Background
First generation Latinx students experience a wide range of disparities in higher education institutions. One of the challenges is maintaining mental well-being. The great demand for mental health services during recent years and the current pandemic demonstrated that the public increasingly recognizes the importance of their mental health and mental health intervention during the pandemic. “Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, college students struggled year over year with increased anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. And now the pandemic has affected them even more especially challenging ways” (Davis & Horne, 2021).

Our study aimed to examine if there was a correlation between cultural centers and first generation Latinx students’ mental well-being. The data collected illustrated how a Latinx cultural center played a role in first generation Latinx students’ mental health at a predominantly white institution. Our study examined qualitative and quantitative data to explore the substantial role cultural centers play for first generation Latinx students in predominantly white institutions.

Research Question
How do Latinx Cultural Centers play a role in First Generation Latinx student’s mental health at Predominately White Institution?

Significant Findings
Community: Through the interviews and surveys collected, a prominent theme was the value of community for Latinx Students at a PWI. Students felt represented at the university because they were able to create and build relationships with the Latinx Center’s staff and other students. They were also able to express their multiple identities and learn how to be better allies to all members of the Latinx community. They mentioned that the Latinx Culture Center staff played a significant role in them finding community and campus involvement. The staff play an integral role in building the community at a Latinx Cultural Center because students see them as mentors and the students trust them.

73% of first generation Latinx Students agreed to some degree that the Latinx Culture Center allows them to find community at a PWI.

Physical Space: The physical space of a Latinx Cultural Center was commonly mentioned through all the interviews and survey data. The responses discussed that the physical space of a cultural center should be in more of an open space or at least expanded because during high stress times, many students sought the Latinx Cultural Center as a space to study and found it often too cramped. They also expressed the Latinx Cultural Center being the only place they felt comfortable to be in as a first generation student because they felt like people just stare at them in other spaces on campus since they are at a PWI. The physical space also allowed them to rest in between classes and develop comfort on campus. Many of the participants expressed how appreciative they were to know their Latinx Cultural Center had a kitchen space and food for them to eat.

“I feel like, for example me, like studying computer science... they have like the office or like study room there. There’s like no Latinos... so just kind of like intimidating.” - Miguel, Undergraduate

Mental Health: This research study illustrated that the Latinx Cultural Center served as an indirect enhancer to first generation Latinx students’ mental health. Many students in the survey and interview said they would not seek direct counseling services in the Latinx Cultural Center but they did find a sense of comfort there when they did not feel accepted at the university. Many did not consider utilizing the space for counseling services or knew the center offered counseling services. The survey and interviews illustrated that first generation Latinx students’ first initiative in seeking mental health support is community because they experience acculturative stress that leads them to have feelings of alienation, identity confusion, and mental health issues in universities (Mayia et al., 2021). Mental health services can be provided to first generation Latinx students by providing a space where they can find community, basic needs, space, and comfortability.

“The Latinx Center is a place where we comfort one another. I feel like that has helped with my mental health because you befriend these other students...and providing that safe space for all the people to come together and be comforted with one another.” - Linda, Undergraduate

Recommendations
Cultural Centers should create mentoring programs to connect first generation Latinx students with current students or alumni to help them through their transition to higher education.

To bridge gaps between first generation Latinx students and administration, cultural centers should intentionally partner with campus partners and the community to provide resources to establish a sense of belonging and a connection.

Cultural Centers should try to connect with students who may be more isolated or disconnected from the campus such as students from a first generation, commuting, and parents to ensure that students are aware of the resources that are available and accessible to them.

Universities should invest more money into Cultural Centers because space that impacts the overall well-being of this specific student population because it enhances their mental health when they have the physical space to build community.

References