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Esmeralda Cabrera  
*University of Central Florida*

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HURRICANE MARIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RECENTLY DISPLACED  
STUDENTS TO THE STATE OF FLORIDA

by

ESMERALDA CABRERA  
B.A. California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
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Major Professor: Fernando Rivera

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past ten years Puerto Rico has been experiencing a severe economic crisis that was worsened when Hurricane Maria made landfall on September 20, 2017. Maria hit Puerto Rico as a category 4 storm, devastating the whole island and its 3.4 million residents. Many students were left with minimal educational choices after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. Research on Latino/a students shows that they are met with unique experiences and challenges as they pursue higher education. The current study uses qualitative data to investigate what are the unique challenges and needs of displaced students from Puerto Rico? and what role does social capital play in confronting and navigating the challenges and needs associated with their transition to a new institutional setting? This study proposes to research the issues that many displaced Puerto Rican college student's face and add to the growing body of knowledge. It is important to understand how these recently displaced students will be affected by leaving behind, economic capital and cultural capital that they had built up in their communities on the island. Participation in the study included 9 participants from a large southeastern university that provided in-state tuition to displaced students for semi-structured qualitative interviews. Results revealed that family support was the main source of support for many of the students. Mentorship support was key in their educational success because the more support and encouragement from faculty led to a better transition. Support from peers was positively associated with a better transition and feeling of acceptance. Higher campus resources were positively associated with a better transition.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Research on Latino/a students' shows that they are met with unique experiences and challenges as they pursue higher education. Many Latino/a students are the first in their family to attend college, which leaves them on their own with no help from parents to navigate the college experience. These students are initiating their college education with no prior knowledge of how to persevere and complete college. Since they are the first in their family to attend college they have no prior knowledge that can assist them in the process (Cerezo & McWhirter, 2012; Luna & Martinez, 2012; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solorzano, 2009). Many students also face the challenge of not seeking out help from professional services dealing with emotional support when experiencing challenges in their college experience (Cerezo & McWhite, 2012; Gloria, Castellanos & Orozco, 2005). For many Latino/a college students, family is an important influencing factor that helps them persist toward completion of their degree (Allen, 2016; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006; Sy, 2006; Sy & Romero, 2008; Zalaquette & Lopez, 2006). The role that mentorship has on the persistence and completion of Latino/a college students is important. These mentor relationships help students feel more involved with the campus community, navigate bureaucracies, provide access to educational resources, and importantly so, provide emotional support (Dowd, Pak & Bensimon, 2013). There are many challenges Latino/a students face in their educational journey, but what happens when a major hurricane displaces college students? The purpose of this study is to investigate the following: What are the unique challenges and needs of displaced students from Puerto Rico? And, what role does various forms of capital play in confronting and navigating the challenges and needs associated with their transition to a new institutional setting?

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Background on Puerto Rico**

In the past ten years, Puerto Rico has been experiencing a severe economic crisis that was worsened with the devastating impact of Hurricane Maria, which hit the island on September 20, 2017. Puerto Rico is facing a public debt of about \$74 billion and an additional \$49 billion debt in pension obligations. Along with these debts, Puerto Rico has faced shutdowns in high-tech industries, increased loss of public and private sector jobs, declining infrastructure, high sales tax, and recently filed for bankruptcy protection (Mora, Davila & Rodriguez, 2018). In June of 2016, President Barak Obama enacted the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) which has complete power over Puerto Rico's budget, laws, financial plans, and regulations (Mora, Davila, & Rodriguez, 2018). PROMESA was created to help Puerto Rico with its debt and proposed a four-step legislative program. The oversight board's purpose is to cut one-third of the debt in six years (2016-2022). The University of Puerto Rico (UPR) has also many cuts. In March 2017 they received a \$200 million cut. This new fiscal plan will add about \$809 million accumulated cuts for the year 2023. In addition, there was an increase in cost per credit hour at the UPR and a ten percent reduction in government pensions (Cordova, 2018). The UPR also suggested a credit increase of \$140 dollars; however, the board ignored this and raised the unit cost to \$157 dollars (Chico, 2018). Puerto Rican college students are seeing a negative impact on their educational accessibility. These college students suffered through huge cuts to their education and had to go through the destruction of a devastating Category 4 hurricane.

Due to the economic crisis Puerto Rico has experienced, there has been a large outmigration. According to Mora, Davila, and Rodriguez (2018), between 2006 and 2016 about 646,932 individuals migrated from Puerto Rico to the United States. At the beginning of the economic crisis, New York was the destination of many migrants; however, there was also an increase in the number of Puerto Ricans migrating to Florida that reached 1,066,767 in 2015. Puerto Rican migration and relocation will change drastically in the next couple of years because of the devastating hit of Hurricane Maria on the island of Puerto Rico. On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico as a category 4 storm, devastating the whole island and its 3.4 million residents. Hurricane Maria made history as the third most powerful storm to make landfall in the United States and the strongest hurricane to hit the island of Puerto Rico in the last eighty years. Hurricane Maria was devastating to the infrastructure of Puerto Rico. It destroyed homes, schools, roads, and bridges. The storm also destroyed power lines and created heavy flooding across the island. The residents have suffered immensely. They have dealt with food and water shortages, electric shortages, hospitals and schools closing, and lack of banking access. Right after Hurricane Maria passed Puerto Rico, a total of 64 people was reported dead; however, according to a new Harvard Study, the actual death toll is probably more than 4,600 (Zorilla, 2017).

Due to Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rican relocation has been projected to change drastically. In March of 2018, the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College reported that more than 135,000 Puerto Rican residents relocated, and the majority went to the state of Florida (Duany, 2018). Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños researchers also estimated that between 2017 and 2019, the island of Puerto Rico may lose up to 470,335 residents (Duany, 2018). A recent



study by the Office of the Governor of Florida stated that more than 367,000 Puerto Ricans arrived between October 3, 2017 and February 2, 2018 (Duany, 2018). In a more recent study by Rayer (2018), it is suggested that around 20,000 to 40,000 Puerto Ricans relocated permanently to the state of Florida. According to the 2017 ACS 1-year estimates, there was an increase in the Puerto Rican population of approximately 60,000 (Rayer, 2018). The Center for Puerto Rican Studies estimates that between 114,000 and 213,000 Puerto Rican residents will leave the island annually because of Hurricane Maria (Rayer, 2018). Of this outmigration from Puerto Rico to the mainland, it is projected that Florida will be most impacted. Hunter College estimates the annual flow to be between 40,000 and 82,000 individuals (Melendez & Hinojosa, 2017). With such high numbers, it is imperative that more be done to study the needs and challenges many Puerto Rican displaced students may face. As mentioned above, college students are being affected by schools closing, destroyed homes, and PROMESA cutting educations funding.

#### Background on Latino/a Education

Research on Latino/a students show that they are met with unique experiences and challenges as they pursue higher education. The family is an important factor that has a large influence on career decisions and behaviors (Fulgini, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005). A study by Fulgini and colleagues found that Latin American adolescents that did not do well in high school were more likely to persist in their post-secondary education because of their strong sense of family obligations; however, they were more likely to attend a 2-year program. More importantly, family in this study proved to serve as a protective factor that contributed to helping students maintain their focus on academics. Many studies have supported the notion that Latino/a college students

that keep strong family ties during their time in higher education is an important factor that helps in their adjustment to college (Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006; Sy, 2006; Sy & Romero, 2008).

Aside from the feeling of motivation based on the responsibility to help improve their own and their family's well-being, many Latino/a students see family support during college as an important factor for success. In a study conducted by Allen (2016) investigated the academic and interpersonal validation experiences of four male and four female Latino students enrolled in a historically Black university in the state of Texas. The author found that family members play a very important role in the college process for Latino/a students. Participants in the study depended heavily on family members, usually their mothers. It was when they were feeling overwhelmed by coursework and responsibilities that they looked to their family's support. The participants mentioned emotional support and encouragement as big factors contributing to their persistence. It was a sense of affirmation and strength that the students needed in moments of doubt, which pushed them to keep on (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard & Aguilar, 2011). Much like Allen (2016), a study conducted by Arebalo and Milacci (2018) focused on the understanding of academic persistence among 10 nontraditional Hispanic undergraduate students. The participants were enrolled in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and were in the last year of their undergraduate education. Findings revealed that family is an important influencing factor of persistence toward completion of a degree, which supports the findings among various studies (Allen, 2016; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006; Sy, 2006; Sy & Romero, 2008; Zalaquette & Lopez, 2006). Participants used words like "help", "motivation", "role model", "supportive", and "sacrifice" to describe their family context. Arebalo and Milacci (2016), found

that the family is a powerful influencer to the persistence of a bachelors degree completion and the lack of family support can also become a barrier towards degree completion. The literature to date describes strong support for the idea that there are many different unique issues that Latino/a college students may face during their academic journey. Latino/a students fall into many different ethnic backgrounds with many differences to look further into. Family and mentorship play a huge role in most of their educational success and motivation in higher academia.

Much of the literature also focuses on support in terms of mentorship in Latino/a academic success. An institutional agent is defined as a person who has a status, authority, and control of resources in a hieratical system (Cox, Yang, & Dicke-Bohmann, 2014; Dowd et. al, 2013). Many studies agree that institutional agents in higher education such as faculty, leaders, and academic program heads play a solidifying role in the access to and success in college for many low income students of color (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Bensimon, Dowd, Alford, & Trapp, 2007; Cejda, Casparis, Rhodes, & Kelly, 2008; Cox, Yang, & Dicke-Bohmann, 2014; Dowd, Pak & Besnimon, 2013; Dowd, 2010; Dowd et al., 2006; González, Stone, & Jovel, 2003; Museus & Neville, 2012; Ramirez, 2014; Tovar, 2015). As some of the literature attests, it is important to put emphasis on the importance of mentorship and assistance for many Latino/a students.

As mentioned earlier, Allen (2016) studied the academic and interpersonal validation experiences of four male and four female Latino students enrolled in a historically Black university in Texas. Among the participants, it was concluded that interpersonal validation was created through relationships with faculty members and staff. Students described the importance of having personal connections with faculty members because they got the chance to know one another as individuals. They felt comfort in knowing that faculty cared for their success. Similarly, a study

conducted by Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) supports the importance of mentorship among Latino/a college students. They reviewed the stories of 13 academically successful Latino/a undergraduate students, with the purpose of finding out what role mentorship played in their success. Findings revealed that mentorship had a significant impact on their academic success. The participants described multiple roles and ways in which mentorship assisted them: (1) the presence of a guide that welcomed them to the university; (2) informing the students with the university's values, culture, and the necessary resources; and (3) providing support and knowledge when needed. Marquez and Dominguez (2010) chose to add to the body of literature by focusing on the value students put on building relationships with teachers/or school leaders. Building these relationships helped students feel connected to their school, go to classes on a regular basis, and have better academic results. Most studies that research and investigate the importance of mentorship among Latino/a college students come to the same findings that it has positive impact it has on their academic experience, persistence and success (Allen, 2016; Bensimon, 2007; Cox, Cody, Yang & Dicke-Bohmann, 2014; Hu & Ma 2010; Marquez & Dominguez, 2010; Nunez, 2009; Saunders & Serena, 2004; Sánchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006; Ramirez, 2014).

Many studies that focus on support for Latino/a students also mention the importance of peer support (Allen, 2016; Bensimon, 2007; Cox, Cody, Yang & Dicke-Bohmann, 2014; Hu & Ma 2010; Marquez & Dominguez, 2010; Nunez, 2009; Saunders & Serena, 2004; Sánchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). A study conducted by Estrada, Mejia, and Hufana (2017) interview college Latinos on their experiences with brotherhood. Brotherhood was defined as a gathering of men who share the same interest and goals. Findings revealed that access to social networking and brotherhood for the participants was important because it meant

having space to network and have support. Participants in this study stated that having brotherhood was a “home-away-from-home.” One student mentioned that the brotherhood connection he felt was similar to that of a family connection. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the family is an important aspect of the Latino/a student, and it makes absolute sense that it is sought after in a college setting, where in most cases they are away from home. In a study conducted by Ramirez (2014) that analyzed the challenges and structural injustices that Chicanos/Latinos(as) encountered and resisted during their first year of graduate school. Across academic fields, these students found ways to make it through their first year of graduate school. The participants described forming peer support groups, mentorship support, and academic support as forms of resistance and persistence; however, peer support networks were the most emphasized form of persistence. Many participants described peer support groups as crucial to their survival in the university setting. Ramirez described peer support groups as representing important forms of social capital because they created crucial forms of support that helped with their persistence. Identity was also important because a participant described the importance of the limited number of Chicano students in their cohort. It was important to have peers that shared their same cultural identity because it was instrumental to their success.

#### Post Research on Displaced Students in Higher Education

To date, there have been limited studies on the displacement of college students post-disaster. The research that does exist mostly examines student experiences post-hurricane Katrina, which struck the US Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, as a category 3 hurricane. There has been limited studies on hurricane Katrina displaced students and their challenges. A study by Love (2008),

analyzed Dillard University's initiative titled: A Katrina Recovery Initiative (AKRI). This initiative was established after both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita struck New Orleans in September of 2005. The damage from the storms resulted in an estimated \$400 million worth of damages to the Dillard campus. After the hurricane, during the fall semester, many Dillard students continued their education around the country and others stayed in New Orleans to continue their education with Dillard University. Even though the campus was under reconstruction, rooms were rented out at the New Orleans Hilton Hotel between January and August of 2006 to hold classes for over 1000 students. This is when the AKRI research project was executed as an undergraduate research program during two school sessions, spring 1 and 2, that would provide additional credits. The graduating seniors were required to participate in the AKRI research project, with a total of 273 Dillard seniors participating in the 2005-2006 school year. There was a total of five options that were developed surrounding different Katrina-related research projects. Option five was "Katrina Project for 2005-2006 Graduating Seniors", that was divided into three categories: Questionnaire, Interview, and Data Analyses. Results revealed that the majority of the participants evacuated outside the state of Louisiana but remained in the southern region. Most of the respondents also reported that the majority of the participants that enrolled in other universities after Katrina, felt accepted and were treated kindly. Many also reported that they did feel stressed after the hurricane. They also report that they were offered "grief counseling" but were still adjusting to the living conditions at the Hilton hotel where they were living and attending class. Most of the participants reported losing all their belongings in the storm. An important finding was the fact that many Dillard students felt that those who suffered through the storm were not provided proper medical and financial assistance from

government agencies. Equally important to the participants was the fact that scholarships and grants, rather than loans should have been made available for those who lost belongings to the storm (Love, 2008). This study is of great importance because it uses the students themselves that went through Katrina to create study's that will ultimately get answers for the needs many of these displaced student need. It is important to look at displaced students and what their needs are as they continue to further their education; Dillard University did a fantastic job with the AKRI initiative.

A study that presented an overview of findings from the Resilience in Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project, which was a longitudinal study of 1,019 predominantly female and African American community college students that were surveyed a year after hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Waters, 2016). Water's (2016), purpose was to scientifically study the impact of the hurricane, the trauma that the mothers and their children experienced, and the effect of their relocation on their long-term well-being and recovery. Also, to tell the stories of the survivors that participated in the study. Through the use of interviews, Waters (2016) provided an in-depth understanding of the participants' experience during and after the hurricane and to gather participants opinions on how the hurricane altered their functioning, relationships, and goals. Findings revealed that the majority of participants did not have their lives "back on track". Many of the participants felt conflicted about returning to New Orleans and have not settled into their new homes. An important finding was strained family networks that Katrina caused by the massive displacement of residents. These family relationships are of importance among low-income black families in New Orleans because it creates financial and emotional difficulties for many of the respondents (Waters, 2016). This study was of huge importance because it aims to

shed light on the importance of studying disasters and their aftermath, but more importantly, it focuses on college students that are forced to put a hold on their education or keep persisting despite the many issues caused by natural disasters.

Persistence to continue college after a natural disaster such as a Hurricane is of great interest. In a study by Lowe and Rhodes (2012), explored predictors of community college re-enrollment in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The study looked to answer the following questions: Do pre- and post-hurricane psychosocial resources predict community college re-enrollment approximately a year after the hurricane? And, how does exposure to the storm affect the likelihood of re-enrollment? This study also used its 221 participants from the RISK project. Results revealed that optimism about graduating from college is shown to be an important psychological resource for community college students. Basically, the idea that there is a possibility of achieving college graduation is a strong factor of re-enrollment. Another important finding was the fact that the lack of a stable residence is a major hurdle to re-enrollment. The aspiration of achieving the dream of becoming a college graduate is important to persistence after a major disaster (Philips & Herlihy, 2009; Lowe and Rhodes, 2012; & Lowe, 2016). Re-enrollment is an important factor to look at when researching displaced students; however, there should be more emphasis on types of support these hurricane-displaced students need to re-enroll and continue their education.

Research that studied post-Hurricane Katrina provide evidence with re-enrollment and in some cases college students recovery from Hurricane Katrina. A study by Love (2008) involved a university founded initiative that involved faculty and students. It also dealt with many aspects of displacement, sense of belonging and personal opinions of the college students who lived



through the hurricane to a better response in future disasters. There is limited information about college displacement after a natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina is to date the most powerful hurricane to hit the mainland United States as a category 5 hurricane. It is important to study displaced Puerto Rican college students and the many challenges they may face as they transition and become accustomed to their new life in the mainland. This study proposes to research and shed light on the issues that many displaced Puerto Rican college student's face and add to the growing body of knowledge. As stated above, previous research indicates the impact of support (family, mentorship and peers) among Latino/a college students. This role of support creates a form of capital and allows students to persist. It is important to research how these recently displaced students will be affected by leaving their forms of social capital behind, economic capital and cultural capital. Through researching what effects their recent displacement may cause, we can also investigate what help can be developed.

## CHAPTER THREE: GUIDING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Social Capital Theory

Two of the main social capital theorists discussed in this section will be Pierre Bourdieu and James S. Coleman. According to Bourdieu, there are three basic forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). Society consists of different groups that hold sub-groups with different types of economic, cultural and social capital. Economic capital is a type of capital that can be converted into money or can be considered property rights. Money as a form of economic capital has the highest effectiveness because it can be interchanged for any form of goods. Cultural capital exists in three different states: internalized/incorporated, objectified and institutionalized. Cultural capital is seen as durable qualities that can include knowledge or different skills. It can also be viewed as cultural goods like paintings, books, etc. this can also be objectified and be seen as sanctions titles like a diploma. To accumulate and incorporate cultural capital it requires socialization and learning time (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). Incorporated social capital is seen as the property rights of each person. Time is necessary to gain incorporated social capital, as it represents the connection between economic and cultural capital. For example, education is seen as something that raises economic cost directly and indirectly. Bourdieu states that disparities in the amount of cultural and economic capital of families lead to different starting points and the time it takes to transfer capital to children. (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). According to Bourdieu cultural capital rich parents will invest in the cultural capital of their children early on. For example, cultural capital rich parents will send their children to preschool and in the future send them to college. In contrast, cultural capital poor parents will not have the awareness of the importance that early education

(preschool) has and most will not have the economic capital to send their children to higher academia (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). Furthermore, economic capital that is the product of culture capital can also be transferable via material or transferable legal property. For example, when the parents die, they leave behind things like pictures, fine china or furniture that can be passed on to their children. Bourdieu also explains what he calls “incorporated culture skills”, which are skills that are not seen as transferable. Incorporated culture skills are not transferable because they are acquired by a person through socialization. The different kinds of skills can be institutionalized and legally granted using titles. These titles can be academically given, which can then become exchangeable in society for monetary gain, ensuring that cultural capital is turned into money (economic capital). In this case, the title is seen as the amount of “incorporated cultural capital” of an individual person that allows an individual to find a position in the labor market (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). “Social capital is the aggregate of current or potential resources related to existing, permanent networks, which can be based, to a greater or lesser extent, on institutionalized relationships of interpersonal respect and acceptance (Rogošić and Baranović, 2016; Hauberer, 2011)”. This is seen as a relationship within group members that is sustained by materialistic or symbolic interchanging. For example, there can be an exchanging of gifts or even an exchange of words. The importance of durable and useful relationships falls on the relationships that are produced and reproduced applying “investment strategies (Hauberer, 2011)”.

Coleman sets his concepts of social capital in relation to rational choice theory. “Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure and they

facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure (Coleman 1988, p. 98)”. In other words, social capital favors the actions of individuals that are members of the social structure. Social capital is a form of capital that reproduces the facilitation of achievement of certain outcomes that would be impossible in its absence. Social capital stays in relationships that are grounded in mutual trust or authority that create familial networks (Hauberer, 2011). According to Coleman (1988), there are different kinds of social capital: relations of mutual trust, authority relations, informational potential, effective norms, and appropriable social organizations. Relations and mutual trust exist if actor A does something for actor B and trusts B enough to return it in the future. Coleman (1988), suggest that in this case trustworthiness of the social capital surroundings combined with obligations is of importance. For trustworthiness to developed, social structures must be closed, or the relationship exists among all actors of society. Authority relations happens if actor A transfers the power of control to actor B. Now, actor B possess social capital in the form of rights of control. The informational potential is seen as a social relationship that contains information potential that provides the members with information. Effective norms are powerful but can also be seen as fragile because they can make certain actions easier while limiting others. Appropriable social organizations are established to achieve certain goals that are supposed to be useful in obtaining other goals (Coleman, 1988; Hauberer, 2011).

Both Bourdieu and Coleman discussed the theory of social capital as “property relations” because it is a resource that actors can use and serve as a benefit. An important difference between Bourdieu and Coleman is the way they see the collective or groups of society. In recap, Bourdieu argues that there are benefits an individual obtains through relationships. Meaning,

social capital is viewed as an individual resource (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). However, Coleman's concept sees both the individual and the collective creating different forms of social capital that benefit them all. A great example is, "Trust relations.... make reciprocal actions at different time points possible for an individual and are of value to the collective, because they are the basis for establishing norms guiding the actions of actors and, therefore, give rise to cooperation's (Hauberer, 2011, p.46)". Bourdieu argues that social capital is composed of membership in a group that can be converted into different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). Coleman, on the other hand, believes that for an effective social capital a closed social structure is needed. Meaning, that the amount of closure of a group, the greater the influence on the amount of social capital. Coleman sees this as an advantage because it creates easier access to information and control/laws that help minimize the risk of failure in the group. To summarize a bit of what has been discussed so far, "social capital is the aggregate of current or potential resources related to existing, permanent networks, which can be based, to a greater or lesser extent, on institutionalized relationships of interpersonal respect and acceptance (Rogošić and Baranović, 2016, p.89)". Basically, an individual can utilize relationships with others to achieve a goal, for example, an educational goal. According to Bourdieu the foundations of all capitals is economic capital because it possesses both social and economic capital. Bourdieu even goes a step further and claims that the possession and access of capitals are unevenly distributed in society (Bourdieu, 1986). To be clear, what Bourdieu is trying to explain is that social reproduction is centered in economic capital and symbolic capital; however, the actions of an individual are vastly determined by external factors, such as economic status (Bourdieu, 1986; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016). Coleman also holds strong ideas on this matter

and believes that the power of an individual and their actions is conditioned by social factors. Coleman believes that social capital mainly serves with the transfer of cultural and economic capital from generation to generation, which continues the reproduction of the social order (Coleman, 1988; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016).

Bourdieu and Coleman have strong opinions on the impact social capital has on a person's educational accomplishments. Coleman believes that social capital holds a strong impact on a person's education. As mentioned above, Coleman's "understanding of social capital surpasses the boundaries of individual social capital and becomes a characteristic of the community (institution, organizations) (Rogošić and Baranović, 2016, p. 85)". Coleman believes social capital has a stronger influence on an individual's education because social capital is more evenly distributed than other forms of capital (Coleman, 1990; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016). Even to this day most of the research in the sociology of education focuses on Coleman's conceptual framework. According to Rogošić and Baranović (2016), Coleman's research focused on educational achievements of underprivileged students that mainly focused on relationships between the family and the community, which was used to explain higher educational achievements based on their socioeconomic status. In a study by Isrel, Beaulieu and Hartless (2001), they created a study that used social capital as a framework to examine the influence of family and community in the promotion of educational achievement in public school students. They found that higher economic capital and higher parental education of family contributed to better educational achievements.

Social, cultural, and economic capital are important to educational success. Social capital according to Bourdieu is important because it is a resource that actors can use and serve as a

benefit. There are benefits an individual can obtain through relationships that results as an individual resource (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). To explore these concepts further, there were questions asked that focused on social support of different kinds: Family, friends and faculty/staff. For example:

1. *What kind of support system do you have here in Florida?*
2. *Have you made connections with other students? If yes tell me about them and how you made these connections.*
3. *Have you made meaningful connections with faculty or counselors?*

Bourdieu also sees social capital as composed by membership in a group that can ultimately be converted into different forms of capital. Once social capital is established it is important to look at cultural capital that is basically seen as durable qualities that include knowledge or different skills. An example of this can be a diploma. To accumulate and incorporate cultural capital it requires socialization and learning time (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). Here is where time is necessary, which represents the connection between economic and social capital. As mentioned earlier Bourdieu sees social capital as a key component that can ultimately be converted into different types of capital. For example, when looking at education, it is seen as something that rises economic cost directly and indirectly. Bourdieu goes a step further to argue that disparities in the amount of cultural and economic capital of families lead to different starting points and time it takes of the transferring of capital to children, which leads to a different capital amount by the children from their parents (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). The reasoning behind this is that cultural capital rich parents will invest in the cultural capital of their children early on. An example can be the fact that parents rich in cultural capital will send

their children to preschool and in the future send them to college. Colman also holds strong ideas on this concept, he believes that the power of an individual and actions are conditioned by social factors. The main idea behind his argument is that social capital serves with the transfer of cultural and economic capital from generation to generation, which continues the reproduction of the social order (Coleman, 1988; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016). To further look at this idea we asked questions that focused on economic capital of the parents, educational level, and assistance. The reason behind this is that we wanted to look more into detail on how much of an affect parental education, parental involvement, and economic status has on the transitioning process. Some of the questions were as followed:

1. *Did your parents attend elementary, middle school, Highschool or college?*
2. *What was your economic status in Puerto Rico?*
3. *Did your parents ever speak to you about higher academia?*
4. *When applying for college did your parents assist you or did you figure it out on your own?*
5. *Who assisted you with your travels, or did you make this trip on your own?*

Bourdieu and Coleman have strong views on the amount of impact social capital have on a person's educational accomplishments. Coleman believes social capital has a stronger influence on an individual's education because social capital can be more evenly distributed in comparison to other forms of capital (Coleman, 1988; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016). With evidence in the literature that suggest economic and social capital have a high impact on educational achievements it is important to look at this in more detail (Isrel, Beaulieu and Hartless,2001; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016). It will be interesting to see how the parental educational level will affect students' transition. Also, how support from faculty, friends, and family affects their



overall transition. Lastly, it will be interesting to note how economic capital will impact the transition.

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

### Current Study

The current study uses qualitative data to determine the unique challenges and needs of displaced students from Puerto Rico and, what role does social capital play in confronting and navigating the challenges and needs associated with their transition to a new institutional setting? This study utilized a qualitative design, as this type of research design can provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002). A qualitative approach is an ideal method that should be used when little is known about a phenomenon or issue in a particular population (Mills & Gay, 2016). The criteria to participate in the study had three main components. First, they had to be recently displaced college students from Puerto Rico that suffered through Hurricane Maria. Second, they had to be 18 years or older. Third, they had to be attending a public state university offering in state tuition for displaced students.

The qualitative approach was conducted through interviews that would not last more than 30-45 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide containing 6 interview questions with probes to help facilitate the process will be used (Appendix A). The semi-structured interviews were conducted over a 4-month period from February 2019 to July 2019. Before data collection started, the university institutional review board approved the study (Appendix B). The interviews were administered by the author and were offered in both English and Spanish. Location of interviews varied but were conducted on campus (office setting or library in quiet rooms). Interviews administered through the telephone were conducted wherever the participants felt like they wanted to call from.

Recruitment began at a Florida state university that offered in-state tuition. According to the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, there are a total of 11,554 students from Puerto Rico currently enrolled in Florida's public schools or universities. The state of Florida was among the states that were most impacted by the incoming of Puerto Rican students, following Hurricane Maria. In a news article published in November of last year by the Orlando Sentinel, it was reported that 800 students enrolled in universities and colleges after Hurricane Maria in the state of Florida. As for participant recruitment, it began with seeking out student associations on campus, specifically Latino/a organizations; however, recruitment depended heavily on snowball sampling, which is defined as a nonprobability sampling technique in which the existing participants recruit additional future prospective participants (Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling was of importance in gaining research participants because it was a small sample of students and was difficult to reach this population. A total of 9 participants participated in the study. All nine participants were given pseudonyms to protect participants confidentiality. Interviews varied from 10 minutes to 30 minutes, yielding approximately 200 minutes of data recorded. Once the interview process was complete, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the main author. Once transcription was complete, an in-depth analysis of the transcriptions was conducted by the author to identify recurring themes. Once reoccurring themes were identified, they were broken down into sub-themes to better categorize based on concepts found in the literature and that the participants agreed on.

## CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS

A total of 9 participants were included in the study. There were 3 male and 7 female participants. In the search for results, data analysis included transcribing the interviews and analyzing each interview for recurring themes. Once reoccurring themes were identified, a second analysis was created to strategically place each theme into a section of their own. Findings in this current paper are presented within the following categories: Issues and challenges, different forms of support, higher resources at their current institutions. There are unique challenges many Latino/a students face in higher academia. For many Latino/a college students family is very important influencing factor that helps them persist toward completion of their degree. Mentorship and peer support are also crucial once starting their college experience. (Allen, 2016; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006; Sy, 2006; Sy & Romero, 2008; Zalaquette & Lopez, 2006). These different forms of capital like that of family, faculty/staff and peer support are key towards continuing their education.

### Issues and Challenges

There were many issues and challenges that these displaced Puerto Rican students had to deal with before transferring to Florida and restarting their education. On the island of Puerto Rico, there were many student-led protests happening in 2017, where many university campuses were closed for 72 days protesting the enormous cuts in education (Chico, 2018). Soon after, Hurricane Maria struck the island leaving many without access to their education. Many of the participants described the difficulties they encountered after Maria hit the island. Dino, a communications major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico recounts those moments and the challenges that awaited him soon after the hurricane as he states,

*“Yeah, so a little back story when the hurricane Maria happened my university didn’t open for a few months and a few days so the university started to reopen November 1<sup>st</sup> and I went that day, went to my first class and oh and my journey to getting to the university from my house used to be like 30 minutes because my mom drives me to the public train like it has a stop at the university like 30 minutes I would say. That day she had to drive me all the way to the university and it took me almost two hours”*

He goes on to say,

*“it wasn’t in service, there were parts of the city that didn’t have power still and the train was functioning in certain areas, but it couldn’t pass through those areas because of the power. So, a lot of people and professionals like had to drive up there and take the bus and it took us two hours. So just evaluating how long it took us to get to my classes and how long it would take me to come back I was like this is not going to be worth it like it is not going to be worth it economically for my mom it’s not going to be good for my mental health because all my classes that semester were in class and were either classes or workshops and that was with my minor in photography and it was like hands-on art. I was like no, no, no I need to reevaluate this so that same day after my first class I went, and I dropped...”*

For Dino transportation was a key factor to continue his education and was interrupted because of the loss of infrastructure that Hurricane Maria left behind. Many of the participants were left with an unclear future of their education. When asked why they decided to apply to UCF an interesting point Dino made was,

*“... my mom told me like hey Florida universities are giving like out of state waivers you should look into this, so I started looking into the University of Central Florida and Florida International University and I applied to UCF I was actually in a Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) applying to UCF. I applied, and it was something that I did and kind of like put aside and just kept working and focusing on work”.*

There was no power around his home and had to drive to a nearby Kentucky Fried Chicken fast-food restaurant and use their internet connection to begin and complete the school application process. It was not a comfortable position to be in. Much like Dino, Ben a chemistry major that transferred from the Universidad Interamericana of Puerto Rico described his journey after Maria and applying to the universities in the mainland in the following way:

*“well UCF I randomly chose, it’s funny because I had like a streak of good luck, but after the hurricane happened about October, my mom pushed me to apply so in those circumstances you have to understand on why I applied to so many places randomly was because at that time when I was doing so there was no electricity, no internet, nothing. So, when I went to go do that I had to get in the car on my own. I had to go to a mall that was 20 minutes away. On the road there were no lights there was road rage all the way down and you get to that place where you had some form of LTE or internet and you have to sit down on the floor with hundreds of people that are doing the same thing. Even though they are charging their phones or trying to figure out what they are going to do, and you sit down, and you apply. I wasn’t doing it in an environment where you could just sit down and google every university. You literally just googled ‘where are there tuition waivers?’”*

Latino/a students have unique challenges when applying for and attending higher academia. For these displaced students those challenges were intensified by the devastation that hurricane Maria left behind and now they are in a completely new place far from home. When asked what they felt their current institution could have done better, some reported feeling left on their own. For example, Fernando a finance major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico Bayamón states,

*“it would be difficult for the university to reach out to every single student that came here because of the hurricane but I feel like it’s very important when you are dealing with that kind of situation that kind of student because they are leaving their families, and they are leaving their support groups, and they are leaving everything, and they are coming here alone and they are starting to get jobs and stepping out of their boundaries and they feel very uncomfortable and I felt like just offering that support offering students that they are not alone and they have people to talk to and yeah they are not alone in Puerto Rico everyone knows each other so you’re never alone per say but when you come to Orlando it is very hard to adapt at the beginning.*

Fernando went on to say,

*“Orlando is so big and there are so many people to meet and you are at a university where there are 66,000 students or more or less it is kind of overwhelming when you come from a university where there are like 5,000 students in the whole university and then you come and you don’t know anything some of these Puerto Rican students don’t speak the best English per say so when you, for example, when I got here I got help from a Puerto Rican student but if I didn’t get help from a Puerto Rican student I would never get through things here I guess that’s the problem the university is so big they offered the*

*help and they and it was perfect it just didn't focus on the students to see how they were doing mentally I guess and socially also."*

Fernando felt abandoned by the university, luckily, he found great support systems that helped him navigate his college experience. Another issue that came out was the transferring of credits. Although the participants in this study had no personal issues with transferring of credits, they did express issues their friends had with it. Carina an elementary education major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedra states,

*"in my personal experience I have a lot of friends who a lot of their credits did not transfer and did not get approved I have a friend who is going back to Puerto Rico because she has like 60 something credits that did not get approved and she it's going to take her one more year and in Puerto Rico it's going to take her one more semester... another friend that is going to take him, two more years to graduate and that friend went to the dean even though those classes he took were advanced they were in Spanish, so he had to change his major..."*

Another issue that arose was housing and not knowing if they were going to continue their education at UCF, Ben expresses his experience with housing in the following statement,

*"... The housing situation was a little complicated and making us move out and putting us in temporary housing like if they knew we were going to stay for a full semester and we didn't have families, most of us didn't move because we wanted to, we moved because we had to. They made us figure out the whole process."*

Lastly, a key theme was issues with language. In the case of the participants, Spanish was their first language and was a difficult transition. Some of the participants expressed difficulties in language. Most participants did not expect how difficult it would be for them because most of them have some form of knowledge of the English language. Ana an interdisciplinary major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez, states,

*"... language I thought was going to be easier for me because I was like oh I already know English like I got this but then I moved here and it was like English all the time and I was like I'm exhausted and it was a lot but I managed through it but my first semester was rough because everything was in English and back home in my high school my*

*school from elementary to high school was Spanish we did take English classes but they were not as good...so I got here the essays, the comprehension English, the writing I still have trouble writing correctly..."*

Ana expressed her challenges with English and how difficult it was to get used to. Dino also expressed his concerns with language in the following way,

*"so, I went to benefit dinner...met up with the dean of x and he asked the same question... that is having at least one person that speaks more than English especially Spanish because we are now identified as a Hispanic Serving Institution we have a really high level of Spanish speakers and I know a lot of people that transferred over really struggle with this like back home we do take English from like first grade all the way to senior year we speak it in the class and are done same thing here with Spanish, you take Spanish in classes and then you are done so people know English mentally but they don't know how to do the conversational so in coming here and asking for questions they don't ask the questions because they are scared or they can't because they don't know how to communicate and my friend she works at the advising office and she has helped so many Hispanic students because when she senses that they are Hispanic she starts talking in Spanish and she tells me that the relief in their face is maximin the way they are able to communicate the question and they are like wow I can actually talk to someone and they can understand what I'm saying and when I said that to him he was like that true that's true he has said that's students go to his office and no one speaks Spanish and they could get better help if at least one person can speak Spanish and I think that's something UCF can improve."*

The main issues that came up were housing, lack of Spanish speaking staff and feeling left alone to manage their transition.

### Support

Support as much of the literature has shown, is very important for the academic success of Latino/a student. Different forms of support are key. The main forms of support that came out in this section were: family support, faculty/staff support, and peer support. Also, a further analysis of Bourdieu and Colman's theories on the importance of social capital and education.



### *Family Support*

Bourdieu argues that the disparities in the amount of cultural and economic capital of families lead to different starting points and time it takes of the transferring of capital to children, which leads to a different capital amount by the children from their parents (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). Basically, cultural capital rich parents will invest in the cultural capital of their children early on. Coleman believes that social capital serves with the transfer of cultural and economic capital from generation to generation, which continues the reproduction of the social order (Coleman, 1988; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016). When asked what their parents highest level of education was, the majority of the participants disclosed that either one or both their parents had completed college. When asked their economic status, most of the participants claimed to be “well off” or middle class. What was very interesting was the responses when asking if their parents ever spoke to them about academia and their involvement. Many expressed that their parents paid for quality education and always reminded them that education was important. Carina an elementary education major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedra states,

*“very, very involved in terms of very pro-education they would always tell me if they couldn’t give me a lot they would give me something that couldn’t be taken away which was education. My mom works as a kindergarten teacher in the best school in Puerto Rico, so I would be able to study there from kindergarten to high school.”*

Ben states,

*“for my mom it was really important for me to go to college because she’d never had the push from her parents...For her pushing me was a given. She always paid for private school it was a must.”*

For many of the participants, parental involvement was instrumental in prepping them for higher education and their future. The idea of an education was important. In these cases, cultural

capital and economic capital of parents played a huge role in their education. In this case for the participants in the study that was not the case and this, in turn, helped with their transition to college.

Parental involvement is very important to the persistence of Latino/a college student's in college (Allen, 2016; Arebalo & Milacci, 2018). When asked who their main source of support was, most said that their parents were the main source of support. For example, Ben recounts the sacrifices and the importance of his parent's involvement in his education in the following way,

*“my family obviously was of great support, especially my mom's family. My mom my grandparents. My mom would take me every day to college. That sounds weird but the fact that I didn't have a car for those first two years even though it was bourdon I would say on her she would still do it because she knew it was better for me in the long run. So that was like huge support...”*

When asking who their main support system was, both back in Puerto Rico and Florida they all mentioned their family as their main source of support. The decision to pursue their education in Florida was not easy they had to make a choice that would alter their life completely. Moving was a tuff decision for most of the participants, but the family was key in many cases. The idea that they had family in Florida, or their parents were moving with them was a huge factor in making the decision to move. When asked to describe the transition from Puerto Rico to Florida, Helena a biology major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedra recounts that experience in the following way,

*“honestly it was very cool because though it all at first I thought I was going to move here by myself because my dad, he works for the federal government and he knew there was an opening here in Orlando for his job and he was like maybe I can ask for a transfer because my parents also wanted to move to the states and wanted a better quality of life but they knew that wouldn't be easy for my dad to get that transfer it wasn't like oh I'm going to get it you know it wasn't certain but when I applied he started to call the people here and they were like if he doesn't get that transfer you should still go and I felt scared but I was like if I have to do it I'll do it, and so throughout it all when I got my*

*acceptance from UCF and then a few days later my dad got a call from the place in Orlando that he had gotten the job so, during that time it was smooth in that sense that me and my parents moved here together I always and their support and we did the change all together for me it felt smooth.”*

The importance of having a family in the states was a huge support and made the transition a lot easier. Other participants expressed having either a family member or friend in Florida. Having a family member move or already be in the states was key to a smoother transition. The level of confidence was high when family was involved in their transition.

### *Faculty Support*

Most of the participants reported differences in their faculty support when comparing their prior institution and their current institution. They noticed many differences and how important faculty support is. For most participants having faculty support has been important in their transition and academic progress. When discussing if they had made meaningful connections with faculty, Ben stated the following,

*“... I found a friend in a faculty. I would say faculty here are very approachable I can say that I have never felt really like intimidated they are awesome. Here the faculty and staff if they see interest in you they will pursue you as a student. Over in Puerto Rico, you have to have an unspoken standing between the student and the professors. Unless you do something that is so overachieving, and people are like wow he is an overachiever then you are automatically the favorite in the department. You have to make favorites with the professors you have to go one by one and make sure they get to know you. They just see if your GPA is good and if not, you are trash I say it like that because it’s literally like that. I had a 4.0 and even for me, it was difficult for me to like research and get a good job that wasn’t in the institution. Even just to get experience they are not as approachable.”*

Ben felt a disconnect with faculty and staff in his old institution. When asked how his old intuition and new institution differ he stated the following,

*“even though UCF is pretty big, if you want to do something and push forward here you can, and you’ll get there and start moving forward. Back home even if you wanted to*

*move forward and it was smaller you didn't have that help you just had to for it alone. It makes you secluded even though its small it made sure you were on your own. If you made it great and if you didn't you weren't going to get help. Over here it's different there are a lot of us but if you wanted help you would get it. in terms of resources and accessibility its greater here at UCF even though there are more students taking from those resources a lot more students are helped."*

There seems to be a disconnect between professor and student, and it shows once they get their new institution and they see the differences. Much like Ben, when Dino was asked if he had made meaningful connections with faculty or staff he went into detail about his old institution and his current one in the following way,

*"they have been really, really big and meaningful, I got my job through my advisor because then I got the financial aid award I was like hey I got this and she had seen my resume before and she had seen my experience you know and my education and how serious I am to grow here and she was like I'm going to hire you and I was like what and then she talked around the school and she talked to the marketing coordinator and she was like my students are graduating can I meet him I would like to see if he is a fit for my positions and when we met she was interviewing me the last thing they said they spoke highly of you they see potential in you so when can you start. Just being able to network and just talk to them has been really helpful especially those four months I didn't really know anyone just having her like listen and give me feedback and advise you can do this, and you can do this, and you can take these classes it I really appreciate it."*

Much like the literature states, faculty/staff support is key to persevering and navigating through their college careers. Research shows that many faculty and staff can provide students with information regarding cultural expectations in college, help students in navigating bureaucracies, and access to educational resources (Dowd, Pak & Bensimon, 2013). In Dino's case, his advisor opened the door to employment on campus, networking possibilities, general advising, and support was instrumental. Much like the literature suggest, social capital is important. In this case, the social capital was his connection with an advisor, who then reproduced the social capital in terms of networking. Many of the students found more support at UCF; however, not all agreed. Not all participants felt that they were connected to faculty. In the interviews, a few

participants showed signs of disconnect with the faculty mainly because of the size of the institution. When asked about meaningful connections with faculty or staff Ella a biology major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez, states,

*“right now, I’ve been working a lot with the office of pre-health and they have been able to help me to like because right now even if I’m not sure I’m doing everything if I want to apply I can and it was overwhelming with the things I need to do and back home it was just study and get into. To get into med school in PR all you need is get good grades you don’t need to shadow and then I had to do all that and it’s hard to get those opportunities because they all want the same thing and they should all get the chance but it’s hard but you’ll try to talk to the professor for a position or opening and it’s like five students just asked for the same thing why should I give you that. It’s hard because you know everyone deserves that chance but then where does that leave you. I don’t really know; I feel like all the resources are there to help you but that doesn’t really guarantee that you’ll get that position. Everyone is really helpful I’ll email my professors send 10 emails, and no one will respond back. I wouldn’t say I’m doing everything wrong is it me or is it the system or the ways things are being done its overwhelming. The opportunities are not enough for all of the students that are here.”*

Ella brought an interesting point. Even though she had all the help she needed, there were still times where those tasks were overwhelming in comparison to back in Puerto Rico. Getting faculty to notice her was a big issue that she believes was because of how large the institution was. Not being able to make personal connections with faculty have been really difficult and have made her transition harder. Faculty support is important in Latino/a perseverance because for these students it could either help to persevere or put a barrier in navigating the college experience.

### *Peer Support*

As the literature finds, many students find peer support essential to their perseverance in their educational completion. Peer support groups are seen as representing important forms of social capital because they created crucial forms of support that help with their persistence. For

many of the participants, peer support was an important factor. When asked if they have made connections with other students Ben stated the following,

*“okay so when I moved here the first month I was lonely, I was alone I remember I cried a lot because you are in this new place you don’t know anyone. I remember the day I stepped into the dorm it was an empty four white walls and that one blue bed and I was like okay, so this is my new reality. So, it was hard getting used to it. then I met all the people from PRSA and that was my first support group it made me feel like I wasn’t alone and that was what my first support group. Now I have X and stuff like that, which is integral to me not breaking down and crying in a corner. That first support group after that transition was the Hispanic community they even had an event at the start where we had food and we got to dance, and it was a welcoming activity and I was like damn I am not alone, and it made a good sense of community.”*

Friendships and support groups were important to many of the participants. The welcome reception that was created at the beginning of the semester was integral to the transition process because it allowed the students to make social connections. Ana states,

*“So, when we moved there was like a whole bunch of us, yeah like there is a Puerto Rican student association I don’t know if you are aware and so they made like a welcome event for us so everyone who moved from PR to here met in that event, so we became pretty close, and during other events as well. so, it was like a little piece of home you know we had each other, we would talk to you in Spanish and listen to the same music. We just had the same culture basically you know that little piece, it’s just like a feeling you know.”*

She also stated,

*“...I actually met my best friend there, she came after the hurricane as well, I made other good friends as well, which like most of my friends are them I don’t have any American friends I guess, not because I don’t want to but I find it harder because I do know people from my classes and internship but I don’t normally hang out with them. I find it more difficult to make friends with people who are no Puerto Rican. I don’t know why like I try it’s not that I don’t. it’s just I don’t know what it is I can’t explain it, but it’s a little harder.”*

Here Ana expresses the importance of making connections and the connections she has made have been meaningful; however, there is a sense of disconnect when trying to make connections

outside those groups. Much like Ana, Ella expressed the difficulties of making friends in their current institutions outside their Puerto Rican colleagues. Ella states,

*“no, my family is still back home. I had a friend move over and we lived in the same building and she had a really hard time being here... now that she was gone I had to start over now I’m alone it’s hard to make friends at UCF everyone just wants to go to class and leave back home people would hang out and talk. I never see the same person twice. I feel like it’s extremely important to have some support as a friend. Some days I feel I didn’t even talk out loud. I would just be sitting in my room and studying and go to bed I don’t think I’ve spoken to anyone today. I have roommates but they’re not I thought living with someone it would be like “panita” I’ve been living with three people for a year now and I don’t even know their names. If living with someone doesn’t guarantee friendship, then how can I become friends with someone I’ve only seen twice.”*

Ella did mention a couple of friends she made from the Puerto Rican Association but overall feels like she can’t really connect with them. Peer support was very important to their transition and having a social gathering where they can make friends was important. Support played a huge role in the transition from Puerto Rico to Florida. A sense of community was key.

Throughout this section family support, faculty/staff support, and peer support have been important aspects for these displaced Puerto Rican college students. Family support was crucial in their decisions to move to Florida and continue on with their education. Faculty have been instrumental in navigating their college experience at their current institution. Lastly, peers have been important to feel a sense of acceptance even though not all felt the same. A participant said something that put all of this in perspective when asked what challenges she faced during her transition and would like to end with it. Gloria a communications major that transferred from the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez states,

*“actually it’s been quite a smooth transition...my dad actually put me in contact with an advisor from nursing school and she actually gave me the whole rundown on housing and how UCF is and all that stuff and she actually put me in contact with a communication advisor so she helped a lot planned out my whole schedule for my two years in my first*

*month of being at UCF I actually met my friend at orientation and after that I wasn't alone never alone everybody helped me I had help from my mom and my dad...have to do with academics and money wise my family helped me a lot I actually have two jobs now so that's helping for my housing and for everything else and I haven't gotten any disturbances everybody has been very helpful and I'm just grateful for that."*

With the combination of family support, faculty support and peer support Gloria felt that her over all transition went smoothly.

### Campus Resources

A reoccurring subject that emerged from the interviews was campus resources because it was a sort of a shock to come to a university that was larger in size and offered more resources than their old institutions. Resources were important for the students because they offered many different possibilities within majors, advising, psychological services, specific educational programs, and many more.

*Helena states,*

*"In many, many, many, many ways I had no, UPR just doesn't have many resources like the education isn't bad there aren't as many resources like here, here there are resources for everything you can think off. If you need help with your career there's an office, there's pre-med advising there are so many things for the students. there are things for fun, so the students take away from stress there is always activities there's definitely a lot here."*

Gloria also said,

*"...has a lot of resources that I didn't have at home I had a really bad break up and CAPS really helped me like their psychology center and all that stuff I am really grateful for UCF like I couldn't have these two jobs and internship like in Puerto Rico I didn't have a job and I didn't have an internship or I didn't know that being part of a nonprofit was a possibility so for me the transition was really great and that's it I can really think"*

The number of majors for many of the participants was incredible because they expressed that back at their old institutions there weren't many to chose from. Most of the participants



expressed their shock to seeing the vast number of majors offered at their current institutions.

Ana expressed her experience in the following way,

*“...right now, I am not towards med school I switched recently this semester to interdisciplinary studies, which was a major that I could have never imagined to be on because that doesn't exist in Puerto Rico or from my knowledge it doesn't exist and there's just so many opportunities that I've seen...we have reacted to this change seeing all the opportunities we have available that we didn't, we are trying to get the most advantage for it like we are since we didn't have that many resources back home when we see it here we go crazy we just start doing everything...an advisor here really helped me a lot with that change and when I started in my major I quickly started to look for opportunities within that and within what I wanted to do so for example now I have an internship like it's because there's so many possibilities you just have to look for it and when I come across them I just go for them because I know the things I'm doing right now I wouldn't be able to do back home...”*

An important aspect that came up was the number of resources truly inspired the students to follow other paths and continue their educational careers. Much like Ana, Ben found himself emerged into many different possibilities now that he is at UCF and he states,

*“yes, back home I was going to graduate with a bachelors in chemistry, in Puerto Rico there's a license for chemist over there I was just going to get the license for chemistry and work in a water treating plant or something like a basic 9-5 job but that was my plan back home and now at UCF it's like a PhD totally different I totally prefer the PhD phase”*

The number of possibilities that brought on because of higher resources was extremely positive.

In Ana's personal case, it helped her see that there was much more out there than medical school and helped her find her passion. In Ben's case, it opened the door to doing something more than working at a water treating plant and pursue a Ph.D. There is an increase in social capital, economic capital and cultural capital.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study utilized in-depth interviews with a sample of students that had to leave the island of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria ravaged through the island and had to relocate to the state of Florida. The investigation was anchored around two main inquiries: What are the unique challenges and needs of displaced students from Puerto Rico? And what role does social capital play in confronting and navigating the challenges and needs associated with their transition to a new institutional setting? Much of the literature show that Latino/a students have unique challenges through their college experience that vary from being the first in their families to attend college, have no prior knowledge of the college process and not seeking help from professionals in when dealing with these challenges (Cerezo & McWhirter, 2012; Luna & Martinez, 2012; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solorzano, 2009). According to the literature, there are many things that can ease these difficulties and help these students persevere in higher academia. Family is a keys aspect of support and in many cases help in the persistence process. Also, having a faculty/staff mentor and friendships are crucial to navigating the challenges through higher academia. Social capital is instrumental in navigating these challenges because having support is key to persevere. Family support, faculty/staff support, and peers support are all different kinds of capital that help these students push through.

Results showed that for most participants the main challenges were getting used to moving to a different state, adapting to a new school much larger in size and adapting to a new culture (language). Social capital played a huge role in navigating these challenges. For most participants, the stress of moving was diminished by having a family member already in the state or moving with their family completely. Here, it shows that having social support such as family

was instrumental in having a better transition. Adapting to a school much larger in size was facilitated by having a faculty or staff mentor that made it easier to adapt and navigate their college careers. Friendships were also important in this process because many attributed the Puerto Rican Association at their current institution as key support systems. Overall social capital is fundamental in confronting and navigating the challenges and needs of these displaced college students. Having support from different forms of capital facilitated their transition.

Results from this study have a number of practical implications. For example, creating and conducting support groups that acknowledge their unique struggles, a safe place to tackle the harsh realities of their situation. The state of Florida is a great place for these displaced Puerto Rican college students to pursue their education because of the high number of Puerto Ricans that migrate every year. Most of them acknowledged that their first point of contact was a Puerto Rican Student Association, and it had positive results. A support group could be of great help to the students in navigating the tremendous difference in the academic environment. Social capital is instrumental in making these students feel welcomed and at home, more support groups can do that. In this case many of the students had parents that had knowledge of higher academia, which helped in their transition and navigation through college; however, according to the literature, not all Latino/a students have the same experience and are left to navigate the college experience on their own. In this particular study the displaced students had a unique transition; however, regardless of their background having social support made all the difference, which is why a support group or maybe workshops on navigating the challenges they may face can be of huge importance. In the support groups or workshops they can tackle subjects that include but are not limited to: Language barriers, feeling overwhelmed, nostalgia from being far away from their

home etc. In having personal interviews with the participants it is important to have a Spanish speaking team member in all university offices. Many expressed issues they had, or friends had with going to offices and having a difficult time expressing themselves. A sense of support and belonging is also very crucial to their transition and education.

The university can also use these groups to really be able to be of service to the students. Many of the students expressed that their college experiences in Puerto Rico were not the best because of the 72-day protest that closed many universities and then the devastating hit Maria left behind. Imagine going through a nation-wide protest that stopped your education, then going through a category 4 hurricane and then leaving your home to pursue your education in another state. There is more that can be done by the universities that invited displaced students into their campus. A support group or coalition can be of great importance because it could provide a bridge between students and administration to better their conditions at their current institutions. It is important that more be done to properly serve the students because they have gone through a lot and are committed to continuing their education. As the results have shown, support is instrumental for these students to succeed in their current institutions, but the universities can also improve the support being offered. The participants in this study showed many similarities from past literature, they showed that support from family, friends and faculty is crucial to their education; however, this particular population has the added stress of living through an educational strike, a category 4 hurricane and many had to move from their island to the state of Florida. To date, there have been limited studies that look at displaced students after a natural disaster. For example, the studies that looked at Hurricane Katrina displaced students are important but what happens when it involves students that have language barriers and are

moving from an island to the mainland. It is important that more be done for the future because this is not the last time students will suffer through a disaster.

### Limitations and Future Work

Although this exploratory study provides useful insight into the challenges and needs of recently displaced students, there are limitations to this study that should be addressed. First, it is important to note that only 9 total participants were used in this study. The reasoning behind this is because the majority of the participants eligible to apply in the study declined because they had been inundated with other study participation request, which made it difficult to recruit. Since it was difficult to recruit participants, the recruitment method depended on snowball sampling, which is dependent on current participants to recruit others to participate. This can be classified as sample bias because those that participate may recruit individuals they know well, which can result in people that share the same characteristics.

For future studies, it could be important to have a larger sample from several different universities that offered in-state tuition to see if the same challenges are expressed. An interesting approach would be to have a study that interviews Puerto Rican college students that chose to stay in Puerto Rico and continue their education and interview Puerto Rican college students that left the island. It could be interesting to see the differences between them.

## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. (Intro) Thank you for sitting and doing this interview with me. We are going to go down a path and I am really interested in what help you have had and what barriers you have faced both here at UCF and in Puerto Rico. Basically, what things went well and what things were challenging. Let's begin with your time in Puerto Rico. We know that you ended up at UCF but let's first go back to what was it like in Puerto Rico.
  - a. Tell me about you family.
    1. Did your parents attend elementary, middle school, Highschool or college?
    2. What language do your parents speak?
    3. What was your economic status in Puerto Rico?
    4. Tell me about your parents' involvement in your education?
    5. Did your parents ever speak to you about higher academia?
    6. Was higher academia a topic your parents spoke to you about often?
    7. What was the topic of higher academia like in your home, was college a given or was it something you had to figure out?
    8. When applying for college did your parents assist you or did you figure it out on your own?
  - b. Tell me more about your college experience in Puerto Rico
    1. What University did you attend and how was that experience?
    2. What was your major and why did you choose it?
  - c. Let's discuss the different forms of support, if any, that you had in Puerto Rico.
    1. What was your main source of support in Puerto Rico (friends, family, faculty etc.)?
    2. Were their areas where you felt like you needed support and didn't get it? If yes, tell me about those.
2. Now let's move on and discuss your transition from Puerto Rico:
  - a. What made you chose to move from Puerto Rico to Central Florida?
  - b. How would you describe your transition from Puerto Rico to Central Florida?
    1. Who assisted you with your travels, or did you make this trip on your own?
    2. What challenges have you faced since your transition?
    3. What are your greatest needs or what do you feel you are lacking here in Central Florida?
    4. Earlier you discussed forms of support you had in Puerto Rico, did they come with you?
    5. Do you have new support here that you didn't have there?
3. Now we will discuss your time here at the University of Central Florida and what made you choose UCF as your current institution:
  - a. What made you choose UCF as your current institution?
    1. Did you consider other universities? If yes, which ones? Why did you eventually choose UCF?
    2. Did ~~all~~ of your credits transfer to UCF? If no, how many credits did you lose?
  - b. What kind of support system do you have here in Florida?
    1. Have you made connections with other students? If yes tell me about them and how you made these connections.
    2. Have you made meaningful connections with faculty or counselors?
    3. Do you have financial support here in Florida?
  - c. In what ways does UCF differ from your prior institution?
    1. Are there more resources here that you use?
  - d. How was your academic transition to your current institution?
    1. Were there any difficulties in transferring credit hours to your current institution?
    2. Are the classes here significantly different? If yes, how so?
4. ~~Future Plans~~
  - a. What are your plans after graduation?
    1. Do you intend to pursue graduate school? If so why?
    2. Has UCF impacted your future decisions? Have they changed from what they used to be when you were in PR?
  - b. How long do you intend to stay in Florida? Why?
5. What could have been done differently?
  - a. What do you feel you need personally to succeed in your current situation?
  - b. What if anything could have made your transition to Florida better for you?
  - c. What else could UCF have done to make the transition easier?
6. Do you have any other questions or anything else you would like to add?

## **APPENDIX B: APPROVAL LETTERS**





UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

**Institutional Review Board**  
FWA00000351  
IRB00001138  
Office of Research  
12201 Research Parkway  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

March 22, 2019

Dear Esmeralda Cabrera:

On 3/22/2019, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Hurricane Maria: A Qualitative Study of Recently Displaced College Students to the United States
Investigator:	Esmeralda Cabrera
IRB ID:	STUDY00000181
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Gillian Morien  
Designated Reviewer

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