actively sought out racial minority students, while LIs met them coincidentally. Participants' overall comments regarding their interracial interactions suggest that they have a different conceptual racial/ethnic map of campus. It seems as if HIs perceive campus as being divided between white students on one end, and racial/ethnic minority students on the other. However, LIs seem to paint



a picture of a campus in which Latina/o students are closer to white students than they are to other racial/ethnic groups of students. The activities HIs and LIs are involved in on campus also reflect this pattern. HIs were more likely to be heavily involved in racial/ethnic-oriented student organizations, whereas LIs were more likely to attend university sporting events and be involved in predominantly white student organizations. For instance, in contrast to HIs, who were all very familiar with SEPU's Latina/o Center, only two LIs had even heard about it. Similarly, no LIs said they volunteered with minority recruitment programs.

HIs and LIs also sharply differed in how they felt white students perceive them. While all HIs acknowledged that attending college was not the norm for Latinos, four of them specifically mentioned that many of their white peers attributed their presence at SEPU to affirmative action policies. On the contrary, LIs assumed that because SEPU is a selective university, their white peers would recognize their academic achievements and perceive them as intelligent students who are Latinos. In other words, HIs suggested that white students perceive them as intellectually inferior, whereas LIs claimed that white students perceive them as equals. Such findings are similar to what Guyll and his colleagues (2010) hypothesized regarding the relationship between Latina/o students' ethnic identity and their academic performances. They posited that Latina/os who strongly identify with their ethnic background "may perceive large differences between themselves and Euro-Americans," which would also "encourage stigma consciousness" (p.119). This different perspective between HIs and LIs is directly related to their college experiences because it reveals how accepted they feel on campus. Indeed, HIs clearly see themselves as members of a different group than that of the white students they interact with. This is revealed by their change of register when talking to their white peers. No LI reported doing this; on the contrary LIs' comments suggest a certain level of intimacy with their white

peers. LIs' comments also imply that their presence on campus and their strong academic performances make them part of the same group white students belong to.

Participants' interactions with their white peers also differed based on cultural identification and the role participants attributed to media representations. Indeed, based on HIs' responses, media representations of Latina/os seem to be constantly present in their minds during their social interactions on campus and their academic experiences in classrooms. Because HIs believe that these media images affect perceptions of Latina/os and therefore their college experiences, they reported actively trying to change people's perceptions of Latina/os by "proving them wrong" through their actions. That is, HIs consciously behaved in particular ways when interacting with white students to show that media do not portray an accurate image of Latina/os. On the contrary, LIs seemed more complacent about the current state of race relations on campus and believed that being themselves, or simply seeing Latina/os enrolled at SEPU is enough to alter stereotypical perceptions people may have of Latina/os. Despite these differences, it would be misleading to state that HIs and LIs represent two distinct groups with no commonalities.

#### *Main similarities between HIs and LIs*

All participants identified many media stereotypes but overlooked more recent Latina/o media representations as affluent consumers and/or as characters whose roles are more complex than the traditional stereotypical, one-dimensional ones. Maybe such portrayals are still too new and limited to have really made an impact on the participants, whose Latina/o media representations seem to be dominated by decades-old and pervasive stereotypical images.

Overall, participants either stated that media provided them with no positive Latina/o role models or did not mention anything about the presence of such role models. Eduardo (HI) was the only

participant who cited an example of counter stereotypical portrayals, mentioning *The George Lopez Show* and stating that the Latina/o characters in this show are similar to a traditional American family.

As previously mentioned, HIs and LIs held different beliefs regarding how these media representations influenced white students' perceptions of them. However, when I asked participants questions regarding how they perceived media representations of Latina/os to affect their relationship with professors, the overall consensus was that professors are educated professionals who would not be easily influenced by media images. This is one of the few topics we discussed in our interviews where no major group distinction emerged. The other main similarity between HIs and LIs regarded their perception of the educational opportunities that SEPU provided them.

Overall, participants from both groups were very satisfied with the quality of SEPU's education but also expressed concerns that the university may not fully understand the needs some Latina/o students may have. This view affected participants' trust in SEPU's ability to provide the same education to all students, regardless of their background. Similarly, while they praised SEPU for its diversity efforts, they also questioned SEPU's motives. Indeed, all but three participants (Mauricio, HI; Alejandro, LI; and Enrique, LI) wondered, to various degrees, whether SEPU was committed to diversity to enrich students' college experiences or to enhance the university's image. Despite many HIs implying that the relationship between SEPU and Latina/o students could be strengthened, all participants focused on the positive aspects of their college experiences. First-generation HI college students also said that their college experiences contributed to their identity development.

### *Identity & role models*

Participants' cultural identification clearly impacted how they perceive themselves. HIs' comments on identity were more insightful than LIs, who did not place as much emphasis on their racial/ethnic background as being part of their identity. HIs' comments also revealed a more complex picture on the identity development of first-generation U.S.-born Latinos. Based on the four categories of racial/ethnic identity for immigrants and their offspring—assimilated, integrated, separated and marginalized (Phinney et al., 1992)—discussed in Chapter 8, I propose that LIs belong to the integrated category because they have many white friends, feel comfortable in predominantly white settings and maintain certain aspects of their Latina/o culture because of their families. However, I posit that none of the four categories seems appropriate for HIs who strongly identify with their heritage but are not separated from U.S. society. Categorizing HIs as integrated would undermine the strong bond they continue to have with their culture.

The term bicultural seems more appropriate for HIs because they consider their Latina/o heritage and cultural practices to be part of U.S. society. However, it is crucial to emphasize the role education plays in Latina/o college students' identity. For instance, Arturo's (HI) comments suggest that his pursuit of a college degree contributes to feeling distant from his Latina/o community. This is because U.S. Latina/os have historically been denied access to higher education, and a college degree is usually associated with the dominant culture. Arturo's comments suggest that people can only perceive him as Latino or as educated, but that the two are incompatible. Indeed, as Cano and Castillo (2010) stated, "Latino students may perceive an association between the pursuit of academic success and assimilating to the educational expectations of the dominant culture, resulting in a form of cultural genocide" (pp. 221-222). Three LIs and four HIs, more than half of the participants, were first-generation college students.

However, only HIs expressed having conflicting feelings concerning their level of educational achievement and their identity, due to the lack of role models in their personal and mediated experiences. To come to terms with their identity struggles, HIs developed a new Latina/o identity as “modern-day Latino professionals,” to use Miguel’s (HI) words.

HIs realize they are part of a generation of U.S. Latinos who have strong ties to their cultural heritage and are also seeking to enhance their educational opportunities. Because of their involvement in Latina/o student organizations, first-generation college HI students met professional Latina/os for the first time in their lives, thus confirming their status as modern day Latino professionals and validating the idea that their level of education can also be part of their identity. This modern day Latino professional identity seems to represent the pinnacle of Latina/o biculturalism for HIs because it enables them to stay rooted in their Latina/o culture while participating in the professional U.S. society. Education, once reserved for the dominant group, has become a key part of the modern day Latino professional identity. Focusing on the benefits of their education and meeting successful professional Latina/os enabled these HIs to reject the identity most media representations have ascribed to them and resolve their own identity struggles.

Meeting other high-achieving Latina/o students at SEPU and Latina/o professionals represented a milestone in terms of identity development for HIs. This was the first time they met college-educated Latina/os who were not part of their families (Federico’s father, Hernando’s mother, and Miguel’s older brother and sister graduated from college). Five of the six HIs also did not see any role models in the media that could inspire them to excel academically. Arturo (HI) was the only participant who vividly recalled a television report about a successful Latino immigrant, Dr. Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, whose first job in the U.S. was

on a farm picking tomatoes and, after years of struggling, is now a neurosurgeon. Arturo said this story became an “inspiration” to him, stating, “if he can do it [...] I can do it too.” Even though this was the story of just one person, it was enough to let Arturo know that he too could pursue a higher education. In the same way that HI participants aim to change how their white peers perceive them through their interactions with the latter, HIs also hope to serve as role models for younger Latina/os who may also grow up without knowing any college-educated Latina/os. As HIs believe that positive personal interactions can supersede negative media representations, they feel it is their responsibility to show younger Latina/os that, despite a lack of role models in their personal and mediated experiences, they can nevertheless do well in school, attend college and choose any career they wish.

Similar to HIs, two well-known personalities have recently alluded to the lack of role models for their professional development. In the 2012 London summer Olympics, Gabby Douglas, an African-American gymnast, became the first woman of color to win the individual all-around gold medal. She also became the first U.S. gymnast to win gold medals in the individual all-around and team competitions at the same Olympics. In an interview with the Associated Press, she said, “there's not a lot of African-Americans in this sport, so I'm glad to bring it up” [...] “I want them to think, ‘If Gabby can do it, I can do it, too’” (Armour, 2012, para. 20). Similarly, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina to serve on the Court and self-identified “Nuyorican”—born in New York City of Puerto Rican descent—(Ludden, 2009), promoted her autobiography, published in English, *My Beloved World*, and Spanish, *Mi Mundo Adorado*, stating that one of her main messages was for readers to feel connected to her and “say something like, ‘you know she’s just like me, and if she can reach her dreams, I can reach mine’” (The Colbert Report, 2013). Gabby Douglas and Justice Sotomayor

realize the paucity of roles models for racial/ethnic minorities. They are using the same media outlets that (re)produce stereotypical images of racial/ethnic minorities to communicate their success stories of overcoming struggles and racism in fields that continue to be dominated by Whites. HIs similarly hope to share their stories with young people to inspire them to persevere and achieve their goals.

### *Limitations*

A major limitation of this study is that the data collection was focused only on first-generation U.S.-born Latinos, and I relied only on face-to-face, in-depth interviews. In addition, I gathered participants' accounts of their experiences but I did not observe these experiences. There are also limitations inherent in an interview study. By asking Latino students to participate in an interview with me, I created a situation that would not have existed had I not contacted these Latino students (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Even though the students I interviewed seemed open to sharing their experiences, I cannot guarantee that I was successful at having a natural conversation that could have happened outside of this study. Interviews also rely on participants' memories and one can never be sure that participants are reporting an accurate account of what they experienced or what happened in a particular instance (Maynes et al., 2008). Participants also decide what to recall and relate. While memory represents a limitation of any interview study, this dissertation was concerned with how Latino students' perceive their experiences, which is subject to participants' interpretations of particular situations. Therefore, I did not seek a "historical truth" but a "narrative truth," that is, a truth that "enables us to understand how individuals construct meaning in their lives" (Maynes et al., 2008, p.148).

Another limitation of interviewing has to do with the loss of the participants' performances during the interview, which cannot be recorded (Mazzei, 2009; Williams, 2001).

Indeed, while interviews place paramount importance on participants' voice, it is lost in the transcription process, as participants' voices are reduced to a series of words on paper, separated from their spoken context (Williams, 2001). Lastly, I restricted my data collection to one university located in a Southeastern state that does not have as rich a Latina/o culture as some other states may have. Future research should take these limitations into account to continue to explore the role media representations play in Latina/o students' college experiences.

### *Recommendations*

Media representations of Latina/os certainly affect Latina/o students' college experiences. Findings from this dissertation reveal that HI Latinos feel that many of their white peers perceive them in light of stereotypical media images, which do not include educated, high-achieving Latina/os. HIs believe these images restrict their interracial friendships and worsen their classroom experiences. To a lesser extent but for the same reasons, these images also seem to affect Latino students' self-esteem and academic goals. Universities should implement media literacy workshops to sensitize all students about the effects media images can have in terms of perceptions and self-perceptions. Such workshops would elicit conversations among members of different racial/ethnic groups about the falsity of media portrayals as well as motivate students to critically explore the origins of stereotypes and why media (re)produce these images. Students, such as LIs for instance, might think about such matters for the first time, and it is crucial for them to understand how these images may influence their everyday interactions even if they had never consciously paid attention to certain media representations. Opening a dialogue among students about the role of media on college experiences would hopefully create a more inclusive climate on campus. Similarly, educating students about media stereotypes and their effects



should diminish students' (subconscious) reliance on these stereotypes when interacting with Latina/o students.

Media's power to influence perceptions increases when audiences do not have meaningful interpersonal experiences with members of a particular group. North Carolina's racial demographics do not offer many opportunities for non-Latina/os to interact with Latina/os, especially not young, high-achieving Latina/o students. As participants said, they themselves had not met other high-achieving Latina/os prior to coming to SEPU. Therefore, it is crucial that universities encourage students from various backgrounds to interact with each other and work towards a common goal, whether for academic or social purposes. For instance, universities could implement a team-based structure for class assignments, for which students would have to interact with each other in an intellectual way over a period of time. Universities could also develop programs for social causes that would attract students from different backgrounds; such programs would allow students to collaborate and interact in meaningful ways as they contribute to a 'cause they feel passionate about. Such activities would reveal similarities between students from different backgrounds and hopefully demystify racial/ethnic stereotypes.

One of the strongest commitments universities can make toward creating an inclusive campus is by hiring a diverse faculty and staff. Participants repeatedly lamented the lack of role models, both in their personal and mediated experiences. If they are to feel welcome on campus, students need to see that people who belong to their group are part of the university and contribute to its success. Unfortunately, many participants also noted most non-student Latina/os on campus were either part of the janitorial or construction crews. Participants did not state or imply anything negative about these occupations, but they related these jobs to media representations of Latina/os and argued that unless Latina/os also occupy higher positions,

people will continue to perceive them as not belonging to the business or education world. For Latina/os who did not grow up knowing other Latina/os who graduated from college, attending a university where they still do not see any Latina/os in teaching or administrative positions might send the message that universities do not perceive Latina/os as being fit to hold these positions. If universities are honestly trying to diversify their faculty and staff but are encountering challenges, they could still invite guest and keynote speakers to university events to demonstrate the important contribution diverse points of view make toward students' overall academic experiences. Universities could also display works from diverse artists throughout their campus to show their appreciation of diverse cultures. Such simple actions would make minority students feel more integrated within the campus community.

Many universities, including SEPU, already offer several important resources for Latina/o and other minority students. However, based on participants' comments, such resources are often not well promoted, and therefore may never benefit students who may need these resources the most. Universities should ensure that all students are aware of the different services on campus and be pro-active in reaching out to groups of students who have historically been marginalized in institutions of higher education. Similarly, universities should also strongly support initiatives and events by Latina/o and other minority student groups and encourage students from any background to attend such events. Universities' faculty and staff should lead by example and also be present at these events to promote an inclusive campus where attendees of particular events include members of groups other than members of the group(s) sponsoring the events. Non-Latina/os who attend an event showcasing the richness of Latina/o culture, for example, would hopefully be then less likely to perceive that culture in terms of stereotypes. Lastly, students from any background should be free to identify with what feels most

comfortable to them without thinking about any potential backlash that may occur because of identifying with a particular group. This is especially important for HI students who often change their behavior to conform to the “norm” and/or to avoid reinforcing a media stereotype about their group.

Media representations do impact Latino students’ college experiences, and as with any other factor that affects students’ experiences, universities should address it with the goal of having all students feel welcome on their campuses. The above ideas aim to address the role of media representations in college experiences, and while this dissertation focused specifically on Latino students, these overall recommendations would enhance the experiences of other racial/ethnic minority students who may believe that their college experiences could also be influenced by media representations.

#### *A final word about media*

While all participants’ comments quoted in this dissertation are related to media, I do not want to give the impression that media are the only factors affecting Latina/o students’ college experiences. Indeed, as previously mentioned in chapters 2 and 3, education researchers have found that several variables can affect Latina/o students’ educational achievements; this dissertation was specifically concerned with the role of media. However, even though I focused my questions on media, many factors were simultaneously at play when participants discussed their college experiences. Also, while some experiences may appear to be similar, such as those among HIs and LIs, we cannot overlook participants’ individual differences. Too often, universities seem to disregard individual differences when dealing with various groups of minority students. Similarly, most media studies involving minority participants often compare

these groups to other groups, as opposed to looking at potential differences within minority groups.

This dissertation relied on a symbolic interactionism perspective, which posits that people rely on symbols to communicate and understand each other, and that society consists of people interacting with each other. Through their interactions, HIs used symbols to influence how white students would perceive them. HIs were also more likely to rely on media symbols when communicating with others than were LIs. Overall, findings from this dissertation suggest that media representations of Latina/os do not affect all Latino students in the same way. Specifically, media images can have a negative influence on Latino students with high levels of cultural identification, whereas these images are not at the forefront of the experiences of Latino students' with low levels of cultural identification, and thus do not hinder their college experiences.

## APPENDICES

### *Appendix I: Interview Guide #1*

#### I. Brief bio + student life:

(Ice breaker: first name history/origin?)

1. Tell me a little about you and how you came to study to UNC.
2. How would you describe to one of your friends who does not attend UNC your experience at UNC as a Latino?
3. Can you identify any key moments or events you have experienced or witnessed here, at UNC, that have influenced your sense of identity, how you see yourself in relation to other students in general?

#### II. Media Diet (media might range from a print magazine to the Internet to your cell phone):

1. What types of media do you consume/use on a regular basis? Use the most?
2. From a media perspective, what would a typical week look like?
3. Can you recall specific shows or readings from your childhood or tween and teen years that have marked you more than others (watch read on a regular basis, family or social activity, etc...)?
4. Is there a particular person (real or fictive) that you use to see or read about that you particularly identified with? This person could have been a character in a television show, movie or novel, a public figure, etc...

5. Can you recall any particular media images that have really marked you and might have shape the way you think about a particular issue or topic?
6. Do you think that your experience with media is similar to somebody else's experience?

III. Media and others (some of the same questions as above, but focused on other students):

1. According to you, what types of media do other Latino and Latina students consume/use on a regular basis? Use the most?
2. What about other students?
3. Do you think there are some race-specific media consumption habits?
4. Can you think about any particular media images that might have marked other Latino and Latina students?
5. What about other students?

IV. Transition: You are participating in this study because you belong to a Latino organization.

1. Would you say that you "look" Latino? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that people classify you as a Latino as soon as they see you? Why or why not?
3. Can you recall instances in which you have passed for a non-Latino?
4. Can you think of any potential situation where you would benefit from passing for a non-Latino?

V. Media portrayal:

1. How do you perceive media portrayal of Latina/os?

2. How do you perceive media portrayal of other racial group (minorities and whites)?
3. How would portray Latina/os in the media?

## *Appendix II: Interview Guide #2*

Follow-up questions from first interview and brief recap about participant's answers to the first interview, especially how he perceived media to portray different racial groups.

### VI. Influence of media on others (perceptions):

1. Do you think these media portrayals of Latinos might affect people's perceptions of Latinos in general? How so?
2. Do you think these media portrayals of Latinos might affect other students' perceptions of Latino students? How so?
3. Do you think these media portrayals of Latinos might affect professors' perceptions of Latinos students? How so?
4. Do you think there is a difference between whites and racial minorities regarding perceptions of Latinos?
5. What about you? How do you think these media portrayal affect the way other people (students, professors, etc...) perceive you?

### VII. Influence of media on you:

1. How do these media portrayals of Latinos might affect your self-perception, self-esteem?
2. How do these media portrayals of Latinos might affect your academic goal development?
3. How do these media portrayals of Latinos might affect your interactions/relationships with other students?
4. How do these media portrayals of Latinos might affect your interactions/relationships with other professors?



5. Do you think there is a difference in your interactions/relationships with whites and racial minorities?
6. How do these media portrayals of Latinos might affect your overall college experience?

#### VIII. Being Latino:

1. Do you think that being Latino makes your experience at UNC different from that of other non-Latino students? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that your experience at UNC is typical of that of a Latino male student? Why or why not?
3. Do you (sometimes) feel you need to behave in a certain way based on media portrayal of Latina/os? What about in the classroom or at student events or gatherings? Why or why not?
4. Would a different media representation of Latina/o affect your everyday experience at UNC? How so?

### *Appendix III: Interview Guide #3*

Follow-up questions from previous interview.

1. Would you have talked about yourself in the same way prior to coming to UNC? How would it have been different?
2. How would you describe your experiences in high school?
3. Can you recall discussing media shows or images with your parents?
4. Can you recall discussing media stereotypes of Latina/os with your parents?
5. What rules or restrictions did your parents have for using media?
6. Interracial interactions (students, professors and staff)!

#### I. Trust

1. Do you feel that UNC treats Latino students fairly and justly? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe that, when making important decisions, UNC keeps the needs of Latino students in mind? Why or why not?
3. How much can you trust UNC to keep its promises? How so?
4. Do you feel that UNC seeks the opinion of Latino students before making important decisions? If so, how much weight does it give to these opinions?
5. UNC diversity mission is: “to build and sustain an inclusive campus community and to foster a welcoming climate that values and respects all members of the University community”? To what extent does UNC accomplishes such mission? Please explain.

#### II. Control Mutuality

1. How much attention do you pay to statements and announcements by UNC administrators? For example, statements by the provost or the chancellor?
2. Do you feel that UNC is attentive to what Latino students have to say? Why or why not?
3. How do you think UNC sees the opinions of Latino students?
4. How much influence do you think Latino students have on the decisions UNC administrators make?

### III. Commitment

1. Do you think that UNC works hard to build a long-term relationship with Latino students? How so?
2. How do you feel about your relationship with UNC?
3. How loyal do you feel to UNC? Please explain.

### IV. Satisfaction:

1. How important do think Latino students are to UNC?
2. How much do Latino students benefit from their relationship with UNC?
3. How would you characterize the relationship UNC has built with Latino students?
4. How happy are you with UNC?

### V. Communal Relationships

1. How concerned would you say UNC is about the well-being of Latino students?
2. Do you feel that UNC takes advantage, in any way, of Latino students? What about other minority students?
3. Do you feel that UNC expects something in return for helping Latino students? How so?
4. Would you say that UNC is imposing its way on Latino students? Why or why not?

### VI. Exchange Relationships

5. Do you think that whenever UNC gives or offer something to Latino students it expects something in return? How so?
6. Do you think that UNC takes better care of students who are likely to reward the university?

### VII. Media representation of Latinos

1. Do you think that the media portrayals of Latinos might affect UNC administrators' perceptions of Latino students? How so?
2. How do you think that the media portrayal of Latinos affect the quality of the relationship between UNC and Latino students?

#### *Appendix IV: Interview Guide #4*

##### I. Brief bio + student life:

1. Tell me a little about you and how you came to study to UNC-Chapel Hill.
2. Would you have talked about yourself in the same way prior to coming to UNC? How would it have been different?
3. How would you describe your experiences in high school?
4. How would you describe your experiences at UNC to a friend who does not attend this university?
5. Can you identify any key moments or events you have experienced or witnessed at UNC that have influenced your sense of identity?
6. How do you see yourself in relation to other UNC students in general?

##### II. Media Diet (media might range from a print magazine to the Internet to your cell phone):

1. What media do you consume/use on a regular basis? Use the most?
2. From a media perspective, what would a typical week look like?
3. Can you recall specific shows, songs or readings from your childhood and teen years that influenced you more than others (watch read on a regular basis, family or social activity, etc...)?
4. Can you recall any particular media images that have really influenced you and might have shaped the way you think about a particular issue or topic?
5. Can you recall discussing media shows or images with your parents?
6. Can you recall discussing media stereotypes of Latina/os with your parents?
7. What rules or restrictions did your parents have for using media?

III. Transition: You are participating in this study because you are Latino.

1. Would you say that you “look” Latino? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of any potential situation where you would benefit from passing for a non-Latino?
3. What was your image of Latina/os before you came to UNC?
4. Has it changed since you’ve been here? How so?

V. Media portrayal:

1. Can you describe to me how Latina/os are portrayed in the media?
2. Can you describe to me how other racial/ethnic groups are portrayed in the media?
3. If you could change anything about the media portrayal of racial minorities in general, and of Latina/os in particular, what would you change?

VI. Influence of media on others (perceptions):

1. In what ways do you think media portrayal of Latinos affect people’s perceptions of Latinos?
2. In what ways do you think media portrayal of Latinos affect white students’ perceptions of Latino students?
3. In what ways do you think media portrayal of Latinos affect racial minority students’ perceptions of Latino students?
4. In what ways do you think media portrayal of Latinos affect white professors’ perceptions of Latino students?

5. In what ways do you think media portrayal of Latinos affect racial minority professors' perceptions of Latinos students?
6. What about you? In what ways do you think media portrayal of Latinos affect the way other people on campus (students, professors, etc...) perceive you?

VII. Influence of media on you:

1. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your self-perception, self-esteem?
2. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your academic goal development?
3. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your interactions/relationships with white students?
4. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your interactions/relationships with racial minority students?
5. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your interactions/relationships with white professors?
6. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your interactions/relationships with racial minority professors?
7. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your interactions/relationships with white staff members, such as administrators and advisors?
8. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your interactions/relationships with racial minority staff members?

9. In what ways do you think media portrayals of Latinos affect your overall college experience?

#### VIII. Being Latino:

1. Do you think that your experience at UNC is typical of that of a Latino male student?  
Why or why not? If not, how might it be different for other Latino students?
2. Do you sometimes feel you need to behave in a certain way based on media portrayal of Latina/os? What about in the classroom or at student events or gatherings? Why or why not?
3. Would a different media portrayal of Latino affect your everyday experience at UNC?  
How so?

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