The focus of my doctoral work is to bridge the gap between research on suicide and the practice with adolescents who demonstrate suicidal ideation and behaviors. This interest stems from clinical experience working with suicidal adolescents and young adults in various settings, including hospitals, clinics, and schools. My research suggests that the commonly used medical model relating to suicidality limits our understanding and ability to prevent suicide. My clinical and research experiences fostered my interest in extending suicide intervention research among underserved youth to more accessible, non-clinical and informal settings. My practice experience in various settings, from public schools to outpatient clinics not-for-profit psychiatric hospitals, allowed me to assess and observe suicidality across diverse demographics. Witnessing how social, environmental, and circumstantial stressors and biochemistry all contribute to suicidality informs the research questions I ask and my future research trajectory.

Currently, there is a disparity of research on suicidality among minority youth, specifically Latina teenagers. While the Center for Disease Control (CDC) continues to demonstrate that the rate of suicide attempts among Latina teenagers continues to surpass their non-Hispanic white and Black/African-American female peers, there is a lag in culturally relevant and appropriate interventions for suicidal Latina teens. This incongruence is mirrored in the relevant academic literature, as few studies support the implementation of culturally appropriate interventions for suicide. However, in most studies, only non-Hispanic white youth are included in clinical trials. In addition, few interventions consider the impact of external stressors, such as poverty, violence, and trauma when addressing suicidality. To address these gaps in the literature, my dissertation research focuses on the change in suicidal behaviors among a diverse sample of students enrolled in an alternative high school. If there is a more complete understanding of how students progress in a specialized, non-clinical environment, this would inform schools and other community settings how to foster positive student wellbeing and prevent suicide.

My dissertation project is entitled, “Suicidality and the school environment: Examining mental health and behavioral trajectories of students enrolled in alternative education programs.” I will use a mixed method design to understand how to understand how life stressors (i.e. housing mobility, neighborhood safety, discrimination) and academic progress impact student suicidality and how students perceive the role of the public, alternative school environment in coping with these stressors and academic goals. The study site, Garza Gonzalo Independence High School, is an internationally-recognized alternative high school program that is grounded in a solution-focused approach to assisting students with both personal and scholastic issues. Nearly 43% of the student body identifies as Hispanic and 34% qualify as socioeconomically disadvantaged. The students are at risk of drop out due to legal histories, preexisting mental illness or exposure to abuse. Students will complete questionnaires at one-time point and latent profile analysis will inform which students participate in semi-structure interviews. Results will demonstrate how cumulative life stressors (versus mental health diagnoses) and academic struggles may put youth at risk of suicide and suggest how supportive academic environments founded on clinical principles, like Garza, can be used to prevent suicide and further risky behaviors. The mixed method design will also enhance the understanding of the student experience and the role of cumulative stressors in relation to student suicidality, academic progress, and students’ perception of self.

My previous research demonstrates that I am well equipped to successfully conduct this study and pursue a research trajectory focused on at-risk youth and suicidality. During my post-Masters
clinical fellowship at the Menninger Clinic in Houston, I collaborated with in-house psychiatrists, such Drs. James Fowler, Jon Allen, John Hart, and Tom Ellis on the publication, “Intensive inpatient treatment improves emotion–regulation capacities among adults with severe mental illness.” This paper examined the benefits of specialized inpatient psychiatric on adults with severe mental illness. As a second-year doctoral student, with funding from the Solution Focused Brief Therapy Association, I explored how alternative high school teachers use a solution-focused approach to address the diverse needs of students. This pilot study and resulting publication, “Fostering independence through an academic culture of social responsibility: A grounded theory for engaging at-risk students “, demonstrated that public high school teachers can build mastery in teaching approaches that benefit both student academics and mental health.

Additionally, I have collaborated with Drs. Luis Zayas, Lauren Gulbas on projects focusing on suicidality among Latino youth. One mixed methods study, “Deportation experience and depression among U.S. citizen-children with undocumented Mexican parents” demonstrated the impact of parental deportation on the mental health of U.S. citizen Latino youth. I presented the results of this study at the 2016 Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency (RECS) in Washington, DC. In partnership with colleagues from the University of Southern California and the University of Houston, I assisted in examining the relation of types of bullying to risk behaviors, such as suicidality, among Latino students living in a new receiving city for immigrants. I presented a version of this publication, “General and ethnic biased bullying among Latino Students: Exploring risks of depression, suicidal ideation, and substance use in a new immigrant destination city,” at the 2017 Society of Social Work Research (SSWR) conference.

From 2016 to Spring 2017, I was a principal investigator on a University of Texas at Austin Health Communications Scholars Program funded project that examined the language used in text messages between suicidal teens and crisis hotline volunteers. This study continues to strive to better understand how suicidal youth communicate when in crisis and how they respond to hotline crisis services via text message. Preliminary results of this project indicate that previous legal histories and fears of involvement with law enforcement may prevent some youth from seeking in-person help.

My long-term goals will build upon my previous work and my dissertation project. My future goals involve developing, adapting, and testing interventions that reduce suicide risk among minority and underserved youth in non-treatment settings, including public schools, community centers, and text hotlines. I also intend to partner with data scientists and other disciplines to better understand how these informal and non-clinical settings, including other forms of social media, can offer insight on youth suicidality and how to better prevent suicide among hard-to-reach individuals. I aim to seek funding from both suicide-specific research foundations, such as the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and government sources, including the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH).

As an aspiring professor, I plan to build upon my clinical and research experience by emphasizing the importance of suicide prevention in the social work education curriculum. Regardless if a social work student chooses a career in clinical practice, policy, or research, suicide will inevitably impact their professional or personal life. By teaching students about the development, assessment, and treatment of suicidality, I will hopefully assist in preventing future deaths by suicide. Through my future work, I hope to provide the field of social work with an opportunity to strengthen its presence within the field of study of suicide. Additionally, this will serve as an opportunity for social work research to address the gap in racially and culturally appropriate interventions for suicide that examine the context and role of non-clinical settings.