Enhancing First-Generation MSFW Students' Sense of Belonging

and Retention Through Peer Mentorship

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Approved April 2021 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2021

ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in enrollment of first-generation college students at four-year institutions, this student population was more than twice as likely to drop out before their sophomore year compared to their non-first-generation peers. Specifically, a subgroup of first-generation college students that has been identified as greatly disadvantaged yet received little attention in the literature are those from migrant and seasonal farm worker (MSFW) backgrounds. The unique educational needs and risk factors of these students demand that postsecondary institutions develop resources and support services in an effort to better serve them. While the literature identified co-curricular involvement as a factor contributing to the sense of belonging and retention of college students, it failed to acknowledge the unique experiences of minoritized and/or marginalized student populations. This study introduced and supported the argument that merely offering involvement opportunities did not work for this student population, and suggested that institutional agents who interacted or worked closely with them had to facilitate validating conversations and build close relationships early on to encourage co-curricular involvement. The innovation supported first-generation MSFW students' participation and engagement in conversations and activities in an effort to help enrich their experiences, and enhance their overall sense of belonging and college retention. The innovation demonstrated the many benefits stemming from first-generation MSFW students' participation in a peer mentor program, and allowed for collection of feedback in an effort to better serve this student population. Further, based on the results of this study, the innovation may have positive impacts on the sense of belonging and college retention of first-generation MSFW students.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends who not once doubted my ability to pursue a doctoral degree. A mis padres que trabajaron día y noche para poder brindarnos la oportunidad de estudiar en los Estados Unidos, admiro y agradezco desde el fondo de mi corazón cada uno de sus esfuerzos y sacrificios. Sin duda alguna no estuviera cumpliendo este sueño si no fuera por ustedes. Gracias por siempre recordarnos que el cielo es el limite, y que el que quiere, puede. A mi hermano mayor Adrian por impulsarme a pensar en grande y no conformarme. A mi hermana Melissa por enseñarme que la paciencia y gentileza lo es todo. A mi hermana Ximena por deslúmbranos con su inteligencia y disciplina, y por motivarme a seguir avanzando. Ustedes son la razón por la cual seguí estudiando; espero haber sido un buen ejemplo.

A mi gente del campo y a mis estudiantes, no me canso de decirlo, gracia por ser mi inspiración mas grande. Ustedes son la definición de perseverancia y trabajo duro. Cada uno de ustedes ha contribuido a la persona que soy el día de hoy. Son grandes; nunca dejen que nadie les diga lo contrario, y siempre recuerden que ¡Si Se Puede!

Mabel, no tengo palabras para agradecer el apoyo incondicional que me proporcionas diariamente. Tu sabes mejor que nadie lo mucho que te quiero y admiro hermana. Gracias por siempre recordarme lo que valgo. My good friend TJ, I was not joking when I said I would include your name here. Thank you for being there for me when I was at my lowest. I don't know what I would have done without you in 2019.

Por ultimo, a mi tía Lupita por haber sido la primera de nuestra familia en obtener un doctorado. Te admiro y respeto con todo mi corazón. Thank you for paving the way for us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to start by thanking Dean Basile, Dean Aska, and Dr. O'Connor for their unconditional support throughout this journey. Your guidance, feedback, and words of encouragement have led me to where I am today. Your willingness to share your time and expertise is admirable and very much appreciated. You have all challenged me to become a better practitioner and scholar, and for that I am eternally grateful. Thank you for leading with patience and kindness; the completion of my degree would have not been possible without your constant guidance and support.

Dr. Suzuki and Dr. Albert, thank you for motivating me to pursue a doctoral degree. You both saw something in me that I did not; I will never forget your kind and inspiring words.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my CAMP familia, Dr. Seline Szkupinski Quiroga and Victoria Villalba. Thank you both for being great role models, and for always looking out for me. Let's keep doing great work.

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CHAPTER 1

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

The difficulty lies not so much in developing
new ideas as in escaping from old ones.
~ John Maynard Keynes

In 1990, the United States had the highest college graduation rate among 25 – 34

year olds in the world. Today, it ranks among the lowest in terms of college attainment;

although more than half of college students graduate within six years, the completion rate

for low-income students has been about 25 percent (Castro & Coen-Pirani, 2016).

According to former President Barack Obama, earning a college degree is no longer a

pathway to opportunity for the few; rather, it is a requirement for anyone wishing to enter

today's competitive workforce. Jobs requiring more than a high school diploma will

soon have outgrown jobs that do not; in fact, more than half of the 30 fastest growing

occupations require a college degree (Fry, 2017). With this in mind, President Obama

introduced the 2020 North Star Goal in 2014, calling all postsecondary institutions in the

nation for a united effort to help increase college completion rates, and lead the world in

college graduates by 2020 (Duncan, 2010).

The number of first-generation college students enrolled in postsecondary

institutions has grown dramatically over the past three decades, and has ranged from 22

to 47 percent (Choy, 2001). Interestingly, despite the increase in enrollment, first-

generation college students were more than twice as likely than their non-first-generation

peers to drop out of four-year institutions before their sophomore year (Pascarella,

Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2004; Choy, 2001). Among first-generation college

students who persisted, roughly 90 percent failed to graduate within six years; results suggested that this student population had a harder time transitioning and integrating to college than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Moreover, lack of awareness and knowledge regarding higher education interfered with their parents' ability to provide support and guidance, inadvertently affecting students' retention and overall undergraduate experiences (Boden, 2011).

The most widely used definition of first-generation college students has been those whose parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) have not obtained a college education (Federal TRIO Programs, n.d.). More recently, higher education professionals have used a stricter definition to describe first-generation college students; that is, those for whom neither parent and/or legal guardian attended a postsecondary institution. This distinction has been useful because the number of first-generation college students identified at institutions or in research studies has varied substantially based on the definition used (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). These definitions were also important because students identified being the first to attend college as a barrier affecting their integration and completion (Choy, 2001).

As enrollment of first-generation college students has increased, scholars have paid more attention to their experiences, specifically to the ways in which they have, and continue to pave their way through postsecondary education. Nonetheless, a subgroup of first-generation college students that has been described as greatly disadvantaged yet received little attention in the literature are those from migrant and seasonal farm worker (MSFW) backgrounds (Araujo, 2011). Although educational attainment within this population remains low, there has been a slight increase in the number of first-generation

MSFW students enrolling in a postsecondary education since 2005 (Willison & Jang, 2009). Nonetheless, very few scholars have studied the educational experiences of MSFW students in university settings; most of the research has focused on challenges facing this student population as well as educational gaps while in high school (Bejarano & Valverde, 2012). The choice of focusing on first-generation MSFW students in CAMP for this study derived from the lack of literature surrounding this student population in higher education.

While little is known about their college experiences, scholars have found that first-generation MSFW students experience various risk factors that decrease their probability of staying and succeeding in college (Nora, 2003). Many MSFW students drop out of college due to economic concerns as many have to work to help support their families financially (Tucker, 2000). Additional barriers include culture shock and acculturative stress as college campuses often fail to reflect the cultural experiences of this student population (Anaya & Cole, 2003). While farmworker families understand the importance of education in improving students' chances of leaving farm work for other occupations with higher earnings and better socioeconomic status, low retention in higher education remains a problem for MSFW students (Green, 2003). The unique educational needs of first-generation MSFW students and risk factors they face demand that postsecondary institutions develop resources and support services in an effort to better serve this student population (Zalaquett, McHatton, & Cranston-Gingras, 2007).

To assist in overcoming first-generation MSFW students' obstacles and increase the retention and college completion of this student population, Arizona State University (ASU) introduced the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) in 2016. One of the

overarching goals of CAMP was to provide educational and support services to eligible MSFW students during their first year of college. A cohort-style program, CAMP recruited and served MSFW students by providing a wide range of support services including academic advising, professional development opportunities, assistance with the application process, and tutoring. The program also strived to serve as a support system by fostering formal and informal interactions between students, educators, and their campus community; this was based on the premise that being part of a social network on campus enhanced students' sense of belonging, which contributed to their retention (Torres & Solberg, 2001).

Among the many services provided by CAMP was the peer mentor program, which was developed and established to facilitate conversations between first-year and second-year CAMP students about several topics including financial literacy, time management, academics, co-curricular activities, etc. One of the goals of the peer mentor program was to help enhance first-generation MSFW students' sense of belonging and assist with retention as many students reported a low sense of belonging. In fact, from winter of 2019 to spring of 2020, three freshmen from Cohort 4 withdrew from ASU; when asked to share what influenced their decision, all three students expressed not feeling like they belonged at ASU due to lack of friendships and/or community on campus. Out of the three students, one of them withdrew from ASU and enrolled at Arizona Western College (AWC) in Yuma, the other went back home to Yuma and enrolled in online classes at ASU, and the third student gave ASU a second chance.

Retention within the CAMP program has varied significantly per academic year, with several factors influencing students' decision to withdraw from the institution

including, but not limited to, homesickness, depression, changes in family circumstances, and a lack of a sense of belonging. During the first year of the grant, fifteen students were recruited; although the program's objective was to enroll 20 students in year one and 35 each subsequent year, the program failed to meet its numbers due to lack of awareness around the program. Other challenges or factors preventing MSFW students from enrolling into CAMP included, but were not limited to financial barriers, lack of college knowledge, distance from home to university, fear of separation from family members, and family obligations and responsibilities.

Retention for all student populations has been a complicated issue, and for minoritized students, it has been vastly impacted by various factors including environmental, involvement, personal, and sociocultural factors (Hernandez & Lopez, 2007). Although enrolling students in postsecondary institutions does not guarantee that they will confer a degree, those who entered their 2nd year of college were more likely to graduate. Nonetheless, retention beyond students' first year has been, and continues to be a crucial standard for many postsecondary institutions, including ASU. Under the New American University model, ASU is committed to enhancing student development, and improving freshmen retention to 90 percent. These university-wide goals align with the objectives of ASU CAMP which include that at least 86% of CAMP will complete their first academic year at ASU and at least 85% of CAMP students will proceed to their 2nd year. CAMP was placed on probation after its 1st year of the grant as it did not meet the performance measure goals set by the Office of Migrant Education (OME). It was not until the 3rd year of the grant that CAMP was removed from probation as it surpassed the performance measure goals set by OME.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The low retention of first-generation MSFW students in higher education has represented a national challenge for institutional agents of postsecondary institutions. Despite the many services offered by CAMP, many first-generation MSFW students in CAMP expressed lacking a sense of belonging, which in turn led to the withdrawal of several CAMP students. A peer mentor program was implemented to enhance MSFW students' sense of belonging and retention through the facilitation of conversations between 1st year and 2nd year students. Nonetheless, findings from Cycle 1 presented additional ways in which the program could increase and better enhance their overall sense of belonging and retention.

Semi-structured interviews with several CAMP students were conducted in April of 2019 to gain a better understanding of the peer mentor program, and identify ways in which the program could help serve this student population. CAMP students also shared feedback during informal meetings and conversations. Overall, many MSFW students expressed interest in participating in co-curricular activities; although involvement opportunities were abundant on campus, many continued to lack the knowledge necessary to get involved despite it being a topic of conversation in their one-on-one meetings. Secondly, MSFW students expressed the need to engage in validating conversations with others in an effort to feel acknowledged and supported. Lastly, MSFW students shared both their need and desire to make use of other resources and services on campus (i.e., counseling, health services, etc.) but not feeling comfortable doing so. With this in mind, CAMP staff relied on the peer mentor program to help enhance their sense of belonging and college retention.

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of a peer mentor program focused on the sense of belonging and college retention of first-generation MSFW students within CAMP. A peer mentor program was implemented to provide first-generation MSFW opportunities to learn about and make use of campus resources and services, discuss goal setting as well as other topics pertinent to their sense of belonging and retention, and engage in validating conversations. The peer mentor program supported first-generation MSFW students' participation and engagement in such activities and conversations in an effort to help enrich their experiences, and enhance their overall sense of belonging and college retention. To guide the direction of the study, two research questions (RQ) were examined. Those questions have been provided below.

RQ1: How does a peer mentor program impact the belonging of first-generation MSFW students?

RQ2: How does a peer mentor program impact the retention of first-generation MSFW students?

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH GUIDING THE PROJECT

> *Every great dream begins with a great dreamer. Always*
> *remember you have within you the strength, the patience,*
> *and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.*
> *~ Harriet Tubman*

In Chapter 2, theoretical perspectives and research guiding the action research project were presented. The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of a peer mentor program focused on the sense of belonging and college retention of first-generation MSFW students within CAMP. Feedback gathered from semi-structured interviews in Cycle 1 provided ways to enhance first-generation MSFW students' sense of belonging and retention. Cycle 1 served as one of several multiple cycles of inquiry conducted throughout the doctoral program to better understand one's problem of practice. The study was guided by three theoretical frameworks including the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995), Astin (1984), and Rendón (1994). Each theoretical framework will be described in Chapter 2. Relevant studies and research related to this action research project was also discussed in Chapter 2 as well as conclusions and implications of the theoretical perspectives in relation to first-generation MSFW students' sense of belonging and college retention.

Before proceeding to the discussion of theoretical frameworks, a more comprehensive understanding of the relation between co-curricular involvement, student belonging, and retention has been provided below.

Co-curricular Involvement

Co-curricular involvement was defined as a student's participation in university or college sponsored activities and programs that happened outside the classroom experience (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012). Postsecondary institutions have provided multiple opportunities for students to become involved in campus life (i.e., student clubs and organizations, programs, and events) due to the perceived and well-known impact of co-curricular involvement on college students beyond the classroom. In fact, institutional agents have used co-curricular activities as a way to foster the growth and skill-development of students as well as enhance their sense of belonging (Lott, 2013). Extensive research has been conducted on the many benefits of co-curricular involvement, with findings demonstrating that students who were involved had higher GPAs, reported higher satisfaction with their college experience, and were more likely to attain a college degree compared to those who were not involved (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012).

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, presented in the following section, has long held that investment of both physical and psychological energy on campus created learning gains as well as other benefits for students. Further, he contended that co-curricular involvement bolstered student belonging, which resulted in retention. In other words, involved students felt part of, and more connected to their institution, which in turn led to higher retention. The following formula was provided to illustrate the notion that co-curricular involvement led to student belonging, which contributed to retention:
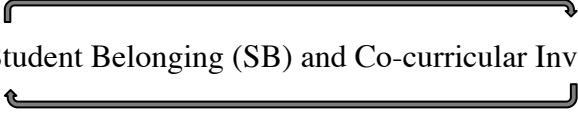
Co-curricular Involvement (CI) = Student Belonging (SB) = Retention (R)

While Astin made the case that co-curricular involvement led to student belonging and retention, he failed to consider and acknowledge the unique experiences of minoritized and/or marginalized student populations. The degree to which students from diverse backgrounds felt connected or complacent with an institution varied significantly on their previous experiences. For example, if a student witnessed biases or discrimination at some point in his or her undergraduate careers, the likelihood of him or her participating in co-curricular activities decreased substantially as the student may have opted to isolate himself or herself from others. Further, Lundberg (2007) contended that the assumption that minoritized students had to participate in co-curricular activities at predominantly White institutions was an overwhelming and intimidating event. He argued that such assumption failed to consider that minoritized students may have been negatively impacted by the dominant culture prior to their college enrollment. For first-generation MSFW students, participation in co-curricular activities presented complications as many had additional obligations that prevented them from achieving their full academic and/or social potential, such as part-time jobs to help support themselves and/or family, frequent travel to visit family and/or take care of siblings and other loved ones, etc. (Kindler, 1995).

Thus, Rendón (1994) contended that active intervention of institutional agents in the form of validation was required to encourage first-generation and minoritized students to get involved in campus life, enhance their sense of belonging, and contribute to their retention. According to Rendón, validation was a process rather than an end goal,

as she found that as students were validated, they felt more comfortable interacting and engaging with their campus community, enhancing levels of student belonging as well as retention. She also made the argument that validation resulted in sense of belonging as it nourished their self-worth by reaffirming the idea that they brought wealth of knowledge and experience to their institution.

As such, Rendón (1994) argued that merely offering involvement opportunities did not work for first-generation or minoritized students, and suggested that institutional agents who interacted or worked closely with these students had to facilitate validating conversations and build close relationships early on to encourage co-curricular involvement. Thus, the argument was made that validation must first occur in order for minoritized students to feel comfortable enough to engage in campus life and participate in co-curricular activities. The following formula was created by the researcher to illustrate this idea:

Validation (V) + Student Belonging (SB) and Co-curricular Involvement (CI) =

Retention (R)

Participation in the peer mentor program translated to co-curricular involvement as it provided first-generation MSFW students multiple opportunities to engage in validating conversations and develop constant and ongoing relationships with institutional agents, learn about and make use of campus resources and services, and set

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goals to name a few. Further, the peer mentor program served as a mechanism by which validation was provided to enhance first-generation MSFW students' sense of belonging and increase their awareness and utilization of campus resources and services, with the goal of retention. As seen in the formula, student belonging and co-curricular involvement were depicted as interchangeable factors as student belonging led to co-curricular involvement and conversely, co-curricular involvement enhanced student belonging, with both contributing to retention.

Peer mentorship. Given the well-established benefits of student belonging and its impact on retention, institutional agents have contemplated a variety of programs and support services that help foster belonging and retention. Research on participation in clubs and student organizations, for example, demonstrated that students who were more involved in college life had a stronger connection with others on campus, and a greater sense of belonging compared to those who were less involved (Strayhorn, 2012). In addition to clubs and student organizations, peer mentoring programs have been viewed as a means of fostering students' relationships with supportive and validating peers in an effort to enhance their sense of belonging and retention. Given the value of peer mentoring that has been acknowledged in the literature and practice, postsecondary institutions have established peer mentorship programs as a means of increasing student involvement, belonging, and retention (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

The idea of learning and education derived from peer mentorship has developed in importance over the past decade, with many studies demonstrating the positive benefits of peer education in several areas including, but not limited to student belonging, social and emotional development (Harmon, 2006), and higher retention rates (Potts, Schultz, &

Foust, 2003). Specifically, participating in peer mentoring programs provided mentees access to information on campus resources and support services, fostered subject-area and academic skill development, created social connections, and increased retention (Glaser, Hall, &. Halerpin, 2006; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2010; Yomtov et al., 2015). Further, peer mentoring was found to contribute to their decision to persist and advance to their second year (Glaser et al., 2006). In a study conducted by Chester et al. (2013), more than 50% of mentees shared that the peer mentor program helped them feel like they belonged, and suggested that proactive interventions from institutional agents in their first semester enhanced crucial aspects of learning and involvement.

The development of validating and trusting relationships between mentors and mentees, even outside of the formalized bounds of the peer mentoring program increased students' belonging as well as connectedness with their campus community (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). One study characterized mentors as a "connecting link" as they helped students get involved with both their campus and education (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 125). For first-year students, minoritized, and vulnerable student populations, the benefits of belonging were of significant importance. Participation in peer mentor programs lowered barriers for minoritized students, enhancing their feelings of belongingness (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Specifically, peer mentoring helped by facilitating relationships for mentees with someone who had already gained experience in navigating unknown territory (Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). Minoritized students must be made aware of the availability as well as benefits of campus resources and support

services in order for them to make use of these services, as another study found that were

less likely to participate compared to their peers (Budge, 2006).

Further, the role that peer mentoring had on first-generation college students was

partly based on both quality characteristics and opportunities that helped foster

relationship building, specifically in the design of programming where peer mentors were

paired with mentees. As mentioned in Irby (2014), mentoring served as a means to help

support the creation of meaningful developmental relationships, promoting student well-

being as well as a wide range of competencies (i.e., social, personal, civic, and

academic). When participation was encouraged and highlighted among peer mentors and

mentees, there existed potential for the development of ongoing significant relationships

that helped bolster student growth (Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2012). This has most

certainly been the case when assessing the effects of peer mentoring programs on student

experiences, as many students attributed their positive outcomes and successes to the

mentoring provided by their peer mentors (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014).

According to Nora and Crisp (2007 – 2008), there existed three domains that

established the multidimensional foundation of effective peer mentoring programs for

college students. This framework was tested among 200 students, with findings

identifying the following three constructs as statistically reliable within peer mentoring

experience: 1) psychological and/or emotional support, 2) goal setting and/or career path

development, and 3) academic subject support. It was concluded that peer mentoring

programs aiming to assist students in their transition to college as well as fully participate

in both the classroom experience and co-curricular activities must intentionally provide

the support delineated by these three dimensions.

Psychological/emotional support, goal setting/career path development, and academic subject support were used by Ward, Thomas, and Disch (2010) to develop a peer mentor program and evaluate its impact upon student development, belonging, and retention. All participants engaged in a goal setting and monitoring activity, which served as the primary task of the peer mentor program. Mentors and mentees met weekly for 90 minutes to discuss goals and monitor progress, and address mentees' strengths, areas of improvement, challenges, and needs. Further, mentors facilitated validating conversations, encouraging and supporting mentees in their pursuit of academic, social connectedness, and personal well-being goals. Examples of academic goals included earning a passing grade in a class, studying at least 10 hours per week, using tutoring services, etc. Social connectedness included actively planning to develop and maintain healthy relationships with friends, family, etc. Lastly, mentors helped mentees identify and access campus resources and services that would support goal attainment. This relationship, which was both personal and validating in nature, was the core of this peer mentor program.

Ward et al. (2010) conducted a study to assess the impact of the peer mentor program on student development, belonging and retention, and found that minoritized students experienced greater academic and social connectedness as a result of their participation. They also found that peer-mentored students persisted at higher rates compared to their non-peer-mentored peers. Further, they contended that the most effective peer mentoring programs were those that were holistic in nature, and that provided psychological and emotional support, goal setting, and academic subject support. The validating and supportive relationships established between participants

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during the peer mentor program served as a powerful intervention that embodied and enhanced a sense of belonging and retention.

Most studies presented above conceptualized mentoring as a constant and ongoing relationship between a supportive and more experienced individual and an inexperienced individual, where guidance, validation, and encouragement was provided by mentors to enhance student development. Activities facilitated within these peer mentor programs ranged from weekly meetings and social networking activities to journaling and goal setting. The CAMP peer mentor program was modeled after ASU's First Year Success Center's peer coaching program, which was informed by Nora and Crisp's (2007 - 2008) conceptual framework. As such, psychological and emotional support were provided in the peer mentor program by CAMP peer mentors, and goal setting and academic subject knowledge was formalized to the extent to which it was a consistent topic of conversation during their 1:1 meetings.

Further, feedback collected from CAMP students during Cycle 1 provided ways in which the peer mentor program could help meet the needs of this population. As mentioned, many MSFW students expressed interest in co-curricular involvement; although involvement opportunities were abundant on campus, many students expressed not having the knowledge necessary to get involved despite it being a topic of conversation in their meetings. Secondly, MSFW students expressed the need to engage in validating conversations with others in an effort to feel acknowledged and supported. Lastly, MSFW students shared both their need and desire to make use of other resources and services on campus (i.e., counseling, health services, etc.) but not feeling comfortable

doing so. As such, recommendations were implemented, and the peer mentor program assisted in meeting the needs of this population.

Due to the unique challenges faced by first-generation MSFW students, a peer mentor program tailored around their experiences and needs was crucial to the success and development of this student population. Through constant support, ongoing interactions, and validating conversations, first-generation MSFW students were reassured about their decision to go to college and ability to succeed. Further, they discussed topics pertinent to their sense of belonging and retention, and were informed about campus resources and services they were unaware of and could benefit from. The fact that peer mentors shared similar characteristics with mentees (i.e., first-generation status, raised in the same area, etc.) was extremely valuable as mentees not only felt better understood and acknowledged but also viewed their mentors as role models.

Retention. Although the terms "persistence" and "retention" have been used interchangeably in the literature, the National Center for Education Statistics differentiated these two by utilizing "persistence" as a student measure and "retention" as an institutional measure; in other words, students persisted while postsecondary institutions retained (Seidman, 2012). Another term commonly utilized with retention is "attrition," defined as the decrease in number of students resulting from lower student retention. For the purposes of this action research study, retention was defined as the continued enrollment of a student from the first to the second year, and so on (Upcraft et al, 2005; Cotton et al., 2017).

Student retention has been crucial to the success of postsecondary institutions as the highest levels of attrition has typically been from year one to year two (Achinewhu-

Nworgu, 2017). Although student attrition has been a critical issue in higher education, the majority of theories around student retention were developed during the early 1970s, and have since been revisited and revised (Tinto, 2007; Tudor, 2018). While theoretical models of student retention have disagreed on how different variables interact with and influence one another, the literature has made it clear that when students' sense of belonging increases, their likelihood of advancing from year one to year two increases (Upcract et al., 2005; Logan, 2017; Olbrecht, 2016).

With this in mind, the American Council on Education (ACE) developed a report outlining a specific plan for institutional success in minoritized student retention which included mentoring for students as well as constant validation and involvement of minoritized institutional agents. Research also reported that co-curricular involvement increased retention as it helped foster sense of belonging and made students feel part of their campus community (Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfe, 1986; Tinto, 1997). In fact, co-curricular involvement was found to be more impactful on the retention of students from minoritized or underrepresented groups than that of their peers (Bowman & Culber, 2019; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Mosholder et al., 2016). In examining how sense of belonging and retention was impacted by co-curricular involvement in both academic and non-academic experiences for minoritized students, Rendón (1994) argued that this student population needed active intervention from others to help them negotiate institutional life. Further, she argued that belonging and retention during their first year was contingent upon whether students got involved in institutional life and whether institutional agents validated them in an interpersonal and academic manner.

Impact. The literature defined the term "impact" as the extent to which a program generated or caused a change in an outcome. The distinction between the terms "outcome" and "impact" must be acknowledged as these terms have been often used interchangeably; while they have been identified as closely related concepts, their meanings were distinct. Unlike "impact," the term "outcome" involved any social, environment or economic benefit that a policy or program aimed to maintain or improve in some way, shape or form.

Impact measurement has gone a step beyond the measurement of outcomes as it attributes the extent to which a program created a change in an outcome. When measuring the impact of a program, it must be acknowledged that it is not always apparent or obvious that the results observed are actually the products of the interventions imposed (Lance, Guilkey, Hattori, and Angeles, 2014). Thus, when looking to understand a program's impact, simply measuring changing outcomes is not sufficient. Researchers must find a way to compare what occurred, with what would have occurred; in other words, compare factual and counterfactual scenarios. The challenge of impact measurement was finding ways to reconstruct what would have happened or occurred in the absence of a program in an effort to compare those two scenarios, and determine impact.

Theoretical Perspectives

Abend (2008) discussed the value of theories when he said,

To put it another way, what theories offer is an original 'interpretation,' 'reading,' or 'way of making sense of a certain slice of the empirical world. They may shed

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new light on an empirical problem, help one understand some social process, or reveal what 'really' went on in a certain conjuncture (p. 178).

The overarching work of this study is based on a theoretical framework that intersects Baumeister and Leary's theory of belonging (1995), Astin's student involvement theory (1984), and Rendón's validation theory (1994). Collectively, the theoretical perspectives on belongingness and validation suggested that first-generation college students benefited significantly from constant and ongoing relationships with peers and institutional agents, specifically those who facilitated validating conversations. A peer mentor program enabled the development of such relationships as it facilitated constant and ongoing interactions as well as validating conversations between mentors and mentees. Further, the peer mentor program provided opportunities to discuss topics pertinent to their sense of belonging and retention as well as learn about and make use of campus resources and services. As such, Astin's student involvement theory provided a means to examine more closely the impact behind a peer mentor program on the sense of belonging and retention of first-generation MSFW students.

The following section includes a description of each theoretical framework as well as studies and research relevant to this action research project. Conclusions and implications of the theoretical perspectives were also discussed, and terms critical to the action research project were defined in the context of the study.

Theory of Belonging

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995) individuals needed to establish and maintain constant interactions with ongoing relational bonds. Thus, they were inclined to form positive and ongoing relationships with others, which resulted in the idea that

belongingness was considered to be a vital human motivation. Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified the following criteria as requirements to satisfy the need to establish these types of relationships: (a) regular and meaningful interactions with a small network of individuals and (b) interactions occurring in a stable and lasting framework. Motivation to belong led individuals to engage in an active cultivation of relationships and establish long-term bonds; among these relationships, there existed a certain level of reciprocity where mutual care, validation, and concern was displayed.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) also argued that a lack of support networks typically resulted in individuals experiencing increased levels of stress, isolation, depression, and anxiety, whereas a supportive network served as a motivator when individuals faced these feelings. Further, individuals sought and cultivated relationships until they reached the desired level of contact (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It was emphasized that repeated interactions with a specified individual were preferred over repeated interactions with multiple individuals. Heavily influenced by Baumeister and Leary's (1995) work on belonging, Strayhorn (2012) identified a sense of belonging as a fundamental need; however, he added to this theory by looking solely at its function within the fields of higher education and student involvement. He defined sense of belonging as "...students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus" (p. 3). He argued that sense of belonging positively affected academic achievement, persistence, and retention; conversely, students who did not feel valued and/or part of their campus community

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struggled to develop and maintain academic engagement and commitment. Lack of sense of belonging led students to marginalization, alienation, depression, or dropping out.

Sense of belonging in college is a result of what Strayhorn (2012) described as 'mattering.' Such feeling is reflected in the sense that it mattered to institutional agents on campus whether a student attended class, completed classes, or was a valued member of campus groups and peers. If a student mattered, s/he became valued to others and was more likely to maintain the bonds through persistence and retention, even in difficult situations. This was especially true for students from populations on the social margins who had mentors, close friends or faculty with whom they had bonded. Lastly, Strayhorn (2012) argued that social identities intersected and affected students' overall sense of belonging; in many cases, social identities were even more difficult for some students to construct due to the multiplicity of such identities.

Strayhorn (2012) also contended that among minoritized students, there existed an emergent need to belong and establish what he described as a "fictive kin;" that is, family-like relationships with other individuals on campus. Further, as mentioned in Turcios-Cotto and Milan (2013), values of familismo played a crucial role in the educational experiences and degree attainment of many Latino/a students. Familismo was defined as one's belief in strong family ties, where the family not only serves as the underlying source of support and loyalty but typically takes precedence over personal ambitions (Halgunseth et al., 2006). Such belief has had implications on the children of Latino/a communities wanting to leave home as adults. In fact, many Latino/a students who went off to pursue higher education had more difficulty adjusting to life away from their family due to the fact that family served as their primary source of support (Kenny

& Stryker, 1996). As such, students needed a reassuring sense that there was someone on campus who would support them and miss them if they did not attend class or dropped out of college (Strayhorn, 2012).

Studies based on theory of belonging. According to Hausman et. al (2007), students' sense of belonging was found to predict their intentions to persist and remain in college, controlling for background variables as well as other predictors of persistence and retention. These factors were critical for first-generation college students given the ongoing concerns about attrition and persistence issues for this student population. In a study conducted by Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman (2014), findings indicated that first-generation college students tended to report lower ratings of belonging, greater levels of stress and depression, and lower use of student services compared to their peers. Further, another study found that, the stronger the self-perceived sense of belonging to a community or campus, the greater the likelihood to thrive and succeed. This was especially true for first-generation college students and other underserved populations (Jehangir, 2010).

Interventions based on the concept of belongingness offered an effective approach to addressing student needs (Crockett, 2017). Further, Walton and Cohen (2011) also stated that interventions based on social belonging resulted in many benefits. For first-year, first-generation college students, the transition from a familiar environment and an established group of friends in high school typically resulted in a negative experience when faced with a new environment. Conversely, students who felt more confident and assured of their belonging were more likely to initiate social interactions and relationships on campus, enhancing their sense of belonging and further benefiting their

wellbeing, health, and performance (Walton & Cohen, 2011). In the case of many

MSFW students, surrogate campus family played a crucial role in Latino/a students

developing identity, a sense of belonging, and the foundation for academic success in

college (Mendoza, Hart, & Whitney, 2011). The notion of *familismo* or surrogate

campus family was extended to Latino/a peers within campus student groups, such as

student clubs or organizations where students found peer support and cultivated

motivation to graduate (Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013).

Student Involvement Theory

Astin's (1984) student involvement theory has played a crucial role in the world

of higher education. It has been described as one of the strongest pieces of evidence for

co-curricular involvement and identified as a leading theory in guiding the development

of retention strategies on college campuses (Grier-Reid, Madyun, and Buckley, 2008). In

his theory of student involvement, Astin (1984) discussed the importance of co-curricular

involvement in college, and how desired outcomes of postsecondary institutions were

viewed in relation to students' involvement. The core concepts of this theory were

composed of the following three elements: inputs, environment, and outputs. Inputs

included educational characteristics, demographic variables, and previous experiences

students brought with them to college that influenced educational outcomes. Their

environment accounted for all factors related to students' experiences while in college

including, but not limited to their interactions with other students, faculty, and staff

members, co-curricular involvement, classroom environment, and so on. Astin perceived

environment as the most important of the three elements as it was what higher education

professionals influenced the most. Lastly, there were outputs or outcomes, which resulted from, and were vastly influenced by both inputs and environment, and included skills, knowledge, and behaviors acquired throughout students' undergraduate careers.

Further, Astin (1984) developed five predictors regarding co-curricular involvement. First, he claimed involvement required investment of both physical and psychosocial energy, whether it was participating in a student organization meeting or engaging in meaningful conversations with other students at campus events. Second, involvement occurred along a continuum, and the amount of energy invested varied substantially among students. Third, involvement had both quantitative and qualitative features (i.e., number of hours spent in a student organization were best measured quantitatively while the benefits resulting from such involvement were best measured qualitatively). Fourth, the amount of learning and personal development students acquired from participating in activities or programs was directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in such activities or programs. Lastly, Astin argued that the overall effectiveness of any practice or policy was directly associated with the capacity of such practices or policy to enhance student involvement. With this in mind, he contended that almost every significant effect on both student persistence and retention could be rationalized around the involvement concept. In other words, students who participated in co-curricular activities were more likely to remain enrolled compared to those who did not participate. He also noted that higher levels of co-curricular involvement were associated with a greater sense of belonging. Although Astin's student involvement theory has been extremely popular, and identified as one of the most commonly used models of student success in the field of higher education, its relevance

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to minoritized students has been challenged (Grier-Reid, Madyun, and Buckley, 2008). Such challenges were presented later in this chapter.

Studies based on student involvement theory. Several studies have examined the role and importance of co-curricular involvement in the success of first-generation students, with most results demonstrating that the more involved students were in both the social and academic aspects of campus life, the more social, personal and learning development they demonstrated (Huang and Chang, 2004). In a study conducted by Demetriou et al. (2017), first-generation college students portrayed their participation in co-curricular activities as personally beneficial. They shared how co-curricular activities challenged them to explore their cultural identities and communities, and expressed that participating in such activities made a large campus community feel smaller.

According to Pascarella et al. (2004), first-generation students who participated in co-curricular activities gained more positive benefits from their involvement compared to their peers. Moreover, a positive correlation was found between co-curricular and academic involvement; when students' co-curricular involvement increased, their academic involvement increased as well. Some of these co-curricular activities included, but were not limited to participation in campus-wide events and student organizations, and serving as student leaders on committees. Interaction in both social and academic realms also helped students reevaluate and reaffirm their commitments to professional and educational goals (Fischer, 2007). For example, Pascarella (1985) and Kocher and Pascarella (1988) found that students who were involved on campus typically had higher educational aspirations than students who were not involved. Further, Baxter Magolda (1992) found students' involvement in co-curricular activities helped facilitate peer-to-

peer interaction, which typically enhanced the development of knowledge as well as sense of belonging.

Researchers also reported that co-curricular involvement had a positive influence on academic performance and degree attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe, 1988). In a study conducted by Bergen-Cico and Viscomi (2012), attendance of two cohorts of first-year students was tracked; cohort A consisted of students who entered in fall 2002 and cohort B consisted of those who entered in fall 2003. Over 3,000 students were tracked for eight consecutive semesters at a large four-year institution. Data on students' co-curricular involvement was collected when they used their ID cards for admission to club meetings and events implemented by the institution. Students were then placed into groups based on their co-curricular participation: low-level co-curricular involvement and mid-level co-curricular involvement. Findings demonstrated that mid-level co-curricular participants in both cohorts had significantly higher GPAs compared to their low-level co-curricular peers (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012).

As mentioned, involvement in co-curricular activities was associated with both academic achievement and engagement (Roeser and Peck, 2003). These relationships were examined using several achievement measures including GPA, as well as more subjective measures such as intrinsic motivation and sense of belonging (Fredricks and Eccles, 2010; Vandell et al., 2005). These associations were observed and examined across multiple measurements of participation, such as breadth; that is, the number of different activities students are enrolled in, and specific types of activities, such as arts or academics (Fredricks and Eccles, 2006). In addition to academic achievement, sense of

belonging was regarded as a critical academic outcome due to the fact that it was linked with several positive behaviors including academic resilience (Brown and Evans, 2002).

The positive effects of co-curricular involvement did not end at graduation. Many employers sought well-rounded graduates with high GPAs. A study conducted by Albrecht, Carpenter, and Sivo (1994) examined recruiters' preferences and the impact of co-curricular involvement and grades on job potential in various fields including, but not limited to education, engineering, and business. Results of this study demonstrated that recruiters in both education and engineering fields preferred highly involved students with average grades over students with high grades and medium level of involvement. By comparison, business recruiters looked for a slightly different profile among their recruits. Business recruiters selected recruits based on high grades first, but they were still interested in students with medium or higher levels of co-curricular involvement (Albrecht et al., 1994).

The aforementioned benefits stemming from co-curricular involvement supported the importance and reasoning behind using a peer mentor program as a means to encourage MSFW students' co-curricular involvement. Participation in co-curricular activities positively influenced students' academic performance and degree attainment, helped make a large campus community feel smaller, and enhanced their sense of belonging – some of the various goals of this project.

Criticisms of Astin's Student Involvement Theory

As mentioned, Astin's student involvement theory has been very popular in the field of higher education over the last two decades, specifically among student affairs professionals (Grier-Reid, Madyun, and Buckley, 2008). Although it has been among the

most commonly used models of student success, its relevance to minoritized students has been challenged. According to Lundberg (2007), the student involvement theory failed to consider environmental factors within postsecondary institutions, and disregarded the fact that many minoritized students have been negatively impacted by the dominant culture prior to enrolling at a postsecondary institution. He argued that the assumption that minoritized students had to involve themselves in co-curricular activities at predominantly White institutions was in itself an overwhelming and intimidating event.

Astin (1984) acknowledged that it was easier for students to become involved when they identified with their college environment. Yet, the degree to which students from diverse backgrounds felt connected or complacent with an institution varied significantly on students' previous experiences. If, for example, a student witnessed biases or discrimination while in college, they may have opted to isolate themselves or only interact with a small group of peers, resulting in decreased levels of co-curricular involvement. Conversely, incidents such as the previously mentioned may have driven students to become more involved with student clubs and organizations that promote interests and well-being of their community.

While some of the literature around institutional culture has described it as a deracialized phenomenon (i.e, Whitt, 1993, 1996), various scholars have contended that race shapes both the cultures of colleges and universities and the experiences of minoritized students within these culture (Guiffrida, Kiyama, Waterman, & Museus, 2012; Museus & Harris, 2010; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). The notion of campus racial culture was based on the fact that most predominantly White institutions were established on deep-rooted Eurocentrism that shaped the behaviors and norms of faculty,

students, and staff on college campuses (Museus, Ravello, & Vega, 2012; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). Such culture shaped the experiences of many minoritized students as these students were more likely to come from cultures with collectivist orientations. Postsecondary institutions that bolstered individualistic and competitive values created conditions in which minoritized students had difficulty engaging, had low levels of satisfaction, and were less likely to succeed (Guiffrida et al., 2012; Guiffrida, 2006). Conversely, programs and institutions that emphasized the importance of fostering community and family in social and academic environments, and reflected the values and norms of minoritized students increased their abilities to connect with campus cultures (Guiffrida et al., 2012; Guiffrida, 2006).

Further, the literature has demonstrated how racial microaggressions have impacted college campus climates (Harper 2009; Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). Within higher education, the domination of White power structures is evident among faculty, staff, and students of color (Brunsma, Brown, & Placier, 2013). Perpetrated by individuals, microaggressions have formed part of a larger, systemic structure that not only placed minoritized groups at great disadvantage but also portrayed Whiteness as ideal (Solórzano et al., 2000). Due to their concurrent membership in both racially and economically minoritized groups, many first-generation college students have been negatively impacted by race and class in education as these were commonly utilized against them (i.e., presumption that the presence of a minoritized student at a predominantly White institution was due to a scholarship or that such student transferred from a community college)(Sarcedo, Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2015). For racially and economically minoritized students who experienced microaggressions, their dual identity

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exacerbated the impact of such encounters; in turn, had a deeper emotional effect on these students due to the intersection of their multiple identities (Sarcedo et al., 2015).

Astin (1984) also recognized areas of further consideration such as exceptions to his theory of involvement. He contended that there existed cases of students who were actively involved in co-curricular activities yet dropped out. There were also cases of students who were not involved yet still graduated. Nonetheless, he emphasized that like any other theory, the theory of student involvement had its limitations yet should still be regarded as a mechanism by which participation in co-curricular activities helped increase retention rates and enhance student belonging. The intent is not to discount the contribution and overall importance of this theory; rather, the point of this discussion is to highlight the reality that Astin's student involvement theory has limitations. Such limitations underscore the importance of the development as well as testing of more culturally responsive theories that integrate current levels of understanding regarding the role of validation and cultural context and recognize the dimensions of students' experiences in their explanations of retention and success.

The aforementioned critiques of Astin's theory of student involvement have resulted in a growing body of literature on alternative frameworks for comprehending the retention and success of diverse student populations including, but not limited to Rendón's theory of validation (1994). This theory was introduced with particular applicability to first-generation and minoritized students in an effort to theorize how this student population might develop a sense of belonging and find success in college through validating interactions and conversations with institutional agents, specifically for those who struggled to get involved and build community on campus.

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Validation Theory

As mentioned, a theory that has helped scholars gain an in-depth understanding of student involvement is that of validation. Rendón's validation theory (1994) was composed of six elements. The first element emphasized the importance of students, faculty and staff, and other institutional agents with respect to initiating contact with first-year, first-generation college students. First-generation, low-income, and non-traditional students typically struggled to navigate college by themselves. They also felt uncomfortable asking questions and were less likely to make use of the library and tutoring centers or stop by faculty members' office hours. Thus, Rendón emphasized the importance of actively reaching out to these students to offer help, encouragement, and support instead of expecting them to initiate contact. The second element focused on the influence of validation, demonstrating that students had a higher sense of self-worth and felt more capable of learning when validated. Thus, first-generation college students turning to an institutional agent for validation should be affirmed with regard to bringing a wealth of experience and knowledge to college as well as having the potential to graduate and succeed.

In the third element, Rendón (1994) convincingly argued validation was imperative to student development. First-generation college students who were validated regularly were more likely to feel better and more confident about themselves and their abilities to become involved in co-curricular activities on campus. The fourth element suggested validation occurred within and outside the classroom, and the fifth focused on validation as a developmental process, where students benefited from more robust college experiences distributed across time. Finally, because first-generation and low-income

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students benefited significantly from early validation and nurturing interactions in college, validation was most important when it occurred early in students' undergraduate careers.

Further, Rendón discussed the differences between the two types of validation: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation occurred when institutional agents helped first-generation college students trust their intrinsic capacity to learn and develop confidence in their identity as college students (Rendón, 1994). Interpersonal validation, on the other hand, occurred when institutional agents fostered students' social adjustment and personal development. In a validating environment, institutional agents supported students as individuals, not just as students, and built relationships with students while motivating them to build a social network through co-curricular activities (i.e., student organizations, campus events, study groups, etc.). Examples of validating actions mentioned by Rendón took many forms, and varied from publicly acknowledging that students brought wealth of knowledge and experience to the university to privately reminding them that they belong in higher education.

Rendón's theory of validation has been regarded by many educators as having an "interactionist perspective," where environmental factors and institutional agents were identified as crucial to students' undergraduate experiences due to the role they played in enhancing their sense of belonging, growth, and development. Rey Reyes (2009) expanded on the role and importance of key interactions with institutional agents, contending that for migrant/seasonal farmworker students, such interactions had the power to help defy their marginalization and succeed in college. According to Reyes (2009), key interactions involved a certain level of connection of community, history, or

experience, and gave students a sense of agency of empowerment. Such interactions with institutional agents helped keep students on track toward the goal of supporting, guiding, and mentoring or teaching them to be and become successful. Further, they elicited a sense of both place and consciousness in students' schooling continuum as well as how they were operating or performing within such context. Key interactions were provided in many forms including, but not limited to compliments, conversations about academic improvement, encouraging words, etc. Such interactions had the potential to inspire students to perform better academically, attend class, and become aware of their potential in school, activities, etc.

Bejarano (2013) also contended that through constant and ongoing conversations and interactions with institutional agents, first-generation MSFW students acquired navigational capital. Influenced by Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth, Bejarano (2013) defined navigational capital as skills acquired to move successfully through institutions, specifically those that were not designed by or for students of color. As mentioned in Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen (2012), Latino/a students enhanced their capital through their networks, and had funds of knowledge and other resources they tapped into to persist in college. Vélez-Ibañez and Greenberg (1992) described funds of knowledge as a wide range of knowledge and skills that were of significant importance to working-class households from Latin American communities living along the U.S.-Mexico border. Bejarano (2013) also emphasized how important it was for CAMP staff to create and provide opportunities for MSFW students to network and receive emotional and social support as it helped them navigate their university more successfully. Specifically, she stated that institutional agents played a crucial role in this process as

they were the ones that facilitated access to resources, services, and their university as whole.

Studies based on validation theory. Despite calls for research on programs and events that might help improve first-generation college students' experiences, little consideration and attention has been given to understanding the overall importance of validating first-generation college students and their experiences (Stephens, Fryberg, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). For first-generation college students from underrepresented backgrounds, social support systems benefited them substantially as these students searched for models to inspire and guide their own success (Pyne & Means, 2013; Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015). Specifically, first-generation African American and Hispanic students found value in interacting with peers, faculty, and staff representing their own ethnic background as it helped foster a sense of belonging and social adjustment (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

Further, King, Griffith, and Murphy (2017) found story-sharing helped validate first-generation college students, and enhanced their sense of belonging. Because first-generation college students have struggled with ambivalence about college, King et al. (2017) anticipated that sharing stories with other students, faculty, and staff who identified as first-generation college students and/or graduates not only validated students but also increased their desire to get involved on campus. Findings demonstrated that story sharing was an important form of validation, and it also helped participants build connections and relationships with institutional agents, making first-generation students feel as active members of their campus community.

For MSFW students within CAMP, sharing testimonio in different settings and formats, and engaging in mentoring experiences served as opportunities to revamp the idea of what it meant to be college students, which in turn helped transform their university (O'Connor, Mancinas, and Deeg, 2020). Such experiences allowed MSFW students to perceive themselves as possible contributors to their academic communities. Validation through story sharing and mentorship was also found to contribute to aspiration formation, and was effective early in the college experience.

Research also found that many first-generation college students were susceptible to feelings of isolation, typified by a limited understanding of college expectations and overall environment, and a disconnection between academic worlds and their home (Rendón, 1994; Terenzini et al., 1996). In a study conducted by Jehangir (2008), participants shared the process of validation was crucial in helping them find their place on campus and in higher education. Further, participants shared finding a sense of "family" within their campus community of peers, faculty, and staff through validation. Most students characterized validation as a valuable experience, where peers, faculty, and staff filled in gaps by sharing feelings of confusion about the same problems with which they had struggled when they entered college. Findings also demonstrated that sharing personal stories invited students to inhabit the worlds they genuinely understood and those they had never experienced before. Finally, participants shared they benefited substantially from transformational learning opportunities when they reflected on their previous experiences and shared with others, all while obtaining validation from institutional agents.

In an effort to better understand the impact of a multicultural learning program for first-generation college students, Jehangir (2009) focused on issues of marginalization and isolation of this student population. He relied on Rendón's theoretical framework to identify several aspects related to academic integration and sense of belonging within the curricula and postsecondary institutions. In his analysis of student experiences, Jehangir (2009) found that the curriculum and peer interactions in the multicultural learning program promoted the validation of first-generation college students through the sharing of personal experiences, which helped develop a figurative and literal sense of place. Further, students communicated a desire for activities that would help validate who they were as first-generation college students, while also building community between students, faculty, and other institutional agents (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010). For example, students mentioned the importance of hosting events that recognized and validated their accomplishments, were engaging, and built community among students, faculty, and institutional agents.

Terenzini et al. (1994) emphasized the importance of early validation and discussed the role it played in first-generation college students' transition to college. Whether socially or academically, first-generation students had to be constantly reassured they had capabilities to succeed in college, they could take college classes and do the work like any other student, they had thoughts, ideas, and opinions that contributed to the learning environment, and they were capable of participating in various co-curricular activities. In fact, the study conducted by Terenzini et al. (1994) found that academic validation was identified as being particularly important for a great majority of first-generation college students. Further, the "wounds" or challenges many first-generation

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college students brought with them to college must be understood to better support this student population (Terenzini et al., 1994). Lastly, validation of these students did not need to be formal, and could take the form of words of encouragement, constructive critique of their work, and so on.

      Conclusions. While Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement emphasized the need for students to invest considerable amounts of energy in social and academic involvement early in their undergraduate careers, Rendón's validation theory acknowledged that not all students felt comfortable doing so on their own. According to Rendón (1994), expecting students to become involved on campus only worked for those who had the skills to gain access to co-curricular opportunities. Nonetheless, merely offering involvement opportunities did not work for passive students or for those who did not know how to take advantage of the current system. Thus, institutional agents (i.e., students, faculty, and staff) who worked with first-generation MSFW students, or had navigated the process themselves, must build close relationships with these students early on to help enhance their sense of belonging and retention. Institutional agents must also identify ways to let first-generation MSFW students know they are capable of learning and excelling in college as well as reasons why it is important to get involved beyond the classroom.

      Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified belonging as a fundamental need, and contended that lack of support networks resulted in high levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and stress. Influenced by their work, Strayhorn (2012) argued that student belonging positively affected academic achievement, persistence, and retention. This was found to be specifically true for minoritized students, for whom family-like

relationships were instrumental in their belonging, educational experiences, and degree attainment (Strayhorn, 2012; Turcios-Cotto and Milan, 2013). Based on the principles demonstrated in validation and belonging theories, some thoughtful reconsiderations about limitations and caveats of student involvement theory were warranted. Although student involvement theory helped better understand how students develop through involvement, researchers cautioned student affairs practitioners about overgeneralization. First, the extent to which student involvement theory applied in various contexts was heavily dependent on environmental factors. Second, the overgeneralization of student involvement theory to all students and their experiences was unwarranted as student differences and backgrounds must be acknowledged. Conversely, validation theory allowed researchers to gain a better understanding of students by considering cultural and environmental factors as well as the role institutional agents played in enhancing students' growth, development, and involvement.

Taken together, the theoretical perspectives on belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and validation (Rendón, 1994) suggested first-generation college students benefited from validating conversations as well as constant and ongoing relationships with others. Further, Astin's (1994) student involvement theory provided a means to examine more closely first-generation MSFW students' participation and interactions within the peer mentor program as well as their overall sense of belonging. It allowed for an exploration of the mechanism by which validated student involvement enhanced the development of students' sense of belonging as well as retention. Specifically, how the implementation of an improved peer mentor program affected students' experiences at

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ASU, and enhanced their sense of belonging as well as their decision to stay at the institution.

Peer mentorship has been perceived as a means of fostering students' relationships with validating peers in an effort to enhance belonging and retention. Participation in peer mentor programs provided mentees access to campus resources and support services, and fostered social connections, enhanced both subject-area and academic skill development, and increased student retention (Glaser, Hall, &. Halerpin, 2006; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2010; Yomtov et al., 2015). Nora and Crisp (2007 – 2008) identified psychological and/or emotional support, goal setting and/or career path development, and academic subject support as three domains that established the foundation of effective peer mentor programs for college students. A study conducted by Ward et al. (2010) assessed the previously mentioned domains, and found that the most effective peer mentor programs were those that practiced goal setting, and provided psychological, emotional, and academic subject support. As such, validating and supportive relationships served as a powerful intervention that enhanced student belonging and retention. Due to the unique challenges facing this student population, a peer mentor program tailored around first-generation MSFW students' experiences and needs was crucial to the belonging, retention, and success of this student population.

As mentioned in Rendón (2009), meeting the expectations and needs of first-generation college students required best practices that involved helping them develop a sense of belonging at their institutions and feel validated. She also stressed the importance of creating and offering opportunities that capitalized on students' potential,

capacities, and strengths. As such, one of the many benefits of peer mentorship on student involvement and success is that students gained access to transformational experiences where they practiced personal reflection and peer modeling (Bunting & Williams, 2017). Further, mentorship facilitated college adjustment as first-generation college students learned the language of their institution in a safe and supportive environment (Jehangir, 2010). For first-generation MSFW students who did not come from social networks within their communities with knowledge or access to resources, developing mentoring relationships helped provide such access and development. Provision of peer mentoring to this student population also led to decreased levels of attrition and increased levels of academic attainment (Carthy & Slattery, 2015).

The significant lack of educational literature on MSFW students in postsecondary education must be addressed as there has been an increase in the number of first-generation MSFW students enrolling in a postsecondary education since 2005 (Willison & Jang, 2009). While most existing research has focused on MSFW students' challenges in high school and their educational gaps (Bejarano & Valverde, 2012), very few scholars have explored MSFW students' challenges, educational experiences, and successes in postsecondary education. This action research project aimed to narrow the literature gap on first-generation MSFW students' experiences in higher education by assessing the impact of a peer mentor program focused on their sense of belonging and college retention.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Never give up on a dream just because of the time it
will take to accomplish it. The time will pass anyway.
~ Earl Nightingale

Chapter 3 will address the method utilized in the study and included details about the setting, participants, role of the researcher, instruments, and innovation. A peer mentor program was introduced as an intervention to help enhance first-generation MSFW students' sense of belonging and college retention. Further, the data collection and data analysis procedures were illustrated. The study was guided by theoretical frameworks by Baumeister and Leary (1995), Astin (1984), and Rendón (1994). In this study, first-generation MSFW students were defined as the first in their immediate family to go to college, and whose parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) travel, or had traveled, to work in the fields or for other seasonal labor in the United States. The study was guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: How does a peer mentor program impact the belonging of first-generation MSFW students?

RQ2: How does a peer mentor program impact the retention of first-generation MSFW students?

Large and Local Context

Arizona State University (ASU) was a comprehensive public research institution based in Phoenix, Arizona. Four diverse locations served the Phoenix metropolitan area including Polytechnic, Downtown, Phoenix, West, and Tempe campuses. Each of the

campuses had a unique identity that allowed students to benefit from attending a large, public research institution, with student-centric programs and services. Its commitment to inclusion and access was evident in its increasing enrollment and aggressive goals to reach more than 110,000 students by fall of 2020. In fact, President Michael Crow welcomed the largest and most diverse freshman class ever this past fall, with more than 50% of students coming from underrepresented populations (Arizona State University, 2017).

ASU was recently inducted into the inaugural cohort of First Forward Institutions by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and recognized for its commitment to improving experiences and advancing outcomes of first-generation college students. Its access and outreach efforts nearly tripled the number of first-generation college students from 7,500 in 2002 to 22,070 in 2017, which represented 30 percent of the entire student population (ASU Enrollment Figures, n.d.). Among the 22,070 students who identified as first-generation, about 1% had migrant and seasonal farm worker (MSFW) backgrounds. As mentioned, first-generation MSFW students were often the first in their immediate family to go to college, and whose parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) travel, or have traveled, to work in the fields or for other seasonal labor in the United States (Zalaquett et al., 2007). In recent years, first-generation MSFW students were also predominantly of Latino/a descent and of low-income backgrounds (Zalaquett et al., 2007).

Although there has been an increase in the number of MSFW graduating from high schools and enrolling in college (Willison & Jang, 2009; Zalaquett, Alvarez, & Cranston-Gingras, 2007), it was common for them to experience risk factors that

decreased their probability of persisting in college and obtaining a degree. Many first-generation students dropped out of college because of economic concerns or due to the number of hours spent working that prevented them from passing courses or graduating on time (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). In many cases, first-generation students had to work to pay for college and help support their families financially (Tucker, 2000). Culture shock was another obstacle for this student population while in college. Faculty, staff, students, and curriculum often did not reflect the cultural experiences of minoritized students, making them feel alienated (Anaya & Cole, 2003). Additional barriers included lack of minority support programs, role models and mentors, and unsuccessful transitions from high school to college (Nora, 2011).

First-generation MSFW students were not officially tracked at ASU until fall of 2016, which is when it was awarded its first College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) grant of $2.1 million from the U.S. Department of Education. CAMP was established in 1972 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in an effort to assist migratory and seasonal farm workers and their children in enrolling and completing a minimum of the first year of college (Araujo, 2011). Ever since its introduction and implementation at ASU, more than 100 first-generation MSFW students have received personal, academic, and financial support from CAMP staff during their first year in college. To qualify for CAMP, students had to be accepted into ASU, have a high school diploma or GED, and be a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident. Students also had to have a migrant or seasonal farm worker background; they or their parents must have worked in migrant or seasonal farm work for at least 75 days in the past 2 years prior to

applying to the university or been part of the federal Migrant Education Program (MEP) in elementary, junior high, and/or high school.

The primary goals of ASU CAMP were to 1) create a comprehensive, responsive, and sustainable retention program for migrant students, 2) create "whole family" support networks, and 3) ensure students' academic and social success. Support services provided by CAMP staff included, but were not limited to tailored academic advising, transition programming for parents and students, and professional development opportunities. The CAMP staff consisted of a Principal Investigator (PI), a Director, a Program Coordinator, an Academic Success Coordinator, and myself. The researcher's professional role as Student Recruitment and Family Engagement Coordinator required the collection of constant input from first-generation MSFW students in an effort to help ease their transition from high school to college, and enhance their sense of belonging and retention at ASU. As such, the researcher sought to learn more about first-generation MSFW students in an effort to better serve this student population. By interacting and engaging with this student population on a more personal level, the researcher aimed to gain a better understanding of their experiences at ASU, and develop support services that catered to the unique and specific needs of this student population.

It was estimated that there were more than 3 million agricultural workers in the United States. Within the MSFW population, 16% identified as migrating, and 84% were seasonal agricultural workers (Kandel et al., 2008). On average, MSFW families earned an annual income of $17, 500 - $19,999; about 80% of agricultural workers were paid by the hour while 9% were paid by the piece and 8% were salaried (Roka, 2009). MSFW students often experienced disruption in their schooling as they traveled with their

families to follow the harvest. Further, children of MSFWs were more likely to attend a Title 1 school and qualify for both free breakfast and lunch at school as they were well below the federal poverty level (Green, 2003). In the 2014 – 15 academic year, Arizona had more than 10,000 identified MSFW students spread throughout 6 counties (Arizona Department of Education Migration Education Program, 2015).

A vast majority of CAMP students were from Yuma county as that was where most MSFW students were located, and where most recruitment efforts took place. Yuma county was located in the southwestern corner of Arizona, and comprised of four cities and towns: Yuma, San Luis, Somerton, and Wellton. Remaining CAMP students were from Pinal and Maricopa counties. Recruitment efforts included, but were not limited to bilingual (English and Spanish) high school presentations, tabling at community events, and 1:1 meetings with potential students and their parents and/or legal guardians. Distance from ASU to Yuma county was 155 miles, the equivalent of a three to four hour drive depending on traffic. On average, students visited home once every one to two months as they lacked the modes of transportation to do so. Thus, they spent most of their time during the week and weekends in Tempe or on campus.

Most CAMP students participated in the President Barack Obama Scholars Program. President Obama's visit to ASU in 2009 inspired a new scholarship program for low-income Arizona high school graduates in response to President Michael Crow's challenge for the U.S. to have the highest number of college graduates in the world by 2020. This program covered students' estimated direct costs of attending ASU for eight consecutive semesters. Estimated direct costs included tuition and mandatory fees as well as housing, meals, books and supplies. Remaining CAMP students participated in

the ASU College Attainment Grant Program (CAG), which covered tuition and fees for up to eight consecutive semesters. Most CAMP students lived in the residence halls during their first year of college, while others lived off-campus by choice. Additionally, CAMP helped pay for various expenses not covered by the Obama Scholars program and ASU College Attainment Grant Program (CAG). CAMP also offered work study positions for students wanting to work 10 - 15 hours per week.

Despite the support provided by CAMP staff, many of our first-generation MSFW students reported difficulty in the process of developing a sense of belonging and feeling part of the ASU community, which resulted in the withdrawal of CAMP students from the institution. In Cycle 1, students expressed ways in which the peer mentor program could help enhance their belonging. They expressed interest in participating in co-curricular activities, engaging in validating conversations, and utilizing campus resources. With this in mind, it was crucial for CAMP staff to use the peer mentor program as a means to enhance their sense of belonging and college retention. The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of a peer mentor program focused on the sense of belonging and college retention of first-generation MSFW students within CAMP. A peer mentor program was used as a means to provide first-generation MSFW opportunities to learn about and make use of campus resources and services, discuss goal setting and other topics pertinent to their sense of belonging and retention, and engage in validation conversations. The peer mentor program supported first-generation MSFW students' participation and engagement in such conversations and activities in an effort to help enrich their experiences, and enhance their overall sense of belonging and college retention.

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Participants

 A purposive sampling method was utilized to recruit study participants. CAMP students were sampled purposefully to ensure that only first-generation MSFW participated in this study. An email was sent to 20 first-year, first-generation MSFW students in CAMP with an invitation to participate as mentees in the improved peer mentor program. Criteria for participation included: 1) self-identify as first-year, first-generation college student based on definition provided, 2) participate in CAMP program, and 3) enroll full-time at ASU (at least 12 credit hours per semester). An email invitation was also sent to 5 first-generation MSFW students in their second and third year of college to serve as mentors in the innovation. A total of 15 first-generation MSFW students were selected to participate in the peer mentor program; 5 students served as mentors, while 10 students served as mentees. For the purposes of this study, first-generation MSFW students were defined as the first in their immediate family to go to college, and whose parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) travel, or had traveled, to work in the fields or for other seasonal labor in the United States. All participants were undergraduate students enrolled full-time at ASU (12 or more units).

Research Design

 This study was an action research study, and employed a qualitative approach to gather data and answer the research questions. Action research is defined as any systematic inquiry, where participants including teachers, school administrators, and staff, examine their own educational practice (Mertler, 2014). The purpose of action research was to locate problems and produce a plan of action for better practice. While

action research is not fully generalizable to other populations, results make it possible to influence other similarly situated environments. As mentioned in Dickens and Watkins (1999), the cyclical action research process entails the following four stages: plan, act, observe, and reflect. First, the practitioner must develop a plan of action to improve a setting, and enact that plan. While acting, one must observe the effects of that action within the setting, and reflect on them for further planning.

The project presented a strategy for enhancing first-generation MSFW students' sense of belonging and retention at Arizona State University. It aimed to facilitate validating conversations with, as well as provide mentees tools and support to interact and learn from mentors about various topics and campus resources pertinent to their belonging and retention. Mentors shared similar characteristics to mentees (i.e., first-generation status, raised in the same area, etc.), and were also part of the CAMP program. Mentors were paired with mentees based on major or career goal, and asked to meet at least once every two weeks. Mentors were not only asked to provide validation and converse about topics and campus resources pertinent to mentees' sense of belonging and retention, but also take a more hands-on role by accompanying mentees to centers and offices to make use of campus resources (i.e., counseling, health services, student organizations' office, etc.).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's professional role as Student Recruitment and Family Engagement Coordinator required the collection of constant input from first-generation MSFW students to help ease their transition from high school to college, and enhance

their sense of belonging and retention at ASU. The researcher sought to learn more about first-generation MSFW students in an effort to better serve this student population. By interacting and engaging with this student population on a more personal level, the researcher aimed to gain a better understanding of their experiences at ASU. This allowed the researcher to develop support services that catered to the needs of first-generation MSFW students in an intentional and strategic manner. As a first-generation college graduate, the researcher had a clear understanding of the many challenges and internal struggles that come with not developing a sense of belonging; thus, she aspired to come up with potential solutions that would help enhance student belonging and retention within this student population. Further, due the researcher's involvement with CAMP, a wealth of experience was brought from her previous interactions with students and staff in the program. Due to the fact that the researcher had access to first-generation MSFW students as well as oversight of opportunities for these students, the problem of practice was focused on this student population as it was within the researcher's professional sphere of interest and influence.

The innovation took place during the fall 2020 semester at ASU's Tempe campus. Throughout the action research study, the researcher assumed the role of practitioner, data collector, and innovation facilitator. As the practitioner, the researcher played a role in the peer mentor program, and served as a support to mentors and mentees by providing resources, guidance, and support throughout the innovation. As previously noted, findings from Cycle 1 presented ways in which the peer mentor program could help enhance students' sense of belonging and retention; a peer mentor program was used as a means to better serve this student population. The peer mentor program aimed to

transform CAMP students' relationships and on-campus interactions by providing a less passive and more hands-on experience for mentees. Mentors were asked to take a more active role by not only discussing campus resources and services but also accompanying mentees to make use of such services, making them feel supported and more comfortable while doing so. Further, validating conversations were facilitated and mentees engaged in goal setting. As the data collector, the researcher collected participant field notes from mentees, and conducted semi-structured interviews with first-generation MSFW students in their first year of college. Lastly, the researcher managed several aspects of the innovation, and worked closely with CAMP staff to serve participants.

Innovation

A peer mentor program was used as a means to enhance first-generation MSFW students' belonging and retention through the facilitation of constant and ongoing interactions as well as validating conversations with mentors. The three constructs discussed in Chapter 2 were formally embedded into the peer mentor program, which include psychological and emotional support, goal setting and career path development, and academic subject support. Participants engaged in goal setting activities throughout the innovation, and discussed topics based on interests, challenges, and needs expressed by mentees during 1:1 meetings for a more personalized experience. Mentors also facilitated validating conversations to encourage and support mentees in their pursuit of academic, social, and personal well-being goals. Lastly, mentors helped mentees identify and access campus resources and services that were pertinent to their goals, belonging, and retention.

As mentioned, first-generation MSFW students in their second and third year of college were recruited and paired with first-generation MSFW students in their first year of college. A welcome event was coordinated and facilitated virtually by CAMP staff to kick-off the peer mentor program; mentees interacted with mentors and were given the opportunity to socialize with other participants to help build a support system for all. An overview of the peer mentor program was provided, and objectives were discussed. Roles and expectations were reviewed by CAMP staff in an effort to provide guidance and clarity to all participants. The welcome event was in addition to the peer mentor program; it served as the official start of the program and was considered part of the innovation. Due to the pandemic, all innovation activities occurred online via the videoconferencing platform Zoom in an effort to comply with ASU's health guidelines.

The peer mentor program provided MSFW students multiple opportunities during the fall to interact with and learn from their mentors. The role of the mentor was to facilitate validating conversations, share knowledge around campus resources and support services as well as previous experiences and challenges faced in college. They also answered questions, shared college tips to help increase socialization, and connected students with campus resources and services to help them feel more comfortable and familiar with their institution. Participants engaged in goal setting activities throughout the innovation, and discussed topics pertinent to mentees' goals, belonging and retention. Mentees were also asked to share their concerns with mentors to alleviate some of their barriers and challenges.

Mentor training. A training manual was developed by CAMP staff in June and distributed to mentors electronically in mid-July. The training manual contained

examples of validating actions and statements, frequently asked questions about campus resources and support services as well as guidelines for responding to students in crisis. Further, it included recommended practices for establishing and maintaining a quality, high impact peer mentoring relationship as well as strategies for providing quality mentoring. Guides, handout, and other materials from the National Mentoring Resource Center and the UNM Mentoring Institute were used to create the training manual. Further, mentors met remotely with CAMP staff in July and participated in training to provide guidance, discuss items in the training manual, and answer questions. Mentors were also asked to reach out to CAMP staff with questions and/or concerns throughout the innovation.

Mentoring sessions. An online folder containing the training manual, handouts, and topics pertinent to student belonging and retention was shared electronically with mentors. Mentors were asked to schedule their first mentoring session in August, and meet with students on a consistent basis. Further, mentees were asked to complete field note entries around 1:1 meetings using prompts to guide their responses (see Appendix B). The prompt focused on interactions as well as topics discussed during 1:1 meetings, and provided an opportunity for mentees to reflect on their conversations. Content covered at every 1:1 meeting was tailored around mentees' interests, needs, and challenges. If, for example, a mentee shared with their mentor the desire to join a club or student organization, then the mentor was responsible for walking with mentee to the Office of Student Engagement and talking to staff member about ways to get involved.

A peer mentor meeting log was provided to guide the conversations of participants, and ensure that topics pertinent to student's belonging and retention were

discussed. The peer mentor meeting log also included a section for mentors to take notes, write down mentee's daily and weekly goals, and questions, challenges and concerns. An example of a peer mentor meeting log has been provided below:

Peer Mentor Log Student Name_____ Peer Mentor Name _____

Topics Addressed:	Date/Time	Student Initials	Type of Contact
☐ Academic Advising ☐ Career/Employment ☐Personal ☐ Health/Wellness ☐ Financial ☐ Tutoring Session Subject(s):_____	Notes:		
Topics Addressed:	Date/Time	Student Initials	Type of Contact
☐ Academic Advising ☐ Career/Employment ☐Personal ☐ Health/Wellness ☐ Financial ☐ Tutoring Session Subject(s):_____	Notes:		

Instruments

This action research project employed a qualitative approach to gather data and answer the research questions. The researcher drew from two primary sources of qualitative data collected throughout the implementation of the improved peer mentor program: participant field notes and interview responses. For the first source of qualitative data, mentees were asked to keep field notes of their interactions. Participants were asked to take some time at the end of each meeting to complete field note entries; prompts were provided to guide their responses and help participants reflect on their conversations (see Appendix B and C). They were also prompted to write down questions, comments, and/or concerns for future meetings. Further, mentors were asked

to participate in regular Zoom meetings facilitated by CAMP staff to talk about topics discussed during meetings, interactions with mentees, etc. Mentors were encouraged to share information about their interactions and conversations with mentees. Feedback provided during Zoom meetings helped further enhance the improved peer mentor program as CAMP staff provided support and guidance to mentors in an effort to better serve mentees.

For the second and final source of qualitative data, mentees participated in semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore first-generation MSFW students' interactions and experiences in the improved peer mentor program as well as overall sense of belonging and retention. Interviews included 14 questions and were scheduled starting the week of November 23, 2020. Examples of questions included "Had you not been part of this program, do you think you would have interacted with students and staff to the same extent to which you did as a result of your participation in this program?" and "Did you have meaningful experiences with your peer mentor program that contributed to your sense of belonging? Please tell me more." Please refer to Appendix C for interview questions.

Procedure and Timeline

Once study participants were identified, the innovation was implemented. A welcome event took place in August to kick-off the peer mentor program; mentees met their mentors and connected with other first-generation MSFW students in an effort to build a support system for all participants. Mentors were asked to schedule their first meeting with their mentees soon after the kick-off event; meetings occurred from

throughout the fall. Following the conclusion of the innovation, qualitative data was

gathered through participant field notes. Mentees were asked to complete field note

entries after each meeting; prompts were used to guide their responses. Qualitative data

was also gathered through ten semi-structured interviews conducted with mentees; the

researcher recorded each interview using Zoom's cloud recording feature. Interviews

were conducted online using the video-conferencing platform Zoom. Lastly, all

interviews were transcribed using an online transcription service.

Table 1 details the timeline as well as procedures for the study including each step

such as approvals, implementation of the innovation, data collection, and data analysis.

Table 1

Timeline and Procedures for the Action Research Project

Timeframe	Actions	Procedures
July 21, 2020	Initial meeting/training with mentors	Met with mentors to discuss materials and answer questions
August 10, 2020	Finalized interview questions	Secured IRB approval
Week of August 17, 2020	Hosted welcome event	Mentors met mentees, and were informed about program
Week of August 24, 2020	Mentor/mentee check-in	Checked-in with mentors and mentees for insight
Week of September 14, 2020	Mentor/mentee check-in	Checked-in with mentors and mentees for insight
Week of October 12, 2020	Mentor/mentee check-in	Checked-in with mentors and mentees for insight
Week of October 19, 2020	Mentor/mentee check-in	Checked-in with mentors and mentees for insight

Week of November 16, 2020	Mentor/mentee check-in	Checked-in with mentors and mentees for insight
Week of November 16, 2020	Conducted interviews	Conducted semi-structured interviews with mentees; collected field notes
Week of November 30, 2020	Conducted interviews	Conducted semi-structured interviews with mentees; collected field notes
Week of December 7, 2020	Conducted interviews	Conducted semi-structured interviews with mentees; collected field notes
Week of December 14, 2020	Conducted data analysis	Transcribed interviews and analyzed data from qualitative data sources

Data Analysis

Member checking, also referred to as participant validation, is a technique used to establish credibility and trustworthiness. Traditionally, member checking involves the sharing of a brief summary of the findings or whole findings with participants. In this case, a copy of the interview transcript was sent to each respective participant to ensure accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Further, findings were shared with participants to ensure researcher's interpretation of the data was accurate. Overall, participants expressed satisfaction with researcher's interpretation of the data, and shared their appreciation for the utilization of pseudonyms.

The qualitative data stemming from the semi-structured interviews participant field notes was entered into HyperRESEARCH (HyperRESEARCH 4.0.2., 2014) and analyzed utilizing the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Qualitative data coding involved identifying key words, or initial open codes; these were then combined into larger categories known as theme-related components, which were then aggregated into themes. Identified themes were the basis of the assertions, which were connected to the original interview quotes. The researcher reviewed transcripts multiple times, coded them, and conducted the higher-level interpretive work to deduce the themes and assertions. As mentioned in Saldaña (2015), assertions help address the specifics of a study through data-supported and aggregate statements. The researcher used reflective processes in the qualitative data analysis to ensure the data supported these higher-level understandings.

Further, grounded theory was utilized to analyze the field notes. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined grounded theory as an inductive method that seeks to generate theory based on existing data. In other words, it develops a theory rooted in the data instead of a theory that is preconceived. In qualitative data analysis, there exist three levels of coding in grounded theory. The first is open; that is, breaking the data into pieces. The second is axial, or putting the data back together into defined categories. The last is selective, or integrating the key categories in an effort to inform the theory. Lastly, triangulation will be utilized to compare the data collected from participant field notes and semi-structured interviews in an effort to determine corroboration. As mentioned in Mark and Shotland (1987), triangulation yields a more accurate and valid estimate of a result when methods of measurement converge on the same answer.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The purpose of this action research study was to assess the impact of a peer

mentor program focused on the sense of belonging and college retention of first-

generation MSFW students within ASU CAMP. The study was guided by three

theoretical frameworks including Baumeister and Leary (1995), Astin (1984), and

Rendón (1994). Data collection and data analysis processes used in this study as well as

results have been presented in the following section.

COVID Adjustments

Several adjustments were made to this study due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The outbreak of the virus began in January of 2020, with President Trump declaring a

national emergency in March and states issuing stay-at-home directives to reduce

coronavirus transmission. University leadership at ASU transitioned all in-person classes

to online in an effort to help manage the potential spread of COVID-19. Although all

innovation activities were scheduled to occur in-person, changes were implemented in

April to comply with health guidelines implemented by ASU.

The peer mentor training occurred in July in an effort to provide support and

guidance to mentees early in the semester. The welcome event, originally planned to take

place on ASU's Tempe campus, was hosted online via Zoom due to the number of

participants and limitations set by the university regarding large-scale events. In the

same manner, peer mentor meetings were conducted online in an effort to reduce

transmission of coronavirus. CAMP students were given the option to reside on-campus

and enroll in classes through three learning environments: 1) in-person classes; 2) remote

classes delivered through Zoom, known as ASU Sync, and 3) classes delivered fully online, known as iCourses. Nonetheless, CAMP staff and peer mentors worked remotely during the duration of innovation, offering all support services including tutoring, academic advising, and professional development fully online.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data results have been presented in two main sections: (a) participant field notes and (b) semi-structured interviews. For each section, a table was used to present the themes, theme-related components, and assertions. Quotes from semi-structured interviews were utilized to support claims.

The codes developed for this action research study utilized holistic and narrative coding (Saldaña, 2015). In Vivo coding was utilized as the initial set coding, analyzing line after line. For participant field note entries, the codes for all entries were individually coded with overlap between each round of coding on each entry. In Vivo coding was used in the same manner for notes stemming from semi-structured interviews. After the coding was conducted for participant field note entries and semi-structured interviews, three major categories emerged: development, personal success, and connection. Categories, codes, and a brief description were depicted in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Categories, Codes, and Description of Codes from Qualitative Data Analysis

Categories	Code	Description
DEVELOPMENT	SELF-ASSESSMENT SELF-ADVOCACY ACQUIRED SKILLS ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE	Using campus resources to succeed and alleviate challenges; assessing personal needs and sharing

		with peer mentor; asking for help; expressed interest in learning about campus resource
PERSONAL SUCCESS	PERSONAL GOAL ACADEMIC GOAL PROFESSIONAL GOAL	Goals established by mentees during meetings with peer mentors (i.e., graduate school, job, internship, etc.)
CONNECTION	INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITY CAMPUS REFERRAL UTILIZATION OF CAMPUS RESOURCE /SERVICE	Expressed interest in using campus resources to work on current goals and set new goals; expressed interest in student organizations and/or other campus resource or service

The codes within the category of development were based on knowledge acquired by mentees as a result of their constant conversations with peer mentors regarding campus resources and support services including, but not limited to tutoring, counseling, academic advising, and career services. For example, the code of "self-advocacy—using campus resources to succeed and alleviate challenges," referred to how a student used, or had intentions to make use of campus resources and services in an effort to alleviate challenges and concerns stemming from academics, and feel more connected to their campus community. The codes for personal success were based on both personal, academic, and professional goals set and expressed by students in their meetings with peer mentors. For example, the code of "personal goal—set example" was based on their desire to set an example for family members and friends with respect to continued enrollment and college attainment.

The codes within the category of connection were based on students' referral and use of campus resources and support services, and how such connections reinforced their goals and decision to stay at ASU. For example, the code of "involvement opportunity—using campus resources to work on current goals and set new goals" referred to students who benefited personally, professionally, and/or academically from working with other campus staff and/or were connected to campus resources based on expressed goals.

Once the three categories were determined, many overlapping codes within each area between participant field note entries and semi-structured interviews emerged. Despite the fact that codes were placed into one of three distinct categories through a process of code mapping, several codes developed as larger interconnected lines of familiarity. For example, the codes "involvement opportunity—interest in student organizations," "self-advocacy—assessing personal needs," and "personal goal—set example" formed the beginning of the theme related component of *Being at ASU inspired students to set new goals*. This specific theme related component involved codes centered around students' personal and professional goals, motives for such goals, and how the utilization of campus resources and services further enhanced their desire to stay at ASU to achieve their goals. Theme-related components, which were connected and associated, were combined to form themes. Continuing with the example, these led to the theme *Setting personal and professional goals for ASU and beyond*. The assertion was determined through a holistic understanding of the theme-related codes, which led to the creation of the assertion *Student goals were inspired and fueled by their educational and career aspirations through their conversations with peer mentors*.

Participant field note entries. As part of the peer mentor program, mentees were required to complete field note entries around 1:1 meetings. A prompt was provided to allow time for reflection on their conversations with peer mentors. Questions such as, "What were some topics discussed during your meeting with your peer mentor? and "Which campus resources or services did you learn about, and make use of?" were included to guide their responses. Further, mentees were asked to write about their weekly goals and think about ways in which they would accomplish such goals. They were also encouraged to write down questions, comments, and/or concerns for mentors to address during meetings.

Holistic coding was used to code participant field note entries based on their conversations with peer mentors about personal experiences, campus resources and services, and goals. This approach was deemed appropriate for participant field note entries as the researcher had a general idea of what to investigate in the data, and knew how to chunk text into broad topic areas in an effort to develop broader categories. As such, holistic coding allowed the researcher to develop themes and subsequent assertions, allowing student voice to drive the narrative of their experiences in the peer mentor program.

In an effort to provide an advance organizer for these data, themes from participant field note entries as well as their corresponding theme-related components and assertions were depicted in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Theme-Related Components, Themes, and Assertions Based on Participant Field Note Entries

Theme-related components	Theme	Assertion
1. Participating in the peer mentor program allowed students to reflect on accomplishments and needs. 2. Having someone to share experiences with regarding their new environment helped alleviate challenges. 3. Referrals to and utilization of campus resources made students feel supported, validated, and cared about.	1. Seeking out campus resources and services in times of need.	1. Utilizing campus resources helped alleviate challenges faced by students, enhancing belonging and retention.
1. Being at ASU inspired students to set new goals, with campus resources facilitating achievement. 2. Conversations with peer mentors reinforced goals and aspirations, and fostered accountability.	2. Setting personal and professional goals for ASU and beyond.	1. Student goals were inspired and fueled by their educational and career aspirations through their conversations with peer mentors.

Theme 1: Seeking out campus resources and services in times of need.

Assertion 1 stated, *Utilizing campus resources helped alleviate challenges faced by students, enhancing belonging and retention.* Prompts allowed participants to reflect on topics discussed with peer mentors, set weekly goals, and learn about and make use of campus resources available to them. Mentees were asked to write about campus resources and services discussed during their meetings, and summarize how they planned on using such resources and services to thrive at ASU. Three related theme components embodied the theme about seeking out campus resources and services in times of need which led to Assertion 1: (a) participating in the peer mentor program allowed students to reflect on accomplishments and needs, (b) having someone to share experiences with

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regarding new environment helped alleviate challenges, and (c) referrals to and utilization of campus resources made students feel supported and cared about.

Participating in the peer mentor program allowed students to reflect on accomplishments and needs. Students' reflections focused on accomplishments and needs, with many sharing how their interactions with peer mentors facilitated conversations around significant topics such as academics, health and wellness, and personal and professional development. A student majoring in political science, wrote,

> I didn't really take time to celebrate my good grades because I was too stressed and focused on other things, like not missing a deadline or making sure I was attending classes, but when [peer mentor] asked how I celebrated my accomplishments, it got me thinking. Now I realize that it is important to take some time to breathe and look around me. I now understand that it is necessary to take breaks and do social things like hangout or go to the gym to not burn out, keep getting good grades in class, and do well enough to graduate.

Students benefited from their interactions with mentors as it created space for them to develop a plan of action and think about next steps for future semesters. A STEM major from San Luis High School wrote,

> Classes are important and all but what you do beyond the classroom also matters. Something that my peer mentor told me that really stuck with me was to gain some real-life experience. I have the grades but I also want to work as an engineer so I know I got to start looking for an internship or something like that. He also suggested that I attended online conferences to learn what skills I need to be a

successful engineer. I recently joined the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) so I know that's a good start.

Taken together, these statements summarized some of the various topics discussed with peer mentors as well as students' awareness of accomplishments and needs. Conversations with mentors inspired students to not only think about, but also plan for future semesters. Further, it allowed students to reflect on their experiences at the university, and seek out development opportunities within and beyond ASU.

Having someone to share experiences with regarding their new environment helped alleviate challenges. Students expressed their appreciation for peer mentors for consistently supporting them as they faced stress and frustration with the complexities of college life and virtual environment. To illustrate, a student from Yuma majoring in health sciences shared,

> Today, my peer mentor and I talked about how difficult it is to be the first in your family to go to college. I didn't think it would be this hard, but I am glad I have someone who is there to guide me through my first semester of college. We also talked about online classes and how challenging it is for many of us to not be physically in the classroom. I am struggling with my MAT class, but it is okay because I know I am not the only one. I feel more calm and know that I will be okay with the help of CAMP, my family and friends.

Another student shared how the pandemic affected his mental health, and expressed his appreciation towards his peer mentor for informing him about mental health resources on campus. His intentions to make use of counseling services were apparent when he wrote, "My peer mentor talked about the importance of talking to an

expert about personal problems. I have been dealing with a lot lately especially with everything online but know that I am not alone thanks to [peer mentor] and everyone else that surrounds and supports me."

Similarly, a student from the town of Yuma shared how her peer mentor made her feel understood while she experienced difficulty adjusting to ASU. She expressed feeling validated and reassured by her peer mentor as they both worked through her challenges. She shared,

> What I learned from my peer mentor today is that it is okay to communicate problems and anything that is affecting me with her. For many months I thought I was the only one struggling with getting used to college but she mentioned that it was common and something she even went through. I also told her I was unhappy with my major and she shared she had changed her major herself and knew how to help. It was nice hearing that it is normal for students to change their majors during their first year.

When writing about their conversations with peer mentors, many students shared how gratifying it was to have someone young and experienced by their side, providing support and guidance during challenging moments. As discussed, many of the challenges faced by mentees stemmed from academics, the virtual environment, and school-life balance. Mentee's first-year experience was heavily impacted by COVID-19 as all instruction, services, and activities were remote. Due to the pandemic, mentees were unable to make use of spaces, participate in social gatherings, and/or physically interact with CAMP students and staff, suffering from the lack of in-person community. Mentees spent most of their time in their dorms in an effort to prevent transmission and

contraction of COVID-19. Many challenges resulted from social isolation and lack of in-person community as mentees missed out on opportunities to connect with others and receive face-to-face support. Nonetheless, peer mentors played a crucial role in mentees' first-year experience as they helped facilitate social interaction, and served as a support system.

Referrals to and utilization of campus resources made students feel supported, validated, and cared about. Although students understood the importance of utilizing campus resources, many expressed that they would have not reached out had it not been for the referrals made by CAMP staff and peer mentors. For a majority of students, engaging in campus resources seemed intimidating as they expressed not fully knowing who to contact for help. Nonetheless, they relied on CAMP staff and peer mentors to learn about, connect with, and take advantage of campus resources. When asked to reflect on campus resources and services learned about during their conversations with peer mentors, a student from San Luis shared,

> I didn't know ASU had counseling until my mentor told me. She referred me to this person she had met with in the past. I met with a counselor for the first time and wish I had done it sooner. He spoke to me in Spanish and reminded me in my own language that I was special and worthy of success. It feels good to have someone on campus who can help me resolve my personal problems. I hope to continue meeting with my counselor to move forward and enjoy my time in college.

Another student shared how his peer mentor not only introduced him to a campus resource he had never heard about but instead, went the extra mile and accompanied him.

He wrote,

> I felt very unhappy with the fact that I was gaining weight, and I decided to share
> this with my peer mentor. He immediately asked if I had checked out the SDFC
> and I told him I didn't know what that was. He explained to me that the SDFC
> was a gym where you could work out and told me to check it out. He also
> explained they had dietitians on site who could help out. I haven't taken a look at
> that but I worked out and it felt great. It felt good physically and mentally.

A student who had been involved in student council in high school expressed how helpful
it was connecting with ASU's student government through his peer mentor. "I knew I
wanted to get involved but I just didn't know in what capacity. I told my mentor I had
been in STUCO during high school and [peer mentor] recommended running for a
position with USG. I didn't think I'd get elected but [peer mentor] still pushed me and
thanks to her support I am now part of USG!"

In sum, students shared how peer mentors served as an instrumental key to their
involvement in the campus community and utilization of campus resources. Additionally,
they expressed that during the pandemic, having a peer mentor connect them with
resources was beneficial as it allowed them to feel part of ASU. Many students
expressed experiencing loneliness due to pandemic, and shared how having someone they
to talk to and check-in was helpful, even if it was remote.

Theme 2: Setting personal and academic goals for ASU and beyond.
Assertion 2 stated, *Student goals were inspired and fueled by their educational and*
career aspirations through their conversations with peer mentors. The prompt provided
to mentees allowed them to reflect on and set weekly goals as well as brainstorm ways to

achieve such goals. Assertion 2 theme about personal and academic goals was representative of their thinking and writing, as reflected on the prompt provided. Three related components embodied this theme which lead to Assertion 2: (a) being at ASU inspired students to set new goals, with campus resources facilitating achievement and (b) conversations with peer mentors reinforced goals and aspirations and fostered accountability.

Being at ASU inspired students to set new goals, with campus resources facilitating achievement. Students indicated that being the first in their families to attend ASU, and learning about the many resources, choices, and opportunities available to them through their peer mentors and CAMP staff inspired new goals. For example, a political science student shared reasons why she chose to attend ASU as well as her motivations to achieve her goals when she shared,

> The goal I set for myself this week is attached to my dream of becoming an immigration lawyer. I spoke with [peer mentor] about me wanting to go to law school to eventually become an immigration lawyer and [peer mentor] suggested adding a minor in Transborder Studies or in Spanish. This week, I will be meeting with my academic advisor to add a minor. My mom lives in San Luis, Mexico but has always wanted to come to the U.S. That is why I am at ASU, to educate myself enough to get my mom out of poverty. Plus, I have siblings I need to set an example for. I think a minor will allow me to learn even more about my community and ways in which I can give back to them.

A peer mentor helped influence his mentee's academic aspirations by introducing him to a program he had never heard about. A STEM major interested in pursuing graduate school wrote,

> This week I made it a goal to get a Master's. I know I am barely in my first year but I know that if I made it this far then I will also be successful in a Master's program. My mom told me that I dream too much but there's a reason why I came here all the way from Yuma. Not only do I want to be the first in my family to graduate with a Bachelor's but also with a Master's. My mentor told me about this 4 + 1 program they're interested in so I hope I can do that too. I am still learning more about it but my goal is to research it a bit more.

Overall, students wrote about ways in which their identity, background, and the knowledge acquired through their conversations with peer mentors and CAMP staff inspired new goals. Further, students expressed how being the first in their families to attend college served as a motivator to aim higher.

Conversations with peer mentors reinforced goals and aspirations, and fostered accountability. Students were asked to reflect on their conversations with peer mentors, and write down ways in which they benefited from the peer mentor program. They were educated on the importance of building relationships with others, and provided tools to make connections with peer mentors and other members of the ASU community. Students expressed satisfaction with the peer mentor program, and shared how their conversations with mentors encouraged them during moments of doubt. One student from San Luis High School shared,

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Being away from home is really hard, especially during a pandemic. Plus online

classes are difficult so it's easy to think, what am I doing here? I remember asking

[peer mentor] early in the semester what he thought about me transferring to

Arizona Western College (AWC). He gave me the info I needed but before doing

so he said, "Look I know it's hard but think for a second about all the work you

did to get here". He shared that he had felt the same way when he first started,

which made me feel more at peace with myself. He reminded me that it was ok to

have doubts but to always remember my goals and the hard work my parents had

invested in me to get here. He advised me to finish the semester first and then

think about transferring. Now I am not even considering it anymore because my

dream has always been to graduate from ASU.

Similarly, another student from San Luis who had been struggling with goal setting and

accountability, shared how her peer mentor enhanced her motivation to achieve goals.

She said,

I had a really difficult time staying on track with weekly goals. It was almost

impossible for me as I didn't really do homework when I was in high school, so I

just didn't know how to study or where to begin. It got to a point where I thought

I wasn't going to pass the semester but having someone looking over my

shoulders, reminding me of my weekly goals made it almost impossible not to get

back on track. He pushed me to do better… he believed in me, even when I didn't

think I would make it.

A third student majoring in STEM provided a similar rationale about goal setting and

accountability when she wrote,

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Having someone there going over my goals only reminded me of how important it is for me to accomplish them. Because they are goals worth accomplishing and they are goals that will help me be successful in life. Being able to share my dream of working in the health care field with someone who is graduating next year with the same major as me was very inspiring. We both had the opportunity to talk about our passions and share things she had done to achieve her goals, which was helpful and helped me stay on track with my goals here at ASU.

For these students, having a peer to share their goals with served as a motivator during difficult times. Students relied on their peer mentors for reassurance, and were validated as well as reminded of their ability to accomplish their goals and succeed at ASU. Despite their doubts about ASU, students shared their contentment with the community, and expressed their gratitude for the support provided by CAMP during their first semester.

Semi-structured interviews. A total of ten first-generation MSFW students in CAMP were interviewed upon completion of the innovation. Interviews consisted of 14 open-ended questions in a semi-structure format, allowing for follow-up questions. The interviews varied in length between 20 - 35 minutes. Seven students reported living in a residence hall despite given the option to return home due to the pandemic, while the remaining students lived in apartment complexes near campus. Six of the ten students interviewed were awarded the Obama Scholarship, three received the College Attainment Grant, and one received financial assistance from CAMP. All interviews were conducted via Zoom to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all participants. It is worth mentioning

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that many responses were translated from Spanish to English as participants expressed feeling more comfortable expressing themselves in their native language.

Further, narrative coding was utilized to code all individual interviews. As mentioned in Saldaña (2015), narrative coding allows researchers to apply the conventions of both literary elements and analysis to qualitative texts in the form of stories. Thus, narrative coding was deemed appropriate for the exploration of participant experiences and actions as it allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the human condition through story. When examining the experiences of students with respect to sense of belonging and retention, narrative coding allowed for their voices to assist in deriving meaning to create a collective category as well as themes and assertions. Table 4 displayed the theme-related components, themes, and assertions based on the data that stemmed from semi-structured interviews.

Table 4

Theme-Related Components, Themes, and Assertions Based on Semi-Structured Interviews

Theme-related components	Theme	Assertion
1. Learning about involvement opportunities facilitated the creation of campus connections. 2. Continuing at ASU included further developing campus connections to meet demands.	Capitalizing on involvement opportunities to connect with campus community and persist at ASU.	1. Peer mentorship afforded opportunities for students to build connections at ASU.
1. Conversations with peer mentors reassured students' goals.	Goal setting and achievement enhanced retention and persistence.	1. Students benefited from goal setting, reflected on

2. Developing a plan to achieve goals motivated students to stay and continue at ASU.		failures, and celebrated small wins.
1. Acknowledgment of identity, background, and abilities made students feel supported and valued. 2. Story-sharing built confidence and solidified students' goals.	Enhancing student belonging and retention through validating statements and story-sharing.	1. Students experienced instances of validation from peer mentors where validation led to feelings of support, increased confidence, and persistence.

Theme 1: Capitalizing on involvement opportunities to connect with campus community and persist at ASU. Assertion 1 suggested, *Peer mentorship afforded opportunities for students to create meaningful connections at ASU*. Participating in a peer mentor program gave students the ability to build connections beyond CAMP, enhancing both their belonging and retention. Two theme-related components comprised the theme which led to Assertion 1: (a) learning about involvement opportunities facilitated the creation of campus connections and (b) continuing at ASU included further developing campus connections to meet demands.

Learning about involvement opportunities facilitated the creation of campus connections. As mentioned, peer mentors were required to introduce and refer mentees to campus resources and services in an effort to foster belonging and help them feel part of the campus community. During the interviews, students shared that they were not fully aware of the many resources and services available to them, and that discussing such

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opportunities with a more experienced peer enabled the creation of campus connections.

One student majoring in engineering indicated,

> You hear about all these resources during orientation but it's inevitable not to
>
> forget since it is so much information. But when you have someone you look up
>
> to tell you how they benefited from Success Nights (tutoring sessions) in Tooker
>
> or from joining a club or going to an event then you realize how important it is for
>
> you to do these things too. My mentor told me to join Society of Hispanic and
>
> Professional Engineers and I didn't think it was that important but I still did it.
>
> Going to the first virtual meeting was eye opening because it really got me
>
> thinking about things I had not thought about conferences, internships, jobs, and
>
> all that. I got to learn about things I needed to do and the people I needed to
>
> connect with to get ahead of the game. Now I have a mentor within Society of
>
> Hispanic Professional Engineers who is about to graduate and wants to help me
>
> just like they helped him. It feels great knowing other people majoring in the
>
> same thing as you are, especially during this pandemic.

A student who had been curious about exploring campus but did not know where to start

relied on her peer mentor for guidance and expertise. She shared,

> I was told by my mentor that I had to do more than just attend class in order to
>
> feel part of my university. It was hard at first just sitting in my dorm all day
>
> doing homework and not exploring campus but after a while I knew some things
>
> had to change. Staying in was affecting me more than I thought. I had questions
>
> about Residence Hall Association (RHA) and was intrigued by their online and
>
> in-person events but didn't feel comfortable going alone. I asked my mentor and

she said I should go to an in-person, socially distanced event, and it turned out

better than expected because I got to meet other students. Up until now, I still go

to some events and they are a lot of fun! It has helped a lot because I now hang

out around campus. Ever since, I have used the gym, met new people and hiked A

mountain, done homework with others around campus, and gone to a few virtual

workshops.

Similarly, a third student described how learning about involvement opportunities helped

her get a campus job, making her feel as a valuable member of the Sun Devil community.

She stated,

You know having an on-campus job has helped me a lot. From meeting new

people and learning about other departments to helping students, working on

campus makes me feel like I am giving back to ASU. I didn't think a job would

do that until I started and realized how cool it was to learn from my boss and co-

workers. Not only do I feel supported but also important here. I remember telling

my mentor and [CAMP staff] I wanted to work on campus, and before I knew it

they had filled me with information and lots of encouragement! Now I understand

why it is so important to take advantage of the opportunities offered to us.

To summarize, students explained how learning from peer mentors about campus

resources and other opportunities available to them enhanced their belonging, connecting

them with members of their campus community, and making them feel part of their

university. In addition, students expressed gaining a better understanding of benefits

stemming from campus involvement, and how crucial it was to their success at ASU.

Continuing at ASU included further developing campus connections to meet demands. During the interviews, seven students indicated they had already registered for the spring semester, while the remaining three shared they were working with their academic advisor on changing their major and/or getting registered for classes. Nonetheless, all ten students stated they would be returning to ASU for their sophomore year. In thinking about the spring semester and beyond, students shared their desire to further develop campus connections to thrive at ASU. When asked "What are some topics and/or resources you believe would further enhance your sense of belonging and retention?", most students expressed an interest in and need for in-person campus involvement. A student from San Luis shared that, although he was informed by his peer mentor about student clubs and organizations, he believed in-person campus involvement would have allowed him to connect with his community,

> I am grateful for [CAMP staff], tutors, and mentors. I feel like I have been able to manage this experience well thanks to the guidance and support of my peer mentor but I also feel like I am missing out on so many opportunities. I wish I would have had the opportunity during my first semester to explore clubs, meet people with my same interests, and create connections with others. That stuff that makes college feel like home, you know? Participated in meetings, gone to campus events, all of that. But that's okay. If anything, I now know why it is important to join clubs, and if anything I feel like this whole pandemic thing has only made me want to come back to ASU next year to experience what college is truly like. My peer mentor told me to join Hispanic Business Students Association and run for a leadership position, and I think I will.

Another student reflected on how the pandemic affected his undergraduate experience, and expressed interest in establishing and further developing relationships with institutional agents moving forward to succeed at ASU. He said,

I think for me interacting with professors, going to office hours, and taking advantage of study groups and tutoring are some of the many things I am missing out on. I am going to tutoring right now but it's online and I don't like it. I heard [CAMP staff] and also from [peer mentor] that last year, some CAMP students did some research with a professor and that just sounds like something I would enjoy doing. I don't remember if it was [peer mentor] but someone talked to me about how important it is to connect with professors, especially if you want to get a Master's. He also mentioned a graduate advising center or something like that which I really hope to check out once everything goes back to normal.

A third student from San Luis shared his desire to join intramural sports and attend athletic events to further develop campus connections and feel more connected to ASU. He stated,

Right now I am in my first semester so I feel like I still have a lot I need to take advantage of. For me, I think a resource I would like to learn about to feel more connected to ASU would be sports. I am interested in sports management and marketing and want to have a career in that in the future, so I am hoping next year we will get lucky and visit the stadium. I also play sports and want to join a league or something on campus to meet other students with my same interests and passions, and also to get a break from my classes and all the stress that comes with studying. I know it sounds weird but sports is the reason why I chose ASU

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over a community college. Right now I feel like I know very few people but

know that hopefully, I will soon make friends that are as passionate about sports

as I am.

To summarize, students expressed a need for and desire to further develop campus

connections to feel more connected to their university. They demonstrated interest in a

wide variety of resources and services, from graduate advising to student organizations

and sporting events. Further, they understood the benefits stemming from campus

involvement, and regarded it as an important factor when thinking about their belonging

and retention at ASU.

Theme 2: Goal setting and achievement enhanced retention and persistence.

Assertion 2 indicated, *Students benefited from goal setting, reflected on failures,*

and celebrated small wins. During the interviews, students were asked a series of

questions around challenges, goals, and factors that influenced their retention. Two

theme-related components comprised the theme which led to Assertion 2: (a)

conversations with peer mentors reassured students' goals and (b) developing a plan to

achieve goals motivated students to stay and continue at ASU.

Conversations with peer mentors reassured students' goals. Many students

expressed feeling better and more confident about their goals after discussing them with

peer mentors. They also shared having a hard time discussing academic goals with

family members due to lack of knowledge regarding college experience. A student

shared how her peer mentor encouraged her to pursue her goals, and motivated her to stay

ambitious. She claimed,

I told my mom I wanted to get a Master's and she said that I dreamed too big and

stuff. You know it was kind of like sad to hear that and a little bit like disappointing. I know she meant no harm but it did hurt me. Anyways, this made me feel like I needed to like not get too ahead of myself. When [peer mentor] would like ask me questions about my goals I didn't really like want to tell her because I felt like she was going to judge me or something. But of course, it like wasn't like that or anything. On the contrary, she like shared how like it was okay to think and dream big. It was like the thing I needed to hear to not feel bad about all my dreams and stuff.

A student from San Luis High School described how her peer mentor provided support with conflicting goals when she shared,

Outside of CAMP, it's not like I talk to people about like what I want to do or that stuff. Not because I don't want to but because not everyone understands why you are like doing something. My parents are like always trying to talk to me and like asking when I will be visiting but I don't think they like realize that I need to study to get good grades and not fail and stuff. My mom wants me to get straight A's but I don't think she understands that it's not that easy. My goals are more realistic, like getting A's and B's and it's not easy to tell that to them because they're like, "Mijita you've always been an straight A student" but that was back in high school. Thank God I had [peer mentor] to talk to about my goals because she said getting straight A's in college wasn't that easy and that it was good for me to have realistic goals for myself.

A student majoring in STEM shared similar sentiment about conflicting goals, and explained how having someone in college to talk to about finances was beneficial when she stated,

> Well it's easy and normal to have a lot of questions and not know how to accomplish goals, or at least that was my case because there isn't really anyone at home I can ask for advice. Like my dad didn't go to college so it's hard for him to understand like how things work and stuff. I had to take out a loan to finish paying for my dorm because I didn't want to work, I wanted to focus on school and I told my dad and he got mad. He wanted me to work, told me that it was bad to borrow money and that it was going to be really hard to pay them back. But then like I talked to [CAMP staff] and several peer mentors and they all said it was okay to borrow money, and gave me info about ways I could pay for it later. They also gave me information about scholarships, and helped me by giving me money so I can meet my goal of graduating with no loans.

Although many students expressed abstaining from discussing goals with family members, they felt that their conversations with peer mentors inspired them to work towards their goals. Further, students shared how helpful it was having someone with their same background mentor them during their first semester of college.

Developing a plan to achieve goals motivated students to stay and continue at ASU. During their interviews, students were asked "Did the peer mentor program help you stay on track with your goals?" The answer for all students was yes, followed by examples of goal setting practices. A student from Yuma explained how working with a peer mentor was helpful as she not only reflected on setbacks through their conversations

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but also established both short-term and long-term goals. She stated,

> It was pretty cool having someone interested in like knowing more about my goals and stuff. I would always ask [peer mentor], "Do you really like want to know?" and she would always laugh and nod. Once we started working on my goals and talking about them I felt more relaxed, like it made me think bigger picture and I used that to push myself and not give up. It was also cool because it was not only about like the big stuff, like my dreams and stuff, it was also like small stuff. Like meeting deadlines, passing a test or lab, stuff that is small but still like matters a lot. I failed a couple of assignments and a few quizzes at like the beginning but after like talking about stuff I did bad or wrong with [peer mentor] I created new goals like going to tutoring at least once a week. Little by little I like did things I had never done, which is getting me close to the big stuff, like graduation.

A second student described how her peer mentor taught her strategies for setting and achieving goals. She shared how her peer mentor introduced her to SMART goals, a tool that allowed her to reflect on goals. She stated,

> So what we did was think about my big goal and work backwards. She really got me to think about like every little thing. What I needed to do to pass the classes I'm taking like right now, what I needed to register for spring and things like that, what I could like do during the summer, etc. Things I like, didn't think about. As I started to meet goals and stuff she would push me to keep going, reminded me of how that goal would impact my new goal, and how one thing would like eventually lead to me being successful at ASU.

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A third student from San Luis explained how reflecting on setbacks with peer mentor motivated her to do better. Further, she shared how her peer mentor provided study tips and techniques in an effort to help reinforce her academic skills. She stated,

> You know there's like students here that will like fail an exam and feel like it's the end of the world. I know because I was like that person during the start of the semester. I like told [CAMP staff] and she told me it was okay and that I could still get a good grade but that I just needed to like go to tutoring and talk to my mentor about study tips. I did it without really thinking that like my mentor would be able to help much but he did. He shared techniques on how to study, like writing terms and in flashcards and like reviewing like my notes and it helped me. I did like so many things to pass the second exam, and was like, "Ok, I got this" and kept doing it over and over again. It felt like I had found the key to success. I know I can do this, and am really really working on keeping up my good grades so I don't lose my scholarships 'cause I want to stay here and graduate.

To summarize, students demonstrated a clear understanding of benefits stemming from goal setting, and described how such practices allowed them to continue during moments of failure. Further, mentees demonstrated their ability to reflect on their own academic development as a result of their conversations with mentees and CAMP staff. Lastly, their motivation to stay at ASU extended to setting new goals as well as focusing on and celebrating small wins.

Theme 3: Enhancing student belonging and retention through validating statements and story-sharing. Assertion 3 indicated, *Students experienced instances of validation from peer mentors where validation led to feelings of support, increased*

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confidence, and persistence. During the interviews, students were asked to describe their experiences in the peer mentor program, and share instances where they had meaningful interactions with their peer mentors. Students described occasions of validation from their peer mentors and the influence it had on their feelings of being supported, experiences of confidence, and desires to continue at ASU. Two theme-related components comprised the theme which led to Assertion 3: (a) acknowledgment of identity, background, and abilities made students feel supported and valued and (b) story-sharing built confidence and solidified students' goals.

Acknowledgment of identity, background, and abilities made students feel supported and valued.

Students shared instances of having their identity, background, and abilities validated by their peer mentors, and validating statements motivated them to finish the semester and continue at ASU. A student from the town of San Luis shared how feelings of homesickness almost made him drop out, and described how his peer mentor played a role in his decision to stay at ASU. He shared,

> I am not going to lie, there were several moments where I thought about giving up and going back home. I mean, who doesn't? I remember meeting with [peer mentor] and her saying, "Think about the long hours and hard work your parents have put on the fields. You have what it takes to keep going! You are smart and capable of doing anything put you put your mind to". She was right and for some reason, like it really stuck with me. It's funny because now I am about to finish the semester and like I am already looking forward to next semester and my next years at ASU!

Another student from San Luis High School expressed how her peer mentor served as a support system as she constantly reassured her place at ASU. She shared,

I guess I could say talking with [peer mentor] felt like a friendship more to me. We talked on a personal level like friends and she was almost like a... Cheerleader? Cheerleader, yes. She was like super inspirational and always reminded me of how I got here and why I was here. She said stuff that reminded me of who I was, where I come from like the city I grew up with and stuff, and all that which helped a lot. She also reminded me that it was ok to feel a bit lost and to like have challenges because I was the first one from my family at ASU, which is right. She also said that if I was able to get this far and be at ASU then I was capable of doing all the stuff I wanted.

Students also demonstrated a strong sense of confidence to continue and succeed at the university. Factors that influenced their thoughts included, but were not limited to, being the first in their family to attend college as well as their sense of belonging derived from their conversations and interactions with CAMP, ASU staff, and peers. The development of confidence was evident when students described how their peer mentors validated their identities, experiences, and abilities, motivating them through story. A third student from Kofa High School described her interactions with her peer mentor as "a driving force," and also stated,

At first I was like a bit shy and didn't really open up to my peer mentor. Once she began to share her personal experiences with me, I felt more connected to her and stuff. We both have the same background, you know like our parents live in Yuma and work in the fields so she like understands me. I remember telling her I

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was struggling with math and that I didn't think I would pass it, and she shared she had also struggled with math during her freshman year which like made me feel so much better. She gave me some tips on how to study and referred me to a CAMP tutor. She was great at reminding me that I have a place here at ASU and also that I am more than capable of passing my classes and achieving all my dreams. It's like super easy to forget that when you are stressed but I appreciate her always being there for me, like constantly checking up on me and stuff, and asking about my classes. It's good to be reminded that I am here for a reason, and that I can like do anything I set my mind to. I really hope to continue working with her, honestly and also to get to know her and other peer mentors better because they are really super nice.

Notably, students expressed their contentment with and gratitude towards peer mentors for validating their identity, background, and abilities. They identified validating statements as a motivational factor which contributed to their belonging and desire to stay and succeed at ASU.

Story-sharing built confidence and solidified students' goals. Students described how listening to stories and sharing their own built confidence in themselves and their ability to achieve personal and academic goals, motivating them during challenging times. A student from San Luis High School expressed how she benefited from story-sharing when she said,

Something that I thought was like very helpful was listening to [peer mentor] share her own like stories of how she like was falling a class at the beginning of the semester but then passed it. She did this 'cause I told her that I was falling a

class and that I felt very sad and disappointed, 'cause I had like never failed an

exam before. But like once she said she had been in the same spot as me I was

like, "Okay, I think I can do this then". She also shared like wanting to go back to

[community college] but pushing through her first year here. All that is like,

inspiring to me and like it also made me think of how I can also push through and

really do everything I want to do here and after I'm done with ASU.

A second student majoring in business described his peer mentor as family, supporting

Strayhorn's (2012) notion of fictive kin; that is, family-like relationships with others on

campus. He noted,

> [Peer mentor] was almost like a brother to me. You know how like your older
>
> brothers or sisters tell you things they have done and things they wish they would
>
> have done to like guide you? Well, same thing here. [Peer mentor] was always
>
> like, "Hey remember how I told you I had a hard time turning in assignments
>
> because I never wrote anything down? Have you done the same thing yet? Come
>
> on, you can do this!" It was kind of funny and like a bit annoying at first 'cause he
>
> reminded me of my mom but I understood very quickly why he was like sharing
>
> all that with me. He really got me doing things I never thought I would have done
>
> myself, like buying a calendar and writing everything down to like get good
>
> grades and pass all my classes. And let me tell you it did like help, like a
>
> lot.

A third student in STEM shared how advice from a peer mentor changed her mind about

dropping out of ASU and transferring to a university in Mexico. She shared,

For me it was clear that like I was not going to make it past this semester. My dream had always been to graduate from a university in the US and be an engineer but I always struggled with my English, and I like still do to be honest. When I shared this with [peer mentor] she like told me she had changed her major from Business to Photography to now Spanish because like she had also struggled with her Spanish, just like me. Hearing her say that, our high school didn't prepare us well, was true. We went to the same high school by the way, and so they didn't speak much English there. [Peer mentor] also shared some tips and how she had worked with I don't remember which department to like improve her English skills. I don't plan on transferring to Mexico anymore but I will be changing my major… I now want to be a teacher, and will be taking classes in that major next semester.

Taken together, story-sharing allowed students to reflect on their experiences and that of peer mentors, reinforcing their personal and academic goals. Confidence and desire to continue at the university was apparent in students' responses, and it boded well for their continued success in their efforts at ASU.

Evidently, the same underlying themes emerged throughout the data, with semi-structured interviews strengthening themes emerging from the written data and vice versa. For example, theme 1 from semi-structured interviews, *Capitalizing on involvement opportunities to connect with campus community and persist at ASU*, corroborated with theme 1 from written data, *Seeking out campus resources and services in times of need*. Data stemming from semi-structured interviews supported mentees' expressed desire to create campus connections and make use of resources and services to

continue at ASU. As such, peer mentors introduced mentees to resources and services they believed were beneficial to students based on expressed needs and challenges, serving a support system during difficult times.

Further, Theme 2 from semi-structured interviews, *Goal setting and achievement enhanced retention and persistence*, expanded on theme 2 from written data, *Setting personal and professional goals for ASU and beyond*, with mentees describing how mentors assisted with goal setting practices. Mentees shared how their conversations with mentors influenced their academic aspirations; in moments of doubt, peer mentors reassured mentees by providing advice and support. Further, peer mentors played a crucial role in helping mentees set and accomplish personal goals, creating space for planning and reflection.

Story-sharing was also a recurring theme in both semi-structured interviews and participant field notes, with mentees experiencing instances of validation and reassurance throughout their conversations with peer mentors. They expressed how having someone from their same background was beneficial as they felt comfortable asking for guidance and advice. Further, story-sharing enhanced mentees' intentions to stay at ASU, as peer mentors validated their experiences.

Summary. Overall, the qualitative data suggested students benefited from their participation in the peer mentor program as it served as a way for them to learn about resources and get connected with their campus community. Despite the pandemic, students took advantage of opportunities to get involved in small ways, developed campus connections that inspired and supported them, and built confidence to thrive at ASU.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this action research study was to assess the impact of a peer mentor program focused on the sense of belonging and college retention of first-generation MSFW students within CAMP. The study was guided by three theoretical frameworks including the work of the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995), Astin (1984), and Rendón (1994). In Chapter 5, findings of the study were discussed including (a) explanation of results, (b) limitations, (c) implications for practice, (d) implications for future research, and (e) personal lessons learned.

Explanation of Results

The theoretical perspectives on belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), student involvement (Astin, 1984), and validation (Rendón, 1994) suggested that students benefited from constant and ongoing relationships with peers and key institutional agents, particularly those who facilitated validating conversations. Further, to the extent students were involved with their campus community, they developed a sense of belonging and felt more connected to their university, increasing students' desire to stay and continue at ASU.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that, because it was necessary for humans to establish and maintain relationships, they were constantly looking for ways to develop definite and ongoing relationships with others. Consistent with these claims, results from this action research study demonstrated that students craved opportunities to meet and connect with other members of their community, and looked up to their peer mentors and other institutional agents for guidance and validation. The peer mentor program afforded

opportunities for students to form and build relationships with CAMP students in their second and third year of college and interact with other institutional agents. Further, mentees looked up to mentors for inspiration and reassurance, motivating them to reflect on accomplishments, set new goals, and find support when needed.

Several interview responses were consistent with the theory of belonging, including the case of the student who shared,

> I am grateful for [CAMP staff], tutors, and mentors. I feel like I have been able to manage this experience well thanks to the guidance and support of my peer mentor… I wish I would have had the opportunity during my first semester to explore clubs, meet people with my same interests, and create connections with others. That stuff that makes college feel like home, you know? Participated in meetings, gone to campus events, all of that.

Although the pandemic prevented students from establishing in-person relationships with institutional agents, this quote provided evidence about students' understanding regarding the importance of relationships in building connections and enhancing a sense of belonging. Further, this initial sense of connectedness and belonging contributed to retention, as evident in the qualitative data. The following quote attested to this claim when one student stated, "Having someone there going over my goals only reminded me of how important it is for me to accomplish them. We both had the opportunity to talk about our passions and share things she had done to achieve her goals, which was helpful and helped me stay on track with my goals here at ASU."

Further, Astin (1984) introduced one of the strongest pieces of evidence for co-curricular involvement, making the argument that desired outcomes of postsecondary

institutions were viewed in relation to students' involvement. According to Astin, persistence and retention could be rationalized around student involvement as students who participated in co-curricular activities developed a greater sense of belonging. Nonetheless, Astin's student involvement theory disregarded environmental factors within colleges and universities, and failed to consider the fact many minoritized students have been negatively impacted by the dominant culture prior to entering college. As such, Astin's student involvement theory was only used to inform the researcher's overall understanding of co-curricular involvement and its applicability to the peer mentor program.

Consistent with Astin's student involvement theory, various instances from the qualitative data demonstrated that students benefited from learning about as well as utilizing campus resources and services. For example, one student shared,

You hear about all these resources during orientation but it's inevitable not to forget since it is so much information. But when you have someone you look up to tell you how they benefited from Success Nights in Tooker or from joining a club or going to an event then you realize how important it is for you to do these things too. My mentor told me to join the Society of Hispanic and Professional Engineers with him and I didn't think it was that important but I still did it. Going to the first virtual meeting was eye opening because it really got me thinking about things I had not thought about like conferences, internships, jobs, and all that.

Evidently, peer mentors played a crucial role in introducing and connecting mentees to campus resources and services, which allowed for establishing relationships with

institutional agents and other members of their campus community. Although all interactions were virtual due to the pandemic, mentees expressed their desire and intentions to enhance their involvement and further develop campus connections during the upcoming Fall semester. One participant stated, "I now know why it is important to join clubs, and if anything I feel like this whole pandemic thing has only made me want to come back to ASU next year to experience what college is truly like."

Moreover, several other examples from the qualitative data indicated that mentees understood the many benefits stemming from co-curricular involvement, and viewed it as a crucial factor contributing to their belonging and retention at ASU. Mentees learned to perceive co-curricular involvement as a way to acquire knowledge, skills, and experience in an effort to be successful at ASU and beyond. For example, one student claimed, "My mentor told me to join the Society of Hispanic and Professional Engineers with him and I didn't think it was that important but I still did it. Going to the first virtual meeting was eye opening because it really got me thinking about things I had not thought about conferences, internships, jobs, and all that." Lastly, mentees expressed contentment and gratitude towards their mentors for introducing them to campus resources and services, supporting their goals, and validating their identity, background, and abilities.

Further, Rendón (1994) emphasized the importance of validation and described its role in student involvement. According to Rendón, it was crucial for institutional agents who interacted or worked closely with minoritized students to establish relationships and facilitate validating conversations in an effort to encourage co-curricular involvement. She argued that merely offering involvement opportunities did not work for minoritized students; instead, contended that validation had to occur first in order for students to feel

comfortable enough to engage in such opportunities. Consistent with these claims, results from the current study indicated that students relied on peer mentors for validation as it provided reassurance and built confidence, motivating them to connect with their campus community. For example, one student claimed, "I remember telling my mentor and [CAMP staff] I wanted to work on campus, and before I knew it they had filled me with information and lots of encouragement! Now I understand why it is so important to take advantage of the opportunities offered to us."

Rendón also argued that validation was imperative to student development, and stated that students who were validated regularly felt more confident about themselves as well as their abilities to achieve goals and become involved on campus. Various interview responses were consistent with Rendón's validation theory as they indicated how peer mentors solidified mentees' personal and academic goals through validating statements, enhancing their decision to persist at ASU. For example, one student stated, "As I started to meet goals and stuff [peer mentor] would push me to keep going, remind me of how that goal would impact my new goal, and how one thing would like eventually lead to me being successful at ASU." Evidently, validating conversations were critical for first-generation MSFW students during their first semester at ASU as they navigated their new and fully remote campus environment.

Taken together, the results of this study extended the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995), Astin (1984), and Rendón's (1994). In particular, the results of this study supported the argument that validation was necessary in order for minoritized students to feel comfortable enough to engage in campus life, and enhance their sense of belonging. The peer mentor program translated to a co-curricular involvement opportunity for first-

generation MSFW students as it allowed them to establish relationships with institutional agents, set new goals, and learn about campus resources and services at ASU, all while engaging in validating conversations with institutional agents. Further, the peer mentor program served as a support system for mentees in moments of doubt and adversity, specifically during the pandemic as most students' experiences were fully remote. As such, the peer mentor program played a crucial role in their sense of belonging and retention as it served as an avenue for mentees to connect with their campus community, make use of resources and services, and rely on their peers for goal accountability and support.

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study, including (a) researcher bias and (b) the number of participants. Each limitation was presented in the following section.

The first limitation was research bias. Due to the fact that I was not only the researcher, but also the Student Recruitment and Family Engagement Coordinator, it was likely that bias could have played a role in my interpretations of results. Thus, in an effort to combat researcher bias, I engaged in thoughtful reflection throughout the coding and interpretive processes. I kept a reflection journal with steps made during data analysis to ensure that the interpretation of qualitative data reflected students' experiences. I also took some time to reflect and write about aspects of the innovation that did not happen as planned, and constantly checked-in with mentees to ensure that their feedback was being implemented. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that my positionality as Student

Recruitment and Family Engagement Coordinator provided me with unique interpretive advantages as I had deep cultural knowledge of the situation studied in this project.

The second limitation was the small number of study participants. As previously mentioned, this study was aimed at first-year, first-generation MSFW students within CAMP. An arrangement was made to recruit 10 first-generation MSFW students in their first year; while all ten students participated in the semi-structured interviews, several participants did not fully complete their field notes. It is also worth noting that this group of students were not representative of all first-year, first-generation MSFW students as sample biased toward female students; thus, conclusions were made with caution.

Implications for Research

Results from this action research study suggested various implications for research, which included (a) studies of first-generation MSFW students in higher education and (b) research around storytelling and its applicability to peer mentor program.

The first implication pertained to additional studies of first-generation MSFW students in higher education. The literature gap on first-generation MSFW students and their collegiate experiences was apparent; much of what has been explored with respect to this student population focused on challenges faced in high school as well as their educational gaps. As the number of first-generation MSFW students entering higher education increases, empirical work addressing MSFW students' challenges and needs while in college is needed in an effort to develop intentional programming. Thus, research should become more focused on the collegiate experience of first-generation

MSFW students as well as the resources needed for them to develop a sense of belonging and succeed.

As body of literature around MSFW students in higher education emerges, it is important to consider factors influencing the success of this student population. As mentioned in Escamilla and Treviño (2014), family-like connections played a crucial role in MSFW students' collegiate success as they relied in fictive kinship to get through emotional and academic stress. Findings from this study demonstrated how mentees relied on peer mentors and CAMP staff for guidance and support during challenging situations. Further, having someone on campus to talk to about finances and academics was helpful as it was often difficult for mentees to discuss these topics with family members. Escamilla and Treviño also contended that MSFW students benefited from in-depth relationships within support systems as they were able to reflect on and share experiences and challenges with others. Rey Reyes (2009) discussed the importance of key interactions for minoritized students, and contended that words of encouragement from institutional agents served as a motivating factor for this student population. Findings from this study extended on the notion of key interactions as validating statements played a crucial role in mentees' sense of belonging and retention.

The second implication pertained to research on storytelling and its applicability to a peer mentor program, specifically around teaching and learning. Evidently, storytelling played a crucial role in the peer mentor program as it enhanced students' confidence and solidified their goals. Mentors shared personal experiences in an effort to connect with mentees, reinforce their goals, and motivate them during challenging times. As such, research on storytelling theories, including Boje's behavioral storytelling theory

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(2005) and Frank's dialogical narrative analysis (2010), should be conducted to gain a better understanding of how stories can be used in a peer mentor program to teach and inspire minoritized students.

Implications for Practice

Results from this action research project suggested various implications for practice including (a) capitalizing on involvement opportunities to enhance a sense of belonging and retention, (b) educating institutional key agents on role and importance of validation, and (c) collecting additional feedback from first-generation MSFW students and sharing with other departments to ensure existing campus resources and services cater their interests and needs.

For first-year, first-generation MSFW students, sense of belonging and community served as manifestations of campus connection. Creating pathways for connections benefited first-generation MSFW students as they were introduced to campus resources and communities that they did not know or knew very little about. Students referred to their social environment as well as campus resources available to them as opportunities for belonging and developing connections with those around them. Future practice must continue to capitalize on such opportunities, and allow for the creation of new opportunities, for the purpose of developing a sense of belonging and community for all students. As such, requiring students to meet with a faculty member or a professional in their designated field of study should be considered in future cycles of the peer mentor program in an effort to enhance relationship building within and beyond ASU.

Educating institutional key agents on the role and importance of validation is crucial to the overall success of first-generation MSFW students and other minoritized

student populations. In this study, students referred to instances where peer mentors validated their experiences and skills, motivating them to continue in moments of doubt. As such, it is crucial for institutional agents to look beyond the traditional, cookie-cutter student experience and think of ways in which involvement opportunities can be tailored around the needs and interests of diverse student populations. Developing programming where minoritized students are given the opportunity to come together and share experiences, challenges, and concerns, and where their identity and background is validated is one way to achieve this goal.

Lastly, the limited timeframe for the current study did not allow for sufficient collection of feedback regarding campus resources and services utilized by first-generation MSFW students. Thus, developing additional tools for gathering student feedback over a longer timeframe may allow for a better and more thorough understanding of MSFW students' needs and interests, resulting in more intentional programming, creation of new resources and opportunities, etc. As such, it is crucial for CAMP staff to find additional ways to not only collect feedback from first-generation MSFW students around campus resources and services but also share such feedback with other departments in an effort to improve students' experiences.

Personal Lessons Learned

Two lessons I have learned are discussed in this section. The two lessons are (a) the value and importance of incremental action research cycles and (b) the power of storytelling.

The first key lesson is the value and importance of incremental action research cycles. The first two cycles of action research informed the research study presented in this dissertation, and allowed me to gain a better and more thorough understanding of the problem of practice. As mentioned in Chapter 2, action research allows scholarly practitioners to engage in reflective inquiry in an effort to influence their professional practice for the purpose of moving towards a shared vision. This process has taught me the importance of identifying a problem within my own context, and engaging in various cycles of action research to come up with potential solutions that will ultimately benefit the students we work with.

The second key lesson and most important lesson I learned was the power of storytelling. As a student affairs professional, I have always found the student perspective important and valuable. Nonetheless, because of this study, I recognize with greater importance and respect the influences of storytelling and validation and their effects on student belonging and retention. Individual narratives create space for reflection and empathy, allowing students to connect with and understand each other. Further, understanding the student experience through semi-structured interviews is both informative and crucial in developing a scholarly practice. Gathering student feedback utilizing a qualitative research approach informs one's understanding of students' needs, which allows for better and more intentional program development. Lastly, for some students, sharing their experience with a university staff member allowed them to come to a better understanding of their first semester at ASU. When university staff engage with students through interviews, we benefit from learning directly from students about the collegiate experience.

Conclusion

My choice to focus on the experiences of first-year, first-generation MSFW students stemmed from the lack of literature surrounding this student population. This dissertation is just the beginning of my very own research on this topic as I am committed to creating and improving campus resources in an effort to help my students succeed. I am confident that future cycles of research will provide me the opportunity to achieve such goals, and better serve our growing MSFW student population at ASU.

As mentioned, the results of this study extended the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995), Astin (1984), and Rendón's (1994), and supported the argument that validation played a key component in the experiences of first-generation MSFW students as it built their confidence and encouraged them to engage in campus life. Findings demonstrated first-generation MSFW students' need for establishing in-depth relationships with institutional agents of similar background(s), as it helped them feel acknowledged and understood. Further, findings capitalized on the importance of validation in the experiences of first-generation MSFW students as it helped acknowledge identity, background, and abilities, making students feel supported and valued. Lastly, while findings supported the overall notion of co-curricular involvement, it created a space for conversation as needs and desires of minoritized students are not met under Astin's student involvement theory.

The peer mentor program served as an opportunity for first-generation MSFW students to engage in validating conversations with institutional agents, reinforce and set goals, and make use of campus resources, enhancing their student belonging and retention. The qualitative data presented in this dissertation demonstrated the many

benefits stemming from first-generation MSFW students' participation in a peer mentor program, and allowed for collection of feedback in an effort to better serve them. Evidently, relationship building is a powerful and instrumental approach in developing a sense of belonging and enhancing retention. For students arriving on campus, feelings of belonging, avenues for building new connections, and validating conversations are instrumental as they acclimate to their new campus environment. In the case of student affairs professionals, creating involvement opportunities focused around validation is key to developing a sense of belonging and community early on in students' undergraduate careers at ASU. Notably, co-curricular involvement of first-year MSFW students is not merely on offering opportunities but facilitating validating conversations to encourage campus participation. Thus, the focus should be around creating avenues for first-generation MSFW students to connect with and learn from institutional agents in an effort to enhance their undergraduate experience at ASU.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUIT CONSENT FORM

RECRUIT CONSENT FORM

Introduction

My name is Zujaila Ornelas and I am a doctoral student in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) at Arizona State University. I am working under the direction of Dr. Carol Basile, the Dean of the Mary Lou Teacher's College. We are conducting a research study on the impact of a program focused on the sense of belonging and retention of first-generation MSFW students within the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). The purpose of this interview is to better understand the current situation with respect to first-generation MSFW students' participation in a peer mentor program at ASU Tempe campus.

We are asking for your help, which will involve your participation in an interview concerning your experiences as a first-generation MSFW student in a peer mentor program as well as your overall sense of belonging. We anticipate this interview to take 30 minutes total. I would like to audio record this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded; you can also change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know.

The intended participants of this questionnaire are first-generation MSFW college freshmen ages 18 and older enrolled full-time at ASU's Tempe campus. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty whatsoever. Your information and responses will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone.

The benefit to participation is the opportunity for you to reflect on and think more about your experiences as a first-generation MSFW student at ASU. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation. Your responses will be anonymous. Results from this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning this study, please contact Zujaila Ornelas at Zujaila.Ornelas@asu.edu or (520) 835-910. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or feel you have been placed at risk, please contact the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at (480) 965-6788.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Zujaila Ornelas, Doctoral Student
Arizona State University, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College

APPENDIX B

PROMPT FOR MENTEE FIELD NOTES

PROMPT FOR MENTEE FIELD NOTES

Field notes are intended to produce an overall understanding of the culture, social situation, and/or phenomenon being studied; in this case, field notes will be evaluated by the researcher. Please complete field notes immediately after the completion of each mentoring meeting. Delays may result in the loss of key information and insights.

In each entry, please include the date as well as your thoughts and insight about the meeting. Below are some questions to help guide your notes.

1. What were some topics discussed during your meeting with your peer mentor?

2. What goal(s) did you set this week? What will you do to accomplish your goal(s)?

3. Which campus resources or services did you learn about, and how do you plan on making use of it?

4. What would you like to discuss with your peer mentor during your next meeting?

APPENDIX C

FIRST-GENERATION MSFW STUDENTS' INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

FIRST-GENERATION MSFW STUDENTS' INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please tell me about your experience participating in the peer mentor program.
2. Did the peer mentor program help make you feel part of the ASU community? If so, how?
3. Did you have meaningful experiences with your peer mentor that contributed to your sense of belonging? Please tell me more.
4. What topics or resources did you learn about that helped connect you to campus life?
5. Would you say you benefited from the peer mentor program? If so, how?
6. Did the peer mentor program help you stay on track with your goals? Please tell me more.
7. Had you not been part of this program, do you think you would have learned and made use of campus resources and services to the same extent to which you did as a result of your participation in this program?
8. Had you not been part of this program, do you think you would have interacted with other students and staff to the same extent to which you did as a result of your participation in this program?
9. What are some challenges you have faced as a first-generation MSFW student thus far?
10. Did the peer mentor program help alleviate some of these challenges? If so, how?
11. What are some topics and/or resources you believe would further enhance your sense of belonging and retention?
12. How can the peer mentor program be improved to better assist first-generation MSFW students?
13. Have you registered for next semester? If no, what is preventing you from registering for next semester?
14. Are you planning on coming back to ASU for your sophomore year?

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Carole Basile
Teachers College, Mary Lou Fulton (MLFTC) - Tempe
480/965-4064
Carole.Basile@asu.edu

Dear Carole Basile:

On 7/9/2020 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Enhancing First-Generation MSFW Students' Sense of Belonging and Retention Through Peer Mentorship at Arizona State University (ASU).
Investigator:	Carole Basile
IRB ID:	STUDY00012096
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Interview Questions, Ornelas, Zujaila.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • IRB Social Behavioral_Ornelas, Zujaila.docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • Recruit Consent Form, Ornelas, Zujaila.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Recruiting Materials, Ornelas, Zujaila.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 on 7/9/2020.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).