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### Latinx and the Community College: Promoting Pathways to Postsecondary Degrees

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## **Chicanas in IR: Data-Driven Advocacy for Latinx Students from Institutional Research Contexts in the Community College**

**Elvira J. Abrica**

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

**Martha Rivas**

*University of California, Riverside*

### **Abstract**

Various inequities and challenges facing Latinx students in community colleges continue to be documented. Yet, less documented are the challenges associated with *advocacy efforts* to support Latinx and other underrepresented Students of Color within the community college sector. There is not often pause to consider: *who advocates for Latinx students? When and how does this advocacy take shape?* In this article, we offer Chicana *testimonios* as institutional research (IR) professionals to highlight ways we experience, respond to, and challenge institutionalized racism and systemic obstacles to advocate for Latinx students in the California community college system. We situate our *testimonios* within a critique of the pillar of neutrality associated with the institutional research profession and argue for a critical examination of the ways in which IR may play an active role in the perpetuation or the dismantling of educational inequities in California community colleges.

*Keywords:* race, persistence, Latinx students, institutional research, community colleges

## Introduction

Institutional Research (IR) offices, sometimes referred to as Offices of Institutional Effectiveness (IE), evaluation, assessment, enrollment research and/or planning, play an important role in shaping decision-making, policies, and practices within colleges and universities (Hossler, Kuh, & Olsen, 2001; Volkwein, 2008). Although the activities, structure, and organizational placement of IR offices vary widely across higher education institutions, their underlying purpose is to generate information that can guide institutional planning and practice (Saupe, 1990). In light of the significant role that IR can potentially play in driving institutional change (Bensimon, 2007; Dowd, 2005, 2007), it is important to explore connections between institutional research and efforts to promote post-secondary educational pathways for Latinx students.

Equity and advocacy for racial minority students are not routinely part of IR work (see Lindquist, 1999 for a description of routine IR activities). Indeed, accountability reporting frameworks do not expressly require IR offices to report, assess, reassess, or respond to ongoing student inequities (Abrica, 2017; Harris & Bensimon, 2007). This disconnect is problematic because, "...if the academic outcomes of minority students are not assessed regularly and treated as measurable evidence of institutional performance, we can expect inequalities in outcomes to remain structurally hidden and unattended to" (Harris & Bensimon, 2007, p. 78). This is especially true for Latinx and other Students of Color who increasingly represent the demographic majority on community college campuses (Murphy, 2013).

While there has been a proliferation of suggestions for how campus-level practitioners and faculty can better support Latinx students, this literature has not attended to the role that IR might play in driving institutional change (Dowd, 2005, 2007). Meanwhile, research studies of the IR profession have yet to engage explicitly with equity, much less critically engage a discussion of ways in which IR professionals can advocate for Latinx pathways in post-secondary institutions. A disconnect between the field of IR and equitable outcomes in post-secondary education reifies two *implicit* and *problematic* assumptions: 1) that IR is divorced from racial/ethnic disparities in student experiences and outcomes, and 2) that it is possible to address historic inequities without the critical examination of cultures, policies, and practices embedded within all structures of U.S. higher education.

An inquiry into the interconnectedness of IR and issues of educational inequity threatens the pillar of neutrality that is associated with the IR (Saupe, 1990; Terenzini, 1993, 2013; Volkwein, 2008). Saupe (1990), for example, wrote:

Institutional research, like other types of research, should be *objective*, systematic, and thorough. *The outcomes of the research should be as free as possible from the influence of personal philosophy, political considerations, and desired results.* The information provided by institutional research is combined with *academic and professional judgement* in planning and other decision-making processes. (p. 2, emphasis added)

Objectivity and the perception of political neutrality are described as the basis of the IR profession. However, it is our perspective that institutional research is an inherently political endeavor in which the research practices reflect and privilege particular epistemological and methodological traditions that do not necessarily incorporate nor consider the experiences of Communities of Color (Anzaldúa, 1987). Moreover, by not engaging, critically, with data and presenting results that are touted as “neutral,” IR professionals become complicit in normalizing discourse, policies, and practice that serve to perpetuate structural racism and educational inequity. Practitioners are limited in taking a more critical approach- informed by extant research on the pervasiveness of racism in higher education- to data collection, management, assessment, and data dissemination (Bauman, Bustillos, Besimon, Brown, & Bartree, 2005; Bensimon, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Harper & Bensimon, 2003; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Peña, Bensimon, & Colyar, 2006).

As Chicanas working in IR, we experienced *objectivity* as a denial of the gross inequities experienced by Communities of Color and *neutrality* of “number crunching” as counterproductive efforts to promote more equitable outcomes for Students of Color (Harper & Bensimon, 2003). We offer our *testimonios* as Chicana IR professionals in a single community college district to highlight the ways we experienced, responded to, and challenged systemic obstacles to advocate for Latinx in the California Community College context. Our *testimonios*—both in method and in content—challenge the presumption that IR is an *apolitical* endeavor (Ochoa, 2016; Pérez Huber, 2009).

## Literature Review

### Organizational Characteristics of Institutional Research

Research on the IR profession has been concerned with documenting the activities, structure, organizational placement, and purpose of IR across post-secondary institutions (Brumbaugh, 1960; Delaney, 1997; Muffo, 1999; Peterson & Corcoran, 1985; Saupe, 1990; Volkwein, 2008). Within this literature, there has been a consistent interest in the ways external accountability demands, which are ever-changing and intertwined with broader policy shifts, inform the organizational structure and activities of institutional researchers (Alexander, 2000; Bers, 2011; Head & Johnson, 2011; McLaughlin, Brozovsky, & McLaughlin, 1998; Smith Morest, 2009; Smith Morest & Jenkins, 2007). This interest has spurred both empirical research (e.g. Knight, Moore, & Coperthwaite, 1997) and reflective essays (e.g. Peterson, 1999; Terenzini, 1993, 2013) on the changing nature of IR within higher education. Notable is a study of a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) community college in Southern California by Murphy (2013), because it contributes to literature that otherwise would not include any mention of how institutions fulfill (or are unable to fulfill) their unique mission of promoting post-secondary pathways specifically for Latinx students.

An area of literature has focused on how IR can shape the organizational context, campus climate, or cultures of the institutions and students they serve. McLaughlin, Brozovsky, and McLaughlin (1998), for example, emphasized the role that IR can play in promoting specific institutional goals like student retention. More recently, Swing (2009) encouraged IR professionals to consider themselves change agents and argued that in many cases, IR professionals already have the training and ability to lead others on campus. An underlying concern was an underutilization of skills of IR professionals and a need to increase individual capacities to establish a common language of change, build awareness, and increase knowledge that can move individuals on campus toward action and change. Similarly, other scholars (Dowd, 2007; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Dowd, Malcom, Nakamoto & Bensimon, 2012) have insisted that campus-level practitioners, rather than data alone, is needed to drive organization change and improve student outcomes.

## Characteristics and Competencies of IR Professionals

Yet another major area of interest within IR literature focuses on the skills, training, and competencies of IR professionals. A seminal scholar in this area is Terenzini (1993), who provided a comprehensive framework for the competencies of IR professionals, including technical and social skills needed for successful practices in the field. Terenzini (2013) focused on how the originally conceived competencies looked in light of broader changes in higher education (e.g. increased globalization, student diversity, and technological advancements). Revisions to the framework include considerations of increased competencies in what Terenzini (2013) calls “issues intelligences” (p. 23). This form of organizational intelligence includes “knowledge of the kinds of issues and decisions that middle- and upper-level administrators in functional units face” and “understanding how colleges and universities function” with regard to an “institution’s political dimensions and the formal and informal dynamics of power” (Terenzini, 2013, p. 141). Of note is the emphasis on IR professionals’ need to know how to play the game of navigating the politics of the campus environment. Politically-savvy IR professionals, according to this framework, will be most successful in securing access to resources and finding common ground with individuals representing multiple constituencies on campus. Terenzini (2013) states:

IR professionals need a keen understanding of the people in the college and university settings: what faculty, administrators, staff, students, and others value, what is important to them. It is the ability to anticipate how others will respond to a proposal, and idea or opportunity (or threat) and whether the reactions will be positive, neutral, or negative. IR is knowing what it will take to secure others’ support. (p. 143)

The identification of these skillsets is an important contribution to our understanding of the IR profession, however, they beg consideration of the following questions: (1) To what extent is the emphasis on political savviness, attentiveness, and responsiveness to constituencies on campus consistent with what is needed to promote educational equity? (2) What does “playing the game” mean for Practitioners of Color? (3) How do these skills and savviness ensure research practices will, in fact, present a platform to advocate for Latinx students?

Saupe (1999), Presley (1990), Hirsch (1975), Leimer and Terkla (2009), Delaney (1997), and others describe the socio-behavioral dimensions of the IR profession, all emphasizing political neutrality as a means of maintaining the perceived trustworthiness of the IR among constituencies (Leimer & Terkla, 2009). Literature on IR does not suggest a focus on issues of race and racism, or other forms of marginalization, within studies of institutional researchers. However, Harper and Bensimon (2003) offer a perspective opposite of what is observed in the literature: that an explicit recognition of race and racism (color-consciousness) is a vital quality for institutional researchers and leaders.

### **Equity and IR in California Community Colleges**

Researchers at the Center for Urban Education have developed an Equity Scorecard that incorporates equity into broader accountability reporting and measures of institutional efficiency. The Equity Scorecard represents an attempt to merge IR and equity, recognizing the need to do this work based on ongoing racial disparities experienced by Students of Color. While the scorecard is presented as a tool to disaggregate data and monitor progress on critical benchmarks to support students, especially highly disproportionately impacted students (majority first-generation, low-income, Students of Color), the tool itself does not facilitate critical dialogues among key practitioners. Critical dialogue would enable practitioners to address and work towards understanding: (a) equity, (b) disparities, (c) impact on students, and (d) perpetuation of racism via complacency and neutrality. Meaning, by not having IR practitioners that are versed to speak on various intersectional notions of institutionalized racism embedded in the lack of data interpretation and reporting, college practices are vulnerable to continue doing business as usual.

### ***Testimonio* as Primary Method**

A Chicana Feminist Critical Praxis framework unapologetically centers the lives of Chicana contributors with a commitment to produce scholarship accessible to multiple communities (not just academia) via *testimonio* (Rivas, 2012). This manuscript evokes the history of employing *testimonio* as both methodology and method. As methodology, we want to strengthen and contribute to the scholarship on the importance of employing culturally-responsive and appropriate methods to uncover and create new knowledge from voices often

silenced in academia (Flores Carmona, 2014). As a method, we engage in critical conversation and exchange, enabling us to highlight a narrative that is too often relegated as anecdotal. Thus, *testimonios* are a process where contributors are able to create knowledge and theory through a conversation of collective lived experiences that may facilitate change (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012).

The Latina Feminist Group (2001) argued that *testimonios* are created when the personal and private become political—become an entity. During *testimonios*, the contributor shares her stories without holding or silencing her critique or analysis of any given experience (Rivas, 2012). Thus, *testimonios* are a tool where contributors can “theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 19). *Testimonios* call for individuals to recall and share their many untold stories (Calderón, Bernal, Huber, Malagón & Vélez, 2012; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Flores Carmona, 2012; Rivas, 2012). Most importantly, *testimonios* serve as, “...a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 2). A Chicana Feminist Critical Praxis lens reminds us that Chicanas are creators and embody knowledge while their *testimonios* help us document these moments with future generations of scholars and community activists (Rivas, 2012).

We offer our own *testimonios* as Chicana institutional research (IR) professionals to highlight ways we experience, respond, and challenge institutionalized racism and systemic obstacles to advocate for Latinx in the California community college context. Previous scholars (e.g. Martinez, Marquez, Cantú & Rocha, 2016; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Prieto & Villenas, 2012) have similarly relied on *testimonio* to offer narratives of advocacy and leadership in the realm of education to disrupt what Dolores Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002) and Pérez Huber (2009) refer to as an apartheid system of knowledge. While extant research on IR described core competencies and knowledge areas, we posit that our *testimonios* offer equally valuable knowledge in service of the IR profession (Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzmán, 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Other *testimonios* highlight experiences of Chicanas and Latinas very specific contexts within education (e.g. Cantú, 2012); however, we focus on the context of institutional research for which there has not yet been a recorded *testimonio* from the field.

## Dr. Elvira's Testimonio

SPSS®....

Syntax...

“Number crunching” ...

*Student Equity Plan...de Aztlan...*

These are the terms that come to mind when I think about the time I spent working in institutional research at a community college. These words circled around in my head; as if, personified, they were waiting for me to decide whether institutional research was the right fit for me. They swirled inside me, amidst the shame I felt for having not secured a tenure-track position at a research institution after completing my Ph.D. I found it difficult to decipher whether I actually wanted to be a part of academia or whether this instinct was purely a result of my doctoral socialization and normalized expectation that I go the faculty route. I was unsure as to whether I wanted to be a part of academia, knowing full well it had already taken a toll on my spirit. So there I sat, every day, from 8-5, with an uncertainty of where I belonged and where I was going.

Click, tab, click.

Mouse swirl.

Descriptive statistics.

Assessment, IR, Student Services, Faculty. So many sub-fields within education and I had to figure out where in this vast landscape of opportunity I could insert myself. Where could I make the biggest difference? How was I going to put this Ph.D. thing to use? They say you grow where you are planted, and I was digging a little spot for myself in IR in the community college sector.

### **The Door**

My office was at the edge of campus in the maintenance building. “There is just no more space anywhere on campus. This is only temporary.”

Everyone around me is maintenance staff. “There is an ant problem, and so-and-so is going to fix it.” Out of place, I closed the door to my office to do “think work.” I didn’t realize that classified staff, as I was, were not allowed to close their door. E-mails were sent. Senior

administrators got involved. I wanted to close my door to focus on my work. As a classified staff member I was not allowed to do so. The senior administrator working in the building says she must be able to watch me, must be able to see me. What could I possibly be doing in this office with a desk and a computer? Now administrators are involved in the debacle. Janitors are Black and Brown men. I chat with them and hear their stories from the weekend. We are so separated from campus. In the field. Next to a prison. Literally. I see clouds and dirt outside my window. I am not allowed to close my door. *What do they think I am doing in here?* My boss treads lightly, but asserts his authority to protect me. Classified staff are not allowed to close their doors.

Eventually, I broke down crying in my boss's office. I just don't know why I am in a field, far away. What am I here for? "Okay, we will get you moved to a building on campus." My new home was a cubicle near our Dean of Student Equity. HALLELUJAH! Free at last! "Hi I am looking for Dr. So-and-So. Can you tell me when he will be in? Why can't you just open his calendar and tell me what his schedule looks like?"

I am not the secretary to the Dean of Student Equity.

I am that Ph.D.—yet, labeled as everything but a doctor.

Ph.D.—the only Chicana with a Ph.D. on campus; yet, I am the only Latina on campus that is not a secretary.

### **Classified Staff**

It soon became apparent that being the only Chicana Ph.D. but also a classified staff member was going to be an interesting experience. I soon learned this campus was all about shared governance. At each meeting, there were representatives of faculty, administrators, and classified staff. I was a classified staff representative for the student success committee and student equity meetings. When I attended meetings, no one knew who I was. No one knew me. No one knew I had a Ph.D. I had this secret training in higher education, more specifically in institutional research and data analyses. I wanted to use it, trust me. I felt that I had the content knowledge- the research expertise and "book knowledge" to contribute to discussions but I too often sat silent in meetings because I was trying to get a feel for who these people were. My sense: there were a select few who really cared and others who were there to get out from behind their regular work. This was "shared governance," where there had to be equal

representation of all faculty and staff at all meetings. There was a meeting almost every day for some sub-sub-sub-subcommittee and another to that sub-committee. But really, my sense was that major decisions were made behind closed doors, between a select 2-3 people. Meetings and minutes were a way to formalize stuff that had already been done, planned, and it was a superficial act to gather everyone together as if it were a democratic process. I often questioned the capacities of individuals to contribute to these meetings.

### **Equity Falls on Deaf Ears**

We traveled to University of Southern California (USC) to participate in an equity summit. We heard faculty talk about equity. My boss tells me “this stuff doesn’t really apply to us.” Us? We have a conversation about equity. I get the impression that there are “equity folks” and then there is everyone else. A few people are committed to talking about equity. Others are silent, or perhaps made to feel silent. We brainstorm how we can promote equity on campus. “IR is just at this workshop because we provide the data,” I am told. All those charts and all those plans. I help write the student equity plan and honestly believe that change will happen. I run the numbers to calculate DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT in accordance with the student equity framework identified in what I refer to as the Equity Plan (...de Aztlan!).

Click, tab, click.

Mouse swirl.

Descriptive statistics.

### **“I Need a Number Cruncher”**

I am in my boss’s office, who is the quintessential IR person. He is a walking example of the IR competencies Terenzini (2013) outlined:

He “protects” me from data requests and says if anyone asks for me to work on a project, they can go through him. He wants to protect my time and keep me focused on the limited number of projects at hand.

He is kind and respectful to me.

I look up his salary. Yeah, I think to myself, I would like to make that salary.

His responses to everyone are kind, courteous, and backed up by data. Professional and qualified.

He is endlessly patient when I need a quick refresher on SPSS commands I have forgotten. He walks me through my analysis and we make data jokes. I am being groomed for an IR career. He supports me as a new IR professional.

I take time off to attend national meetings and research conferences. Until one day, he denies this: “You can’t take any more time off. This is too many conferences. I see how you are. I see the way you think and the ideas you have. Advocacy for Students of Color. I just need you to focus,” he exclaims. “You should make a list of these ideas and we can have a daydream session in the summer of things we might like to explore in the dataset,” he states.

“I only need a number cruncher and I need you to focus,” he confessed!

### **What Does it all Mean?**

Essentially, the memories I share in this testimonio, be they disjointed and nonsensical, represent painful and confusing moments in my work as an IR professional. In so many ways, I did not belong in this position. I could not brace myself to be just a “number cruncher.” Worse, I asked repeatedly to attend different academic conferences and expressed interest in developing my own research projects to focus specifically on outcomes for Latinx students. I wanted to drive my own agenda and use the data I was working with to do something more critical and aligned to student needs. I just could not—and would not—be what I was told an institutional research professional is—a number cruncher. A number cruncher, in my mind, is a person who loves the statistics and the data, but is largely divorced from the realities of those who the data represent—Latinx students.

Yes, I was a horrible institutional research professional by established standards. And yet, in feeling like I failed, in being in a perpetual state of confusion, and in **ALWAYS BEING IN TROUBLE FOR SOME SMALL THING I DID OR SAID**, I learned a lot about the institutional climate. I learned a lot about how people see me. I learned what it was like to be out in the world as a formally Ph.D. educated Chicana. I learned that the culture, practices, beliefs of individuals are what make college campuses and that I, as an individual, was limited in how I could systematically change these. Yet, I tried to speak up in meetings. I tried to build community with other Individuals of Color on campus. I worked after my shifts were over to explore the data for my own research interests. I experimented with new ways of measuring student success. I reflected critically on the ways I was asked to calculate and report on various

indicators for different student populations. I questioned why we didn't share our research with wider audiences. I presented my research at academic conferences; I published my own research findings. And, finally, I was just there. I was just there for all eyes to see: A Woman of Color from a historically underserved background. A Chicana with a Ph.D. and classified staff member. I was just there. My presence on campus alone was sometimes all I could offer.

### **Dr. Martha's Testimonio<sup>1</sup>**

My personal introduction to institutional research was all about timing. I pursued a Ph.D. knowing it would offer opportunities that my parents, family, and community have fought for me to access. The Ph.D. was my ticket for upward mobility (*según*) and a microphone to exemplify and name the various and multiple forms of marginalization Students of Color continue to experience. Though the expectations to pursue tenure-track faculty positions continue to be the dominant narrative in doctoral training, the real politics of administration—or the attempt to create immediate systemic changes—are learned through lived experiences.

As a first-generation scholar and practitioner, the politics maneuvering IR spaces were quite momentous. My research and entire advocacy-research platform continues to assess and document inequities and support systems for Students of Color, particularly Latinx students, and their experience as they transfer from community college onto the four-year, and eventually gain entry into graduate school. I attempted to gain employment in the California Community College sector for 15-consecutive years. I was denied 99% of the time. Most often I received the, “You are too academic,” or the, “too research-based.” However, the California movement on Student Equity brought about the need to develop Institutional Effectiveness departments. Here, practitioners are to adequately disaggregate data to fully understand the processes and college efforts to *simultaneously* respond to student needs. Particularly for Students of Color, this meant an institutional response to understand and provide relevant services to yield positive student outcomes. In theory this sounds great. In theory. What I found was an institutional culture infused with acritical practices too often missing opportunities to address educational inequities—void of critical dialogue to fully understand “equity!” for that matter.

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<sup>1</sup> As noted in the literature, Offices of Institutional Research are also called Offices of Institutional Effectiveness. These terms are used interchangeably within this testimonio.

I was hired as Dean of Institutional Effectiveness. That spoke volumes, to me at least, of the commitment the college was making by hiring a critical race theorist to lead their research and assessment of effectiveness. During the 15-year wait to directly support the community college, I became a nationally—and internationally—recognized evaluator for the federal and nonprofit sectors. I continued to teach and lecture on educational inequities and experiences of Students of Color, but as a practitioner, I excelled in modifying infrastructural data repositories to access adequate data to respond to student needs. The College saw this, and along with degrees and credentials, hired me. However, soon (too soon!), it became apparent the culture within the sector was not ready for someone with my background; my Chicananess, doctoralness, brownness, nor my unapologetic focus on student experience!

Unlike many institutional research and institutional effectiveness practitioners, I hold a Ph.D. in social sciences and comparative education with a specialization in race and ethnic studies. Further, my doctoral dissertation focused on understanding how community colleges may (or may not) promote and support Chicanx/Latinx students. This is important to note because when we speak about how IR folks disaggregate data, I begin by asking, “How, where, and from whom are we collecting data?” to, “What and how are data triangulated to understand student experiences? How are we validating data to gain fidelity and reach generalizable statements to inform executive decision-making processes?” But often these questions are repeatedly ignored or marginalized within an agenda that does not allow for critical reflection and strategic assessment. This is infuriating to say the least. You see, I work with a sense of authentic urgency. We know the 1960 California Master Plan delineates a third sector in higher education as junior colleges—these are often perceived as the bottom of the educational pathways. Bottom of the pathway. Bottom of the pipeline, easily able to lose students altogether. This often evokes a psychological condition to “cool off” the aspirations our students hold (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Yet, sixty years after the fact, we now have a postsecondary educational system that holds the California Community College system as the largest sector in the nation, with 2.4 million students, of which one million are Latinx (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2016). The California community colleges are *the* pathway to ensure Students of Color transfer to obtain baccalaureate and graduate degrees. It is inevitable that I, especially as an IE practitioner, *gently* remind folks of these global implications and responsibilities. However, here is a systemic challenge: I am the only Mexicana-Chicana

with a Ph.D., under the age of 40, serving as an administrator at this college and within the entire community college district—this is a systemic problem! Trust that while I am vocal about what this responsibility entails, I also have to remind folks of who I am and the wealth of experiences that informs my empirical standpoint. But this is exhausting; too exhausting not to document the following:

**Scenario 1:** Shared Governance sub-sub-subcommittee meeting on Student Equity. Faculty, administrators, classified and support staff, and students present.

*Dra. M:* One third of our students are not successfully completing their courses with a “C” or better.

*Male Faculty:* Yeah, that’s because they don’t enroll full-time.

*Male Administrator:* That’s part of the reason. The other is that most of those kids don’t value education.

*Dra. M:* Those are interesting statements, opinions rather. The data I present are direct output data from overall course completion rates. Your statements, on the other hand, I’m wondering what data informs your conclusions? Did you interview students? Did you analyze full-time, part-time enrollment patterns? Both of your statements are not focused on the actual data presented. What I would ask from these data, for example, are what barriers may be preventing our students from completing the courses they enrolled in? Are we scheduling courses appropriately to support completion? Do these data help us understand the pedagogy in the classroom that may prevent students from engaging and completing? Probably not, but I am asking about institutional efforts, processes and barriers we may be able to modify to address students’ needs, versus blaming students and holding deficit opinions about our students.

*Both Men:* [ignore my comment and ask for my presentation to “just go on”]

**Scenario 2:** Southern California regional meeting with institutional research and institutional effectiveness practitioners. There are about 15 colleges represented. IR/IE administrators and support staff in attendance share frustration with annual Transfer Volume (number of students transferring onto four-year institutions), and executive leadership are also requesting data to be disaggregate by race/ethnicity and gender.

*Dra. M:* Help me understand why the frustration?

*Administrator 1:* Well, if we want to know how many students are transferring, let us present that number.

*Administrator 2:* I understand why we need to disaggregate data, but what are they [executives] going to do with it.

*Dra. M:* Well, what have they done before?

*Deans:* [blank stare]

*Dra. M:* Okay, well—the truth is that the “Transfer Volume” itself does not say anything other than the total amount of students who transfer for that specific year. This variable is also contingent on how effective the four-year institution supports transfer students to enroll into their college—is there room for that conversation? But let me not digress. In terms of transfer volume, if we conceptualize the need to measure transfer while simultaneously understand how colleges supported these outcomes, we need to calculate *transfer rates*. I would recommend we control analyses by considering student aspirations. If we follow students, by aspirations and pathways, we can measure completion rates. These may begin to help us understand whether the college did its job to support students to meet their desired goals.

*Administrator 1:* That’s assuming students know what they want to do. Most of these kids don’t know what they want to do when they come here.

*Administrator 2:* It’s not that easy to control. Students change their major all the time.

*Dra. M directed to Administrator 2:* Really? Not as I’m in agreement with your comments. What I am hearing you both state is that you are not understanding the variables that need to be controlled, nor measured. A student major is “program of study.” Aspirations are what they identify as a goal to accomplish (transfer, associates, certificate, etc.) during their educational experience at the community college. Students identify this on their application—we all know where to find this data. If we know what their aspirations are, for example transfer, then we see how the college responds and supports them until they transfer.

*Dra. M directed to Administrator 1:* I agree. Many students may not know exactly what they want to accomplish here, especially if they are first-generation college students. However, if we look at empirical data, we know over half of community college students

aspire to transfer. For example, at the college I support, 60% of entering students aspire to transfer, 25% want a CTE-related certificate, and 15% are undecided. Now, if the college is fully invested and does its job well to counsel and support students, a great majority of the 15% undecided would identify as wanting to transfer. In sum, almost 75% of students aspire to transfer. Centralizing this data, you would hope the majority of college practices would align accordingly and it would identify itself as a transfer college. But it does not. We should also see a comparable output figure of students meeting the transfer opportunity. But instead we simply have a transfer volume which does not specify how long it took the students to reach transfer. So when there are students who transfer in 2 years and others in 6-7 years, we have to ask ‘why?’ What is this college doing (or not) to increase transfer volume and measure a transfer rate appropriately?

*Administrator 1:* I get what you are saying, I do. But it’s not required for us to measure that. We are expected to report on transfer volume, so we do. That’s it. Maybe you can do all that transfer work as a “special project” of some sort, but I’m not here to change processes. I’m just here to report the data required by State and my institution. No deviation from there. I’m not responsible to change the system.

*Dra. M:* Well, maybe we ought to think we may be the researchers and practitioners that can lead our college communities to have critical conversations about systemic changes? If not us, who?

While there are countless scenarios to document how other IR practitioners attempted to silence me, or simply ignore me, I embrace these moments as clear indication ‘they’re not ready for systemic and cultural changes!’ Nonetheless, these scenarios exhibit various levels of institutional complacency. Further, the unfortunate reality are prevalent deficit ideologies that continue to plague the community college sector, and by default directly blame our students for the lack of progress. These deficit ideologies and lack of critical evaluative practices are rampant. Further, the role of IR practitioners is to critically analyze, and scrutinize, how the lack of positive outcomes or stagnant progress are heavily complacent due to the lack of innovative practices and acritical data analyses. Most importantly, the role of administrators, at all ranks, should centralize how data allow us to strengthen processes to support all students, but especially Students of Color. We have a long road to ensure our practices are critical, data-

driven and process-oriented to ensure our students access adequate support to meet their educational aspirations and degrees.

### Discussion

Our *testimonios* inadvertently bring to light a gross structural inequity: the underrepresentation of Practitioners of Color within the field of institutional research. Our experiences with being the “only” one of some aspect of our identity (i.e. only woman, only Chicana, only Chicana with Ph.D., etc.) in meetings with IR colleagues, highlights not only our underrepresentation in the IR field, but also a lack of data on the diversity of the IR profession. The most recent statistic available suggests that Latinx made up only about 4% of the IR profession (Lindquist, 1999), yet Latinx students make up the majority of so many community college campuses. It is vital that Practitioners of Color be represented in the field of IR and be part of the conversations around who gets counted and how, what gets measured and why, and what stories or narratives are told about Students of Color and other marginalized student populations. We intend to encourage future generations of Chicana researchers to consider institutional research as well as academic research professions.

In terms of competencies, the literature on IR is clear: political savvy and ability to remain neutral in the eyes of multiple constituencies is prized. However, our experiences suggest that there is no such thing as neutrality, and that practitioner work done under the guise of neutrality only serves to reinforce structural inequities. Our experiences have taught us to rely on our ethnic studies backgrounds, to draw on our knowledge of intersectionality, racism, and social inequity to enrich our quantitative work. Similar to the critiques made by Hernandez, in this special issue, the *Competencies for Community College Leaders* established by the American Association of Community Colleges’ (AACC) are far from making such connections. Institutional research, as a field, ought to assess critically researchers’ background, knowledge, training and expertise to support student outcomes in higher education.

### Conclusion

We offer our *testimonios* as Chicana IR practitioners to highlight the challenges embedded within advocacy efforts to support Latinx post-secondary pathways in community colleges. Each testimonio documents the specific ways in which our own ways of knowing and

desires to advocate on behalf of Latinx students threatened the political neutrality, complacency, and colorblindness that is associated with the field of institutional research. Ultimately, we draw on our experiences as Practitioners of Color to incite a more critical examination of the ways in which, as a field, institutional research can more effectively advance equity for Latinx students, particularly in community colleges. As Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, and Mallory (2003) point out, true transformation in higher education requires radical and uncomfortable reflection on the ways in which our experiences and backgrounds shape the work that we do. There is indeed room to assess the capacities of IR professionals as they advance *data-driven advocacy* for Latinx and other Students of Color.

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