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

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## Connecting through Engagement: Latinx Student-Faculty Interaction in Community College

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### Abstract

Student engagement with faculty has received increased attention from scholars and practitioners alike. However, much of the focus has been on the engagement experiences of students enrolled at four-year institutions, often excluding the experiences of Latinx<sup>1</sup> students enrolled at two-year public institutions. The present study centers faculty, who are situated within positions of power, as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and examines their formal and informal contacts with Latinx students who began higher education at community colleges. This study utilizes data from the 2004–09 Beginning Postsecondary Survey and employs descriptive analyses and blocked hierarchical regression to gain greater knowledge of the factors that impact Latinx students' frequency of interaction with institutional agents. This study highlights the need to further disaggregate Latinx ethnic subgroups. Findings show that peer, academic, and social engagement are predictors of increased interaction with institutional agents. Of particular interest is the role of institutional contexts, as results reveal unrealized potential for Hispanic-Serving Institutions in promoting opportunities for interaction among Latinx and institutional agents. Implications for creating environments that foster student-faculty relationships are explored.

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<sup>1</sup> Latinx is used in place of Latino/a. Latinx serves as a gender-neutral term that is not limited by the gender binary.

## Introduction

Interaction between faculty and Latinx college students plays a significant role on the academic success of students (Tovar, 2014), including GPA (Baker, 2013), better defined academic goals (DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012), and increased retention into the second year of college (Upcraft, Gardner, & Overman, 2004). Additionally, engagement with faculty increases Latinx students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), social satisfaction (M. E. Levin & J. R. Levin, 1991), and college adjustment and self-efficacy (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). In short, interaction with faculty leads to higher cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, and increases the retention and graduation of Latinx students.

Unfortunately, Latinx students have the lowest frequency of interaction with faculty (Beattie & Thiele, 2016; Kim, 2010), and interaction with faculty is further reduced when the type of interaction is considered. For example, Anaya and Cole (2001) found that while more than 50% of Latinx students reported interacting with faculty regarding academic matters, less than 20% reported interpersonal (informal) contact with faculty. This point is further amplified by the work of Pérez and Sáenz (2017) who found that Latinx males enrolled in selective predominantly White institutions rarely interact with faculty inside or outside the classroom. Similarly, students enrolled in community colleges have less engagement with faculty (Price & Tovar, 2014).

Community colleges enroll larger proportions of students of color than public and private 4-year institutions (Provasnik & Planty, 2008) and Latinxs, in particular, are more likely to attend a community college than any other ethnic group (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2016). Forty-eight percent of all Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are community colleges with a Latinx student population of 25% or greater (Excelencia in Education, 2014). Núñez, Hurtado, and Galdeano (2015) argue that HSIs are unique environments, which can be conducive for creating supportive campus climates for Latinx students. Furthermore, faculty, as institutional agents who hold positions of power within the organizational structure (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), can play a key role in fostering supportive environments. Given the importance of Latinx student engagement with faculty, and low engagement rates, especially at community colleges, the purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence Latinx community college students' frequency of interaction with faculty both academically and informally. Scholars continue to highlight that Latinx students are not a

homogenous group and demonstrate that postsecondary experiences vary across Latinx ethnic subgroups (Arellano, 2011); therefore, we heed this call to disaggregate quantitative data with the study's first research question: To what extent does the frequency of interaction with institutional agents vary across racial and Latinx ethnic subgroups? The study's second research question examines the predictors of interaction: To what extent do demographic, precollege and undergraduate experiences, and key institutional environments (i.e., HSI institutions), influence the frequency of interaction with institutional agents for Latinx community college students?

### **Conceptualizing Faculty as Institutional Agents**

This study is guided by Stanton-Salazar's (2011) conceptualization of institutional agents. Institutions of higher education have historically been designed to support the success of White, upper middle class students (Gusa, 2010), often excluding the knowledge and experiences of Latinx students. Students of color, in addition to navigating postsecondary pathways, must negotiate an educational setting where their values, cultural backgrounds, and experiences are not the center of the institutional context (Gusa, 2010). Hence, Latinx students must utilize other lifelines to succeed in their educational journey. These lifelines, as Stanton-Salazar (2011) describes them, are institutional agents. Institutional agents, as representatives of the institution, occupy positions of power in which they can utilize their social capital, knowledge of the educational system, and access to resources to aid students in navigating the institution. Faculty members, "occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system, and ... are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 15). In the context of community colleges, institutional agents are faculty with knowledge that provides "a whole spectrum of *social and institutional support* that contributes to [the students'] social development and academic performance" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 8). Additionally, institutional agents provide guidance, support, and advocacy on behalf of students, thus removing institutional barriers impeding the success of students (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009).

### **Interaction with Institutional Agents**

Formal and academic interactions outside of the classroom strengthen students' connections with faculty and informal or social contacts with faculty may foster deeper mentoring relationships (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Students' informal interactions with faculty lead students to "feel valued and important" (Cox & Orehovec, 2007, p. 355). Mentoring relationships also facilitate students' personal and social adjustment to college by providing emotional support and access to resources (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). The more access to resources and information, the more likely students successfully navigate postsecondary education. Beyond gaining a sense of belonging in the educational system, students in mentoring relationships are more likely to have higher grade point averages and increased chances of persistence than peers who are not engaged in these types of relationships (Kincey, 2007). When students feel validated, they are more likely to persist in their educational studies (Barnett, 2011). Across the board, research demonstrates that deeper levels of engagement with faculty increases students' overall academic, career, and personal development (Kim, 2010; Tovar, 2014); thus, it is important to understand what factors promote or limit student-faculty interactions outside of classroom.

### **Interaction with Institutional Agents across Groups**

Previous literature has highlighted that not all types of students have the same levels of engagement with institutional agents. Research findings across race and gender are mixed. Kim and Lundberg (2016) found that that students of color enrolled at four-year institutions are less likely to interact with their faculty members in comparison to their White peers. Other studies focusing on the experiences of community college students have produced contradictory findings. For example, Alford (2012) found that Latinx students have higher rates of interaction with faculty and Kim (2010) produced similar findings related to African American students. The literature examining student interaction with faculty has also revealed differences across gender. Kim and Lundberg (2016) found that male students had greater levels of faculty interactions than female students, which in turn, resulted in larger gains in cognitive skills. Other research found that female students interact with faculty at higher frequencies in comparison to male students, yet the effects of such interaction are greater for male students (Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005).

Across socioeconomic lines, low-income students approach engagement cautiously, often working in isolation rather than consulting with faculty (Arzy, Davies, & Harbour, 2006). Similarly, first-generation college students tend to have less engagement with faculty (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Slavin Miller, 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Overall, there are large proportions of Latinx students who are low income and the first in their family to attend college (Hurtado, Santos, Sáenz, & Cabrera, 2008); yet, there are also differences across Latinx ethnic sub-groups. Chicanx college students, on average, have lower incomes and are more likely to be first-generation college students in comparison to Puerto Rican and other Latinx students (Arellano, 2011).

### **Factors Impacting Interaction with Institutional Agents**

For community college students, there are numerous factors outside the campus setting which can limit their interaction with institutional agents. For instance, the more students work off-campus, the less likely they are to be engaged with faculty (Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2008). Further, non-traditional students, defined as students older than 25 years of age with delayed or interrupted enrollment into the higher education pipeline, have different enrollment patterns than traditional students, and tend to interact with faculty primarily in the classroom (Wyatt, 2011). Additionally, students who enroll full-time tend to have higher engagement patterns than students who attend higher education institutions part-time (B. Jacoby, 2014). Finally, social integration—when students feel connected to the campus community, including other students—is a key component in supporting student retention and completion while promoting student engagement with institutional agents at a community college (Barnett, 2011; D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, & Ginn, 2014).

### **Institutional Agents and the Community College Context**

It is important to understand the community college context as it presents unique challenges and opportunities. Over the last 20 years, faculty composition at the community college level has shifted from tenure track to predominantly non-tenure track and part-time faculty (Kezar, 2012). Non-tenure track and part-time faculty make up approximately 66% of all community college faculty (Green, 2007). While qualitative data shows that community college faculty are committed to their students and teaching (J. S. Levin, Cox, Cerven, & Haberler,

2010; Terosky & Gonzales, 2016), the institution itself lacks a culture of support that facilitates or encourages faculty-student interaction. One-year or semester-to-semester contracts, for example, force many non-tenure track faculty to constantly be on the job hunt limiting their time for student contact and teaching preparation (Green, 2007; Kezar, 2012). Research shows that multiple structural barriers cause part-time faculty to have fewer contact hours with students (Green, 2007; B. Jacoby, 2014; Jolley, Cross, & Bryant, 2014; Kezar, 2012). Over 50% of adjunct faculty, for instance, teach two or more sections each semester (Green, 2007) and teach at multiple community college campuses (Kezar, 2012). Additionally, non-tenure track faculty are asked to take on additional responsibilities without compensation (Kezar, 2012). Limited access to physical (i.e. office space) and cognitive/non-cognitive (i.e. feeling of connectedness to the institution) spaces and resources also impacts adjunct faculty's level of interaction with students (D. Jacoby, 2006; Kezar, 2012). Considering the complicated structural barriers within the two-year sector, there is a need for more research to better understand the opportunities for improving student-faculty engagement within community colleges.

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS). BPS is a national probability sample with over 16,000 respondents, representative of about 4 million students who began postsecondary education in the 2003-2004 academic year. The BPS followed students for six years with students surveyed during their first year of enrollment in 2003-2004, their third year of enrollment, and finally, in 2009. The present study utilized data from the first and third years of the survey administration. The BPS collects data on student demographic characteristics, enrollment patterns, persistence and completion, as well as in-school experiences, such as students' engagement with faculty (Cominole, Wheelless, Dudley, Franklin, & Wine, 2007). The analytical sample is limited to degree seeking Latinx students who first enrolled at a two-year public college in 2003-2004, which includes approximately 710 students (rounded per NCES reporting guidelines). Of the Latinx community college students included in the sample, 44% identified as Mexican American or Chicanx, 35% as Puerto Rican, and 21% as Other Latinx, which includes Cuban, Mixed Latinx heritage and Other Latinx heritage students.

## Variables and Coding

Table I provides a complete description of variables and coding procedures utilized in this study.

Table I

### *Variables and Coding*

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#### *Dependent Variable*

Interaction with Institutional Agents

Range: min: 0, max: 5

Composite variable created from two variables: 1) Faculty informal meeting and 2) Talk outside of class with faculty (0: never; 2: often)

#### *Demographics*

Mexican American or Chicano

0: no, 1: yes (Cuban/Puerto Rican/Mixed Latinx/Other Latinx reference group)

Gender: Female

0: male, 1: female

#### *Precollege Factors*

Mother's highest education level

1: less than HS; 10: Doctorate/equivalent

Income

Percent range: min: 0, max: 1

#### *Undergraduate Experiences*

2004: Worked full-time (exclude work-study)

0: no, 1: yes

Delayed enrollment

0: no, 1: yes

Degree aspirations

1: no degree; 5: master's degree or higher

Enrolled full-time 2003-04

0: no, 1: yes

Declared a major 2003-04

0: no 1: yes

College GPA 2003-04

Range: min: 0, max: 400

Frequency: Participation in study groups

Range: min: 0, max: 3

Social integration index

Range: min: 0, max: 167

Composite variable derived from attended fine arts activities, participated in sports, participated in school clubs

#### *Institutional Context*

Hispanic Serving Institution 2003-04

0: no, 1: yes

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The dependent variable for this study is a composite variable of two factors: “talk with faculty outside of class” and “informal meeting with faculty.” These variables ask students to identify the frequency in which students talked to faculty about academic matters, outside class time (including email), and the frequency in which they had informal or social contacts with faculty members outside of the classroom and the office. For each variable, students were given the option to select the frequency of interaction (never= 0, sometimes= 1, often= 2). These measures were collected in both 2004 and 2006; therefore, a mean score was calculated from the values for each measure from both time points and then used to create a composite variable measuring frequency of interaction with institutional agents ( $M= 1.50$ ,  $SD= 1.06$ ).

The independent variables are organized in four categories—demographics, precollege factors, undergraduate experiences, and institutional context.

**Demographics.** The first block of independent variables focused on demographic characteristics. Only students who self-identified as Latinx (the term “Hispanic” was used in the survey) were included in the sample. Students were also asked to identify the type of Latinx origin. The survey included five options—1) Cuban descent, 2) Mexican or Chicano descent, 3) Puerto Rican, 4) Other Hispanic origin, 5) Mixed Hispanic origin (we use Latinx in place of “Hispanic” and Chicanx in place of “Chicano”). Also, included in the survey was a binary measure of gender, which asked students to self-identify as male or female. Fifty-nine percent of students identified as female.

**Precollege factors.** The category of precollege factors included: mother’s highest education as proxy for precollege socioeconomic status, which was measured on a 1 to 7 scale ranging from less than high school to doctoral degree or equivalent ( $M= 2.82$ ,  $SD= 2.13$ ). The income measure identified income in terms of a percentage of the 2003 U.S. Poverty Income Guidelines, with 49.5% of the sample falling at or below 185% of the national poverty guidelines.

**Undergraduate experiences.** The third block of independent variables focused on the undergraduate experiences of students, and included whether a student delayed enrollment (40.8%); worked full-time, excluding work-study (33.2%); declared a major during their first year of enrollment (63.3%); or enrolled full-time during 2003-2004 (50.5%). Degree aspirations were measured on a 1-5 scale ranging from no degree to master’s degree or above ( $M= 0.76$ ,  $SD= 0.79$ ) and first year college GPA ranged from 0 to 400 ( $M= 275.01$ ,  $SD= 83.87$ ). Measures of social integration and the frequency of participation in study groups were collected in 2004

and in 2006. A mean score was calculated from the values for each measure from both time points and then used to create variables measuring participation in study groups (range: 0 to 3) and composite variable of social integration (range: 0 to 167). Overall, students in the sample had a low frequency of participating in study groups ( $M = 0.76$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) and low levels of social integration ( $M = 26.16$ ,  $SD = 32.25$ ). Social integration is a NCES derived variable from the following measures: attended fine arts activities, participated in sports, and participated in school clubs during the first year of enrollment.

**Institutional context.** The final block focused on an important institutional context for Latinx students in postsecondary education: enrollment in a higher education institution designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Higher education institutions are federally designated as an HSI when they enroll a Latinx student population of 25% or greater of the total student body (Contreras & Contreras, 2015). In the sample, an HSI was the first institution of attendance for 43% of students.

## Data Analysis

The present study utilized descriptive statistics to understand the frequency of interaction with institutional agents across racial and Latinx ethnic subgroups and blocked hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression analysis to gain greater knowledge of the factors influencing Latinx students' engagement with institutional agents. A key advantage in utilizing OLS regression analysis is the ability for the researcher to control for potential biases, thus clarifying the role of each of the independent variables on the dependent variables (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Blocked regression analysis was run in four blocks to assess the influence of student demographics, precollege factors, undergraduate experiences, and institutional contexts as previously described. This step allowed us to examine how each block of variables contributed uniquely to the variance in the outcome measure and identify the amount of explained variance in the outcome variables after controlling for each block. By controlling for independent variables in blocks, we identify and examine the influence of these key experiences and environments. For example, by modeling the variable of interest in the final block of the regression, the contribution of all other independent measures to the variance in the outcome measure was controlled. This allowed us to focus on unique elements in our model like the impact of enrolling in an HSI. To preserve the greatest number of respondents in

the sample, we employed the expectation-maximization (EM) algorithm, as a more accurate estimation method for replacing missing values (Krishnan & McLachlan, 1997), listwise deletion removed cases with missing data for the outcome variable, key demographic characteristics, dichotomous variables, and institutional variables.

### **Study Limitations**

Before we present our findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. First, due to the nature of quantitative data, we focused on the frequency and not the quality of interaction between institutional agents and students. While frequent interaction between institutional agents and students is an important component of successful student outcomes (M.E. Levin & J.R. Levin, 1991), students' perceived quality of interaction is far more meaningful in supporting student success (Cole, 2010; Lundberg et al., 2007). Another limitation of the study is the usage of the BPS. While the BPS provides variables to assess student engagement with institutional agents, the variables available may not be representative of the types of interactions students want, or have with faculty, especially at two-year public institutions. Further, survey respondents may interpret "interactions with faculty out of the classroom" differently depending on who is considered faculty within their college. Within colleges where counselors are also faculty, students may have considered their non-classroom interactions with primarily non-instructional staff as interactions with faculty.

Other research has highlighted the differential engagement patterns of non-traditional, first-generation, commuter students, noting that the aforementioned student population interacts seldom with faculty outside of class, and the majority of interaction happens within the classroom setting (Pike et al., 2008; Wyatt, 2011). Hence, further research should also consider interactions within the classroom as these may provide a more complete picture of engagement within the two-year sector. Lastly, limited sample sizes for Latinx students attending community colleges and two-year HSIs, did not allow for further disaggregation of Latinx ethnic subgroups or separate regression analyses comparing across students attending HSIs and non-HSIs; therefore, these may be important areas to explore in future research.

## Findings

### Descriptive Analyses

Table 2 provides the results of cross-tabulations, which were employed to gain a nuanced understanding of students' interactions with institutional agents across race/ethnicity and Latinx ethnic subgroups. Overall, larger proportions of students had some type of interaction (sometimes or often) with faculty academically outside of class in comparison to informal (non-academic) interactions. When compared to other students of color, Latinx students had the lowest rates of academic interaction outside of class with 65.5% meeting sometimes or often in comparison to 66.8% and 72.3% for Asian American and African American students respectively. Disaggregating across Latinx ethnic subgroups, Mexican American/Chicanx students had lower rates of academic interaction outside of class with 64.6% meeting sometimes or often in comparison to 66.2% and 71.6% for Puerto Rican and Other Latinx students respectively. Similarly, when examining informal meetings, Latinx students had the lowest rates of informal interaction with 26.9% meeting sometimes or often in comparison to 33.1% and 40.5% for Asian American and African American students respectively. There were only slight differences in informal interaction when disaggregating by Latinx subgroups, with 26.9%, 27.2%, and 27.4% for Mexican American/Chicanx, Puerto Rican, and Other Latinx students respectively.

Table 2

*Interaction with Institutional Agents by Race/Ethnicity & Latinx Ethnic Subgroups*

	Faculty academic meeting outside class % sometimes/often	Faculty informal meeting outside class % sometimes/often
Asian American	72.3	40.5
African American	66.8	33.1
Latinx	65.5	26.9
Puerto Rican	71.6	27.2
Other Latinx	66.2	27.4
Mexican American/Chicanx	64.6	26.9

**Regression Analyses**

Table 3 presents the unstandardized ( $b$ ) and standardized ( $\beta$ ) regression coefficients and  $r$ -square statistics for each regression model. The first regression model focused on Latinx demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity and gender. Considering the descriptive findings indicating Mexican American/Chicanx students had the lowest rates of interaction with faculty in comparison to other Latinx ethnic subgroups, we included this variable in the regression, which allowed us to explore whether or not these differences would remain significant after controlling for other demographic characteristics and precollege and undergraduate experiences. Within this first model, identification as Mexican American/Chicanx was a statistically significant negative predictor of engagement with institutional agents. Mexican American/Chicanx students have a 0.15 lower frequency of interaction with institutional agents in comparison to Latinx students who do not identify as Mexican American/Chicanx, specifically Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mixed Latinx or Other Latinx students.

Model 2 added variables related to students' socioeconomic status, namely mother's education level and income. After controlling for students' socioeconomic status, students' identification as Mexican American/Chicanx is no longer significant. Instead, mother's education was a significant positive predictor with a 0.07 higher frequency of interaction with institutional agents for every additional level of education attained.

Model 3 introduces undergraduate experiences to the regression model. After controlling for demographics, precollege factors, and undergraduate experiences, there are four statistically significant predictors of engagement: Mother's education, enrolling full-time, participating in study groups, and social integration. For every step increase (i.e. from bachelor's degree to master's degree) in maternal education, a 0.04 higher frequency in interaction with institutional agents is expected. Enrolling full-time during the first year of enrollment is a positive predictor of engagement with institutional agents, as students who enroll full time during their first year of post-secondary education have a 0.17 higher frequency of engagement than students who enroll less than full-time. Students who participate more often in study groups have a 0.40-point increase in the frequency of interaction with institutional agents for every one-unit increase in participation. Social integration, a variable derived from students' attendance in fine arts activities, participate in sports, and social clubs, is also a strong positive predictor of engagement. Students who had higher frequencies of participating in these social activities have a 0.01 increase in interaction with institutional agents for every one-unit increase in social integration.

Table 3

Regression Analysis Predicting Frequency of Interaction with Institutional Agents among Latinx Community College Students (n=710, rounded per NCES reporting guidelines)

	Model 1 ( $r^2=.005$ )				Model 2 ( $r^2=.023$ )				Model 3 ( $r^2=.243$ )				Model 4 ( $r^2=.249$ )			
	b	S.E.	$\beta$	Sig.												
(Constant)	1.64	0.14			1.43	0.16			0.44	0.30			0.48	0.30		
<i>Demographics</i>																
Mexican American or Chicano	-0.15	0.08	-0.07	***	-0.10	0.08	-0.05		-0.06	0.07	-0.03		-0.01	0.08	0.00	
Female	-0.04	0.08	-0.02		-0.02	0.08	-0.01		-0.02	0.07	-0.01		-0.02	0.07	-0.01	
<i>Precollege Factors</i>																
Mother's education					0.07	0.02	0.14	**	0.04	0.02	0.08	*	0.03	0.02	0.07	*
Income					-0.08	0.08	-0.04		-0.01	0.07	0.00		-0.02	0.07	-0.01	
<i>Undergraduate Experiences</i>																
2004: Full-time work									-0.08	0.08	-0.04		-0.09	0.08	-0.04	
Delayed enrollment									-0.05	0.08	-0.03		-0.05	0.08	-0.02	
Degree Aspirations									0.06	0.05	0.04		0.06	0.05	0.05	
Enrolled full-time 2003-04									0.17	0.08	0.08	*	0.16	0.08	0.08	*
Declared major 2003-04									0.12	0.07	0.06		0.13	0.07	0.06	
GPA 2003-04									0.00	0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	0.00	

Connecting through Engagement

Frequency: Study groups 2004/2006	0.40	0.05	0.30	***	0.41	0.05	0.31	***
Social Integration 2004/2006	0.01	0.00	0.25	***	0.01	0.00	0.26	***
<i>Institutional Context</i>								
Hispanic-Serving Institution 2003					-0.16	0.08	-0.08	*

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Note. \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The fourth and final model accounts for Latinx students' enrollment in Hispanic-Serving Institutions. In the final model, all the predictors in Model 3 remained statistically significant with participation in study groups being the strongest predictor of engagement ( $\beta = 0.31$ ) followed by social integration ( $\beta = 0.26$ ). Additionally, enrollment in a HSI is a negative predictor of engagement with institutional agents; specifically, Latinx students who enroll in a HSI have a 0.16 lower frequency of engagement with institutional agents in comparison to their Latinx peers who are not enrolled at an HSI.

Table 3 also includes the r-square statistic for each regression model, which represents the percentage of variance in Latinx frequency of interaction with institutional agents accounted for by each block of variables. Model 3, focused on undergraduate experiences, ( $r^2 = 0.243$ ) appears to have the most impact on Latinx engagement with institutional agents and represents a 0.220 increase in the explained variance over Model 2. Furthermore, the final r-squared, which takes into consideration the influence of institutional context, accounts for 24.9% of the variance of Latinx frequency of interaction with institutional agents, an increase of 0.05% from Model 3.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study explored formal (academic) and informal (non-academic) interactions with faculty outside of the classroom, both of which are vital in fostering success among Latinx community college students. While research suggests that students' contact with faculty out of class is minimal (Abu, Adera, Kamsani, & Ametepee, 2012), our descriptive results show that students interact more with faculty about academic matters outside of the classroom and have very little informal interactions with faculty. Students seeking support on academic matters outside of the classroom is an indicator of students' engagement and sense of belonging (Barnett, 2011; Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004; Tovar, 2014). Yet, higher frequencies of student-faculty interaction about personal and family issues is linked to persistence in community college students (Bharath, 2009); therefore, informal or social contacts are important to foster mentoring relationships between faculty and students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Informal engagement with faculty influences students' academic success, social satisfaction (M. E. Levin & J.R. Levin, 1991), and self-efficacy (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Mentoring relationships facilitate students' personal and social adjustment to college by

providing emotional support and access to resources and information (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). In general, students' engagement with faculty outside of the classroom is crucial in increasing overall academic, career, and personal development (Kim, 2010; Tovar, 2014).

Prior research has noted differences in the amount interaction with faculty for Latinx students versus White students (Anaya & Cole, 2001), but has not been able to tease out the experiences of particular Latinx ethnic groups. The majority of empirical quantitative research in higher education treats Latinx students as one homogenous group (Arellano, 2011). This study, however, capitalizes on its unique capacity to explore interactions with institutional agents across Latinx subgroups. Our findings reveal that Latinx students have the lowest rates of engagement with institutional agents in comparison with all other racial groups. Further, when disaggregating across ethnic subgroups we observed lower levels of formal and informal interaction among Mexican American/Chicanx students in comparison to their Puerto Rican and other Latinx peers. The study was limited by the data available through BPS, yet advanced from recent literature by disaggregating across three Latinx subgroups; however, due to a lack of specification of ethnicity at the time of data collection and low response rates among specific groups, additional disaggregation by country of origin was limited. Future research should heed the call to further disaggregate Latinx subgroups to fully understand the nuances of a diverse Latinx population.

The initial regression model indicated ethnic subgroup differences, with lower interaction rates for Mexican American/Chicanx students in comparison to their Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mixed Latinx, and Other Latinx peers. However, these differences across subgroups were no longer significant after controlling for income and mother's education. This loss of significance may be explained by the literature demonstrating that Chicanx students have on average lower income and higher proportions of first-generation college students in comparison to Puerto Rican and other Latinx students (Arellano, 2011). Clearly parental education is an important factor, as it remained a significant predictor of engagement even after accounting for college experiences and institutional context. This finding supports prior literature that found status as a first-generation college student to be a negative predictor of engagement with faculty within the classroom (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Several undergraduate experiences were central factors impacting Latinx students' engagement with institutional agents. Participation in study groups was the strongest significant

predictor of greater interaction with institutional agents, suggesting that students who are more involved with their peers are more academically engaged. This finding is consistent with research indicating students who frequently discussed coursework with other students had a higher sense of belonging at the institution, including interactions with faculty (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Similarly, study groups create a sense of comfort and belonging for community college students (Deil-Amen, 2011). This is an important factor for students of color, in particular, as participation in study groups positively influences academic performance and social engagement on campus (Kincey, 2007).

Social integration, a composite variable that includes participation in clubs, sports and fine art activities, is also a significant positive predictor of student engagement with institutional agents. This composite variable is operationalized in the survey as social integration, yet it primarily measures the frequency of behaviors and does not fully capture the complicated reality of this type of engagement for historically marginalized students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and community college and commuter students (Deil-Amen, 2011). We conceptualize these activities as social dimensions of two-year experience that may promote engagement in information networks that informally facilitate the transfer of institutional knowledge or procedures (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010). With fewer opportunities to build these out of classroom relationships within the two-year context, it makes sense that students who are more involved overall and in social and academic activities that engage them in these informal information networks are more likely to interact with institutional agents more frequently.

Acknowledging the unique nature of community colleges is key to understanding the conditions that promote or hinder Latinx student engagement with institutional agents. Many students within two-year contexts are low-income, non-traditional, first-generation college students who may be working full-time or have other family or personal commitments—all populations that have shown lower rates of engagement (Lundberg et al., 2007; Wyatt, 2011). In our analysis, full-time enrollment was a significant positive predictor of interaction with faculty, substantiating prior research suggesting that students who enroll full-time tend to have higher engagement patterns than students who attend part-time (B. Jacoby, 2014). Many students enroll part-time due to familial responsibilities, full-time employment, or other responsibilities. The two-year environment is one where diverse student populations spend minimal time on campus, only attending classes and consequently have less opportunities to

interact with faculty (Tovar, 2014). Thus, faculty play an important role as the primary point of contact with students and impact students' outcomes through meaningful relationships (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012) particularly for community college students (Kim, 2010; Tovar, 2014) and Latinx students (Barnett, 2011). Within this context, it is important to ensure that contact with faculty is meaningful, frequent, and focused on ways in which faculty can address systematic challenges for students.

Unfortunately, the community college environment is often not conducive for promoting advising and mentoring of students as an important component of faculty members' professional responsibilities (O'Meara & Braskamp, 2005) nor does it employ sustainable employment practices that promote student-faculty engagement (J. S. Levin & Hernandez, 2014). Part time faculty are a growing presence in higher education, accounting for almost half of faculty in higher education overall and more than two thirds at community colleges (J. S. Levin & Hernandez, 2014), providing nearly half of all instruction at community colleges (D. Jacoby, 2006). High proportions of part-time faculty are associated with lower levels of student engagement (Porter, 2006), as part-time faculty report interacting with students at lower frequencies than tenured and tenure-track faculty (Nakajima et al., 2012; Umbach, 2007).

The overreliance on part-time faculty, particularly at community colleges, adds another challenge to fostering student engagement between faculty and students. Part-time faculty may lack appropriate support and resources to advocate on behalf of students. Many part-time faculty teach at multiple community college campuses making it difficult to stay connected to a particular campus. Part-time faculty may not have access to office space which limits the opportunities to meet with students (Kezar, 2012). Further, lack of adequate compensation diminishes part-time faculty's motivation to engage with students (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009; Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005). It is important for college leaders to recognize negative impacts of overreliance on part-time faculty (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005). To this end, community college leaders must work towards decreasing reliance on part-time faculty while fostering a campus environment which views faculty, regardless of their status, as "essential contributors to student outcomes" instead of "individuals that are unwilling to cooperate" (Levin et al., 2010, p. 54). Faculty, including part-time faculty, are professionals generally interested in supporting the critical and creative thinking of their students (Terosky & Gonzales, 2016); therefore, it is

critical to create opportunities to compensate faculty (financially and cognitively) who engage with students beyond the classroom setting.

It is imperative that community colleges identify strategies to encourage interaction for Latinx students. Arguably, HSIs are the most well positioned to foster Latinx engagement as they have greater representation of Latinx faculty and administration (Núñez et al., 2015). Access to role models and faculty of the same ethnicity can greatly impact Latinx students' motivation to succeed in college (Dayton et al., 2004). HSIs hold potential for creating supportive campus climates and increasing academic self-concept for Latinxs (Núñez et al., 2015). Unfortunately, our findings reveal that HSIs fall short of this potential as Latinx students who enroll in HSIs had lower rates of interaction with institutional agents in comparison to their peers at non-HSIs. Scholars have criticized low student outcomes of Latinx students at HSIs by using the term “Hispanic-enrolling” instead of “Hispanic-serving” suggesting access alone does not fulfill a larger mission and commitment to Latinx students (Gasman, 2008). Garcia (2017) argues that “Hispanic-serving” goes beyond the metrics of Latinx persistence and attainment, but includes providing community engagement opportunities, positive campus climate, and support programs.

Clearly an organizational shift is needed within the two-year sector to fully realize the potential of student-faculty relationships in promoting Latinx postsecondary success. The onus of accountability must move from the student to the institution, which includes supporting faculty to engage with students. Faculty members, as institutional agents, are situated organizationally in a position of power to connect historically underserved students with resources and remove institutional barriers (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In doing so, faculty can impact not only the success of Latinx students, but also the culture of the institution. The institutional environments of community colleges and HSIs add complex nuances to be considered as we reimagine the role of faculty in these unique contexts.

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