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Editors' Message

Though 2020 has been a challenging and unique year due to the worldwide pandemic (COVID-19), our contributors have persevered and put together an amazing theme issue: *Latinx Students at Minority-Serving Institutions*. We are especially thankful to our guest editors, Dr. Taryn Ozuna Allen, Dr. Charles Lu, and Dr. Emily Calderón Galdeano, who spearheaded these efforts. While the AMAE Journal has published several issues in the past on Hispanic Serving Institutions, this is the first one specifically on MSI's (Minority Serving Institutions). The guest editors placed a laser focus on the experiences of Latinx students at MSIs as well as on the structures and programs that aim to serve them in these spaces. The articles in this collection address "servingness"— which is ultimately wrapped up in issues related to equity, access, retention, persistence, assets-based programming, and educational outcomes. Faculty, student affairs staff, administrative leaders, and college students will find the scholarship in this special issue informative as it advances our efforts to learn of the important work carried out across various MSIs in the US.

Juntos logramos más,
Patricia Sánchez, Co-Editor
Antonio Camacho, Co-Editor

INTRODUCTION

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Ample scholarship has demonstrated that the Latinx population continues to be the fastest growing ethnic-minority group in the U.S. (Calderón Galdeano, Flores, & Moder, 2012; Núñez, Sparks, & Hernández, 2011). Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population grew by 44% (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014), and is estimated to double in size by 2050 (Krogstad, 2014). As of 2019, there were an estimated 61 million Latinos residing within the United States (U.S. Census, 2020). As such, the number of Latinx students participating in American colleges and universities has also increased (Medina & Posadas, 2012). Between 2000 and 2018, college enrollment rates for Latinx students increased 14 percentage points, the most of all groups, from 22 percent to 36 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

At the same time, there has been a significant growth in the number of Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) from 414 in the 1980s (Li, 2007) to approximately 1,000 MSIs (Asian American and Native Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions, 2016; Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities [HACU], 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). MSIs are increasingly relevant in higher education for a few distinct reasons (Teranishi, 2014). First, MSIs enroll a high number and proportional representation of low-income minority students. Second, MSIs are pursuing innovative and evidence-based practices, which are effective in promoting persistence, degree attainment, and student satisfaction. Finally, the federal government provides grants to MSIs through a number of federal agencies, with a significant amount of funding authorized through the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA P.L. 89-329). Through HEA alone, annual appropriations total more than $800 million, funding more than

950 institutions. The funding is crucial for MSIs as they typically have fewer resources from tuition revenues or endowments to serve a higher proportion high-need students.

Federal allocations will be heavily influenced by our new president elect, Joe Biden, and vice-president elect, Kamala Harris. For the first time in its history, American citizens elected Kamala Harris, a Black woman of Jamaican and Indian descent, to become the country's Vice President. Furthermore, Kamala Harris is a graduate of a Historically Black College. As such, Biden's administration is projected to bring more aid to MSIs, including investing $10 billion to improve enrollment, retention, degree completion, and employment rates. Biden's proposed plan would spend billions more to improve research at MSIs and require federal agencies to explain and fix any disparities in federal dollars going to MSIs versus other kinds of colleges.

MSIs are of critical importance to the field of higher education, and this special issue builds upon our collective knowledge of Latinx students' being, perceptions, and experiences at them. As our country continues to simultaneously break barriers and struggle with racial equity, our hope is that this scholarship will contribute to highlighting and advancing the efforts of important work being done across MSIs in this country.

This special issue consists of seven articles, one book review, and one poem. As previously mentioned, this issue is being published at the crossroads of social unrest, protests, and leadership changes that reflect a diversifying America. The first article of this series, **"Students' Perceptions of Diversity at Two Hispanic-Serving Institutions Through Pictures: A Focus on Structures for Serving,"** by Gina Garcia and Marialexia Zaragoza explores how students at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) perceive diversity at their institutions through art, people, and space. The authors argue that students at HSIs have not been given the opportunity to define "servingness" or to talk about what it means to be at a campus that is compositionally diverse.

One area where much discussion regarding access and equity to higher education has taken place includes the financial costs associated with attending college. As such, the second article by Vincent Carales, Mauricio Molina, and Darrell L. Hooker, **"Without Them I Couldn't Pay for My Education, so Here I Am": Latinx College Graduates' Experiences with and Perceptions of Their Student Loan Debt,"** discusses how sources of information, rationale for borrowing, and the burden of debt influence students' thought processes and decisions when it comes to their loan debt and overall finances.

In the third article, **"I Love How We Developed a Community Already": A Graduate Student Orientation Model for Minority-Serving Programs and Institutions**, Magdalena Barrera's pedagogical reflection contributes to the discussion of Latinx student experiences by exploring an innovative approach to a new graduate student orientation for a master's program in a Chicana/o studies department at a MSI. This article explores student feedback on the orientation and also provides reflection questions for departments and MSIs to bring a more supportive and holistic approach to welcoming and retaining Latinx graduate students.

In **"*Entrando en el juego*: The Role of Hispanic-Serving Institutions in Fostering Educational and Athletic Outcomes for Latinx Athletes,"** Nikki Grafnetterova, Jocelyn A. Gutierrez, and Rosa M. Banda explore how intercollegiate athletics play a role in fostering educational outcomes for Latinx students at HSIs. Using a critical approach, this qualitative study examined how HSIs operate both the federal designation and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (D1) membership in relation to athletic participation and completion outcomes for Latinx student-athletes. This study is among the first to disaggregate NCAA data by institutional type in regard to the HSI designation and the role HSIs play in fostering athletic and educational outcomes for Latinx student-athletes.

Devan R. Romero, Minerva Gonzalez, Marisol Clark-Ibanez, and Kimberly D'Anna-Hernandez's article entitled "**A Culturally Validated Model of Student Success Services and Academic and Curriculum Enhancements at a Hispanic-Serving Institution"** uses Validation Theory to illustrate an asset-based program that uses a culturally validated model of both student success services and academic and curriculum enhancements at an HSI to increase Latinx student retention and persistence. This model provides a unique approach to how other MSIs can provide culturally validating services in their work.

In the sixth article, **"In a State of Becoming: How Institutions Communicate Latinx- and Asian American and Pacific Islander-Servingness Through Campus Artifacts,"** Cynthia M. Alcantar, Blanca Rincón, and Kristine Jan Espinoza utilized a critical ethnographic methodology and found two interconnected themes that emerged from the data: striving to become and undermining progress towards becoming. The study demonstrated the complexities of communicating Latinx- and AAPI-servingness through campus artifacts,

particularly for Historically White Institutions (HWIs) with multiple, competing missions and limited capacities to shift from becoming to being MSIs.

The final article, **"Factors Influencing Latino First-Generation College Students' Optimism for Degree Attainment,"** by Laura F. Romo, Diana Magana, and Gabriela Gutierrez-Serrano, explored factors that contribute to Latino students' positive expectancies for degree attainment. They found that students' beliefs about their competency and determination to overcome challenges significantly influenced students' optimism. Strong connections with institutional agents, such as faculty and student affairs staff, also emerged as significant contributing factors.

For this special issue, Jesse Enriquez reviewed Angele E. Batista, Shirley M. Collado, and David Perez II's book entitled *Latinx/a/os in Higher Education: Exploring Identity, Pathways, and Success.* Enriquez concludes that the book is a compelling culmination of personal narratives and scholarly papers that are supported by research and data. This publication moves beyond deficit-oriented narratives about the plight of Latinx/a/os in higher education.

Our final offering to the issue is Anahi Ibarra's poem entitled **On Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**. In her piece, she offers an in-depth and critical reflection on navigating college as a first-generation Latina student. Through powerful and piercing words, Anahi's poem challenges faculty, staff, and students alike at MSIs to strive for more equitable outcomes for students.

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Students' Perceptions of Diversity at Two Hispanic-Serving Institutions Through Pictures: A Focus on Structures for Serving

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Abstract

Beyond the basic criteria to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), which includes enrolling 25% Latinx students, the federal government has not established guidelines for better serving these students. Instead, educators at HSIs must submit applications for competitive federal grants that allow them to define and enact "servingness" in practice, which is a multidimensional way to think about how to educate and liberate minoritized students and with a need to transform the "structures for serving" them. In both research and practice, however, students at HSIs have not been given the opportunity to define servingness, or to even talk about what it means to be educated at a campus that is compositionally diverse. The purpose of this study was to explore how students at two HSIs in the Midwest perceive diversity through pictures, with a focus on the organizational structures that represent diversity. Using a photo elicitation methodology, which prompted students to take pictures of the structural elements on campus that represent diversity, and one-on-one interviews that allowed them to describe their pictures, students talked about diversity as reflected in art on campus, people on campus, and spaces on campus. Implications are offered for understanding servingess, and specifically the structures for serving, as perceived by students.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are non-profit colleges and universities that enroll 25% Latinx students (Valdez, 2015). The federal government first recognized HSIs in 1992 and began allocating funds to these colleges and universities in 1995 under Title V of the Higher Education Act (Valdez, 2015). But beyond the enrollment criteria, the federal government has not established guidelines for better serving Latinx students. Instead, the designation is based on the compositional diversity of students, leaving educators at HSIs to define and enact "servingness" in practice, which is a multidimensional way to educate and liberate minoritized students and with a need to transform the "structures for serving" (Garcia & Koren, 2020; Garcia et al., 2019).

Since 1992, few researchers have engaged students in the process of defining servingness. In one study, Garcia and Dwyer (2018) found that students' identification with the HSI status varied significantly, with some believing that the HSI designation is a good thing, and others feeling like it is exclusionary. Still some thought the HSI designation was ambiguous, with little to no meaning at all (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). Similarly, Gonzalez et al. (2020) found that students at one HSI had little knowledge of the HSI designation and doubted that it had any meaning, as the institution did not seem to embrace or promote it. These studies suggest that students at HSIs are rarely aware of the HSI designation, and they are not included in the process of defining what it means to be an HSI. The purpose of this study was to explore how students at two HSIs in the Midwest perceive diversity through pictures, with diversity serving as a starting point for understanding how they define servingess, with a focus on the structures for serving.

Conceptual Framework

Diversity, as defined by Squire (2017), is a "lexical tool characterizing the structural representation of multiple marginalized societal groups (not: white, male, European in ancestry, able bodied, native born, English language speaking, binary gender identifying, Christian, and heterosexual) in a given institution based on geographical context" (p. 731). HSIs are unique as they are compositionally diverse, with white students, on average, representing only 25% of the students enrolled at these colleges and universities (Espinosa et al., 2019) and low-income students being the majority of the student population (Cuellar, 2019; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). There is also diversity within the Latinx population at HSIs, with Latinxs identifying with

different ethnic groups such as Mexican American, Chicanx, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Central and South American, and mixed race Latinxs (Cuellar, 2019; Espinosa et al., 2019). There is also diversity by language and immigration status of students who attend HSIs (Cuellar, 2019; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). The compositional diversity in HSIs makes them ideal sites for exploring how students at these institutions perceive diversity.

In this study, we drew on Garces and Jayakumar's (2014) concept of "dynamic diversity," which they argue starts with a critical mass of diverse students on campus, but also requires contexts that disrupt historical patterns of exclusion and elevate a positive climate that allows for positive cross-racial interactions and the elimination of racial isolation, discrimination, and microaggressions. We used this definition to map on the existing HSI research about cross-racial interactions and racial isolation, discrimination, and microaggressions, as a way to understand how students at HSIs may perceive "dynamic diversity."

Cross-racial Interactions & Racial Tensions at HSIs

Cross-racial interactions in social, curricular, and co-curricular environments have proven to be essential, as they enhance educational outcomes such as cognitive and moral reasoning skills, civic engagement, and academic self-confidence (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). Yet less has been written about *same*-race interactions, which is what the HSI research highlights. For example, Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2016) found that 10 Latinx students attending two HSIs in the Southeast reported positive same-race interactions with peers and mentors, which enhanced their overall sense of belonging. Similarly, students at one HSI in the Southwest reported that shared cultural experiences with same-race faculty, staff, and students enhanced their engagement and contributed to their overall success (Arana et al., 2011). Guardia and Evans (2008) highlighted how Latino men at one HSI in the Southeast found great value in same-race interactions with their peers, faculty, and staff, which ultimately enhanced their own racial identity development. Similar to the research on cross-racial interactions, these studies highlight how the environment at HSIs facilitates same-race interactions that can lead to positive outcomes.

A critical mass of students of color should also create the ideal conditions for decreasing racial isolation, discrimination, and aggressions (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). But research has shown that despite the fact that some students have positive same-race

interactions at HSIs, others continue to have negative racialized experiences (Garcia et al., 2019). For example, Latinx students at one Hispanic-serving community college reported experiences with discrimination and bias in some student services offices (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016). Similarly, Sanchez (2017) found that Latinx students at HSIs and emerging HSIs (institutions that enroll between 15-24% Latinxs) in Texas and California experienced microaggressions in the form of racial stereotypes and physical and social segregation, both inside and outside the classroom. Sanchez (2017), however, reported that students attending HSIs with higher concentrations of Latinxs experienced fewer instances of microaggressions.

Non-Latinx students of color also have racialized experiences at HSIs, suggesting that their cross-racial interactions are negative. For example, Desai and Abeita (2017) provided a detailed description of the institutional microaggressions, exploitation, and commodification of Native culture experienced by one Dine (Navajo) woman attending an HSI in the Southwest. Serrano (2020) found that while Latinx men in his study, as members of the largest racial group on campus, reported a positive sense of belonging at one HSI in California, Black men at the same institution felt isolated as members of the smallest racial group on campus. This was complicated, however, when the same Black and Latinx men talked about specific spaces on campus, such as the classroom, where both groups felt that they were often perceived to be intellectually inferior (Serrano, 2020). Abrica et al. (2019), similarly found that Black men at one Hispanic-serving community college were not only perceived to be intellectually inferior, some were accused of cheating, and others had their intellectual property stolen by other (white) students. These experiences are inhibitors to the enactment of dynamic diversity at HSIs.

Contexts that Facilitate Dynamic Diversity at HSIs

With research suggesting that the racial climate continues to be negative at HSIs, despite the compositional diversity present within these institutions, there must be an effort to disrupt historical contexts of exclusion and isolation in order to achieve the benefits of dynamic diversity (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). This is what Garcia et al. (2019) call the "structures for serving," at HSIs. Structures for serving include organizational elements such as mission and vision statements, compositional diversity of faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate students, curricular and co-curricular structures, institutional advancement activities, and engagement with the local community (e.g., Andrade & Lundberg, 2018; Garcia, 2018; Vargas et al., 2019). In

order to realize the benefits of dynamic diversity at HSIs, and even further, to reach true levels of equity, justice, and liberation, these structures, or contexts, must reflect the compositional diversity of the student body (Garcia, 2018). In this study, we sought to understand how students perceive dynamic diversity within the structures of the institution, rather than in their peer and staff interactions or in their experiences within racism, discrimination, and microaggressions. This contributes to the growing body of research about the structures for serving Latinx students within HSIs.

Methods

The data for this study came from a larger, multi-site case study examining how organizational members at three, four-year HSIs in Chicago make sense of their HSI identity. The strength of case study methodology is in the variety of data sources that can be used to understand the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2009). For the larger project, multiple forms of data were collected from various sources including one-on-one interviews with faculty and staff, focus groups with students, observations on campus, document reviews, and photo elicitation. For this article, we only used data from students at two of the three sites that participated in one focus group, as well as an optional photo elicitation, and second interview following the collection of their photos. We excluded the third site because we did not collect student-level data at that site.

The first site, Azul City University (ACU; a pseudonym) is a four-year, midsize, public, master's granting university. ACU is a federally recognized HSI with 33% of all undergraduates identifying (at the time of data collection) as Latinx, 10% as Black, 9% as Asian American, and 2% as mixed race. ACU has programs and services for Latinxs and other minoritized students, including a cultural center (Garcia, 2019). It also has curricular offerings that allow students to explore their social identities, and to develop a social justice orientation (Garcia, 2019). The second site, Rosado Private University (RPU; a pseudonym) is a small, private, master's granting university. It's an urban, comprehensive university that provides a professional, career-focused undergraduate education. It is also a federally recognized HSI, enrolling 27% Latinx students, and with nearly 60% of all students identifying as students of color. Yet RPU does not offer curricular and co-curricular offerings centered on Latinx ways of knowing or that allow students of color to see themselves in the curriculum or develop a social justice orientation (Garcia, 2019).

Sample

Sixty-three students participated in the larger project (n = 63). A total of 20 students opted into the optional photo elicitation, with 16 participating in a second interview. For this study, we only used data from seven of the 16, who were chosen based on their focus on structures for serving in their perceptions of diversity. Students identified their race/ethnicity and sex/gender through an open-ended question, so responses varied. They also chose their own pseudonyms.

Carmen is a Mexican American woman/female who was in a graduate program in education at ACU. Paige is an Arab American female who was in her junior year in education at ACU. Lili identified as a Hispanic female in her senior year at ACU majoring in social work. June racially identifies as white but ethnically identifies as a Spaniard. She was a graduate student in counseling at ACU. Stephanie is a Hispanic female in her junior year studying biology at ACU. Amy identifies as a mixed race male, including Black, Native, Columbian, and Irish. He was a sophomore majoring in business administration at RPU. Angelica is a Caucasian female who was a senior majoring in graphic design at RPU.

Data Sources

Following participation in a focus group, students were given the option to participate in a photo elicitation project. Photo elicitation is a method used to capture responses, reactions, emotions, and insights of participants through photographs and images (Copes et al., 2018). Photo elicitation is an effective method for flipping the researcher-participant power dynamic, as it allows participants to determine the data to be collected, and the insights to address (Copes et al., 2018). Moreover, it empowers participants to examine power structures that influence their own views and perceptions of the world (Boucher, Jr., 2017), which was essential in this study as we asked students to describe how dynamic diversity is at play within institutions that are historically committed to whiteness as power (Garcia, 2019). Banning et al. (2008) similarly used photos as a way to understand how diversity is portrayed through campus structures. Students were given the following prompt: "Take pictures of artifacts (places, buildings, structures, murals, art, and other 'things' on campus) that represent diversity, Latina/o/x culture, and/or your racial identity."

As recommended by the Institutional Review Board, students were discouraged from taking pictures of people. After taking pictures and uploading them to a phone app, students participated in a second interview, one-on-one via Skype, which focused on their pictures and further probed their understanding of how the institution enacts diversity. For the interview, we used an in-depth, semi-structured protocol, which allowed for direct questioning and emerging ideas, as guided by the participants' worldview (Merriam, 2009). Sample questions included, "Describe the pictures you took." "In what ways do your pictures describe what it means for an institution of higher education to serve Latina/o/x students and other minoritized students?"

Data Analysis

Audio files were professionally transcribed and then verified by at least one member of the research team. For analysis, we created a dataset that only included student-level data. The unit of analysis for this study was students, not institutions, as we sought to understand students' perceptions of diversity through pictures. We did not conduct a cross-case analysis, although we noted differences in the structures for serving at each site. We used thematic analysis, which is a qualitative process that can be used to make sense of multiple forms of data (Boyatzis, 1998). Codes were identified at the manifest level, meaning they were based on directly observable information (Boyatzis, 1998). *In Vivo* codes, in particular, were useful, which are codes based on what participants say (Saldana, 2013), and in this case based on what the students said about how they perceived diversity on their campus. After the first layer of analysis, codes were grouped together based on similarities and contrasts, and then pieced together to inform the three emerging themes, and with comparison to the pictures (Saldana, 2013; de los Rios, 2017).

Findings

We chose six photos to demonstrate the three prominent themes that emerged: (a) art as diversity, (b) people as diversity, and (c) space as diversity. In this section we provide an overview of these themes, providing context that students shared through interviews.

Art as Diversity

Art is one way that participants suggested diversity is represented on campus. Art as diversity is a critical way to promote how campuses are embracing and supporting diversity

(Banning & Bartels, 1997). Yet, an obstacle in trying to create artistic spaces on campus is how to capture art that reflects the complexities of diversity among students (Pedrabissi, 2015). Lili, for example, took a picture of a sculpture on campus that to her was inspired by and represents the Asian community and culture (see Figure 1); however, she said that she did not identify with the sculpture and stressed that the art was not an accurate reflection of what diversity on her campus looks like. In discussing the picture Lili said, "I feel excluded in a sense, because those art pieces don't really have anything to do with me or Hispanics or Latinos' culture."

Figure 1

"Ten Thousand Ripples" Sculpture
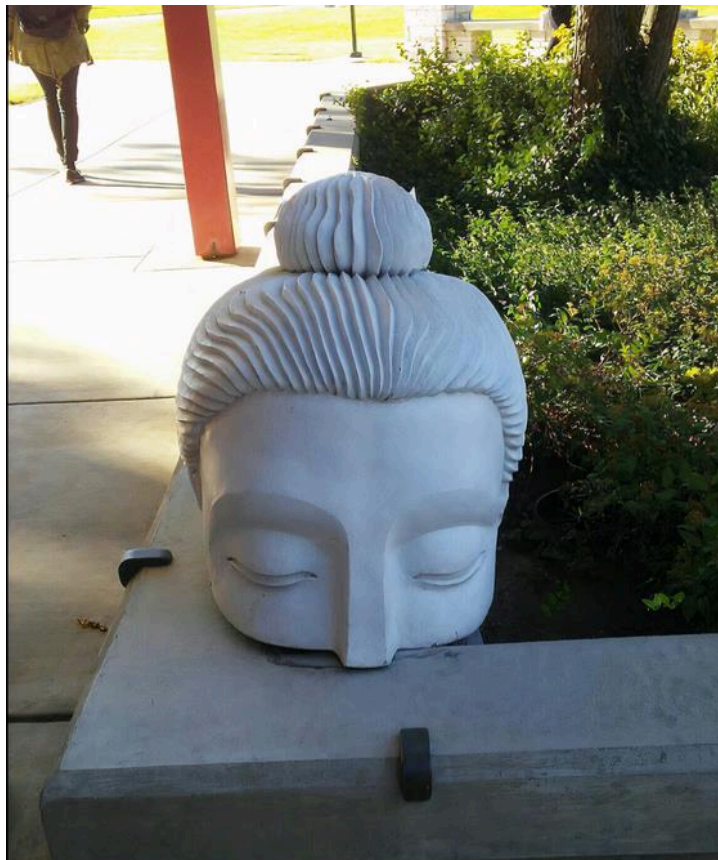
Lili said that there are several sculptures like this on campus, yet she does not believe that they represent the Latinx community. For her, being at an HSI means that there should be representation of Latinx culture through art, in addition to art that represents the culture of others. She stated that if HSIs use art as representation of diversity on campus, there should be pieces that reflect all cultures.

Paige also took a picture of a statue that is located in the Cultural Center on campus (see Figure 2). Paige elaborated on how a statue could represent diversity, specifically when people are not the focus of diversity. In talking about the statue, Paige said:

> I thought it was really a cool way to show diversity in people without having to take pictures of people. Because I always thought of diversity as different individuals valuing each other, no matter where they come from or who they are. That's what I see in the statue, how they're all coming together even though they're all different people.

Figure 2

Sculpture that represents diversity

Paige used the photo of the statue to elaborate on how diversity does not have to be represented by physical people on campus, as art and sculptures can provide a feeling that diversity is valued on campus. This is an important concept, as diversity is often attributed to the number of students of color on campus (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014), not the physical structures and artistic expressions.

People as Diversity

Although this project did not allow students to take pictures of people, people as diversity was a salient theme. In their interviews, students frequently said that they struggled with the project because people are the most important ways that they see diversity on campus. Yet the participants were creative and found other ways to show diversity through their pictures. June took a picture of her professors' decorated door and said that she feels inspired when she sees it and other doors like it (see Figure 3). June stated:

> I feel like it kind of—because every time I go past that door, I stop and read something and there's always something new or something interesting. It's [the door] always encouraging students to go on, to pursue their goals, to not give up; it encourages a lot of minorities who work with kids and stuff, like, if you're either having a bad day and something on that door relates to you, it's gonna help you, definitely.

Figure 3
Professor's door

For June, the messages on the door are relatable and motivating. Moreover, there is a sense of care that comes through the door decorations that can be important to diverse students as they search for supportive people on campus. She said that the door shows that the professor supports diverse students, and the range of issues that may affect them. This door, for example, has a sticker that says, "I'm an unafraid educator with and for undocumented students,"

showing the professor's support for undocumented students, which can be an important group of students for faculty at HSIs to support. June, however, claimed that she does not get this same feeling when she is in departments outside of her own, as it is common for the professors in her department to decorate their doors, but it is less common in other spaces on campus.

Angelica also said that diversity is represented through people, not just in the physical sense, but symbolically, as they create a sense of belonging, and a safe environment on campus. She also said that a lack of diversity, both physically and symbolically, is an important way to think about diversity. Angelica captured this with a photo of an empty hallway (see Figure 4). In describing the picture, she talked about the people whom she would have otherwise captured in the picture if she could have:

> I think a lot of it would be—I have professors that I really enjoy so some of 'em would be professors. Some would be fellow art students. Some would be just friends I've made along the way in different places. Maybe even our newspaper. Family is what we call it. Those people as well. Just kind of the people that have more of an impact on your life— on my life, personally, in school.

Figure 4
Empty hallway

Angelica said it was difficult to try to capture diversity without being able to take pictures of people because they had the biggest impact on how she viewed diversity on campus. The empty spaces can be a reminder of the importance of people as diversity on campus.

Space as Diversity

Participants also talked about spaces as representations of diversity. Spaces on campus contribute to diversity, but they are more than physical, as they have the ability to create feelings within students about diversity, and inclusion. For example, Amy captured a photo of himself in the school library, where he claims to see the most diversity on campus (picture not included to protect anonymity). Amy elaborated on what space means in terms of diversity, and specifically what it means to lack spaces that represent diversity, as he felt was the case on his campus:

> You're claiming diversity, and you're saying, "Hey, this is the school for it. We do this. We do that," but there is not actually a place for it. It's like you're only good for what you say on paper. Where is your action behind your words? You need a place for the stuff that you're saying that you're offering to people.

Amy stressed the need for physical spaces on campus that represent diversity. Amy suggested that the university is doing a disservice to students by failing to provide physical spaces where diversity is seen and felt, and therefore fails to support them.

While Amy felt like there was a lack of spaces that represent diversity on his campus, Carmen said that there were multiple spaces on her campus where diversity was represented. She talked about the cultural center as an important space, as it provided a physical representation of diversity, but expanded this idea by talking about the health center. Carmen captured a photo of baskets full of free hygienic items such as tampons and hand sanitizer that the health center provides to students. In her interview, she explained how the health center provided these products for students stating, "For me this is helpful because sometimes I don't have enough money to buy pads, buy large amounts of pads, like a big packet. It's just very convenient. I can run to the health office, get my pad, get my necessities."

Figure 5

Free samples in the health center

For Carmen, having spaces on campus that provide basic essentials for students is one way to serve diverse students on campus, and particularly low-income students, which is important for HSIs that enroll students who come from various circumstances. Having a health center where basic needs are addressed can be an important space for diversity, and for effectively serving diverse students.

Many of the participants at ACU talked about the cultural center as an important space for diversity, which in several ways incorporated the three themes into one. Stephanie took a picture of a mural in the Cultural Center and said:

The Cultural Center is always open and one of the best places to go and study. I don't enjoy studying in public places with other people or with anything, but that's the one place that I've actually found myself wanting to go and eat my lunch, to go hang out and study or something. Actually spend time there.

Figure 6

Mural in cultural center

The mural, which includes important historical civil rights activists from various racial-ethnic backgrounds, is an important expression of art as diversity (Banning & Bartels, 1997). Yet, the students did not talk about the mural as only art, and instead expanded on the importance of the location of the mural as a representation of diversity. The Cultural Center, as noted by Stephanie, provides students with a space to study, eat, and socialize. The Cultural Center also provides students with relevant trainings and workshops about social justice and leadership, along with acknowledgement and celebrations of cultural heritage months. This space also provides students with a kitchen, all gender restrooms, a lactation room, and additional study spaces, which Carmen said, are important resources for diverse students. Moreover, the Center houses the offices of full-time professionals on campus dedicated to serving diverse populations, which ties in the people as diversity theme. Overall, space as diversity is a powerful concept for students, which may include art, resources, and people as representations of diversity.

Discussion

Participants in this study perceived diversity through pictures in three ways: through art, people, and space. Art on college campuses can be used to represent diversity and empower

diverse students, as seen with the mural that several students captured in their photos. Art as diversity, however, is multifaceted and has the ability to push for deeper dialogue about diversity (Grenier, 2009). Lili, for example, stated that the "Asian" inspired sculpture on her campus made her feel as though her own Latinx culture was not represented, when in reality, the "Ten Thousand Ripples" sculpture is actually a Buddha head turned into an exhibit that was specifically created to foster dialogue about peace within various communities in the city. This form of art on campus may not be intended to serve as a cultural representation per say, yet aimed to create dialogue. Art can be used as both representation of diverse people and to provoke dialogue about larger issues within society while prompting critical thinking, creativity, and a search for truth (Pedrabissi, 2015).

People also contribute to diversity on campus, physically and symbolically. Diverse people on campus may suggest that the institution is committed to supporting students through their own racial-ethnic lenses, and in the case of HSIs, through language (Garcia, 2019). Although participants struggled to take pictures that did not include people, they found ways to represent the importance of people as diversity. This was creatively done by June, who took pictures of her professor's door, which could be a form of art as diversity, yet she described how the meaning and symbolism of the decorations on the door were important to her as a reminder of how her professors support diverse students. Even though they did not take pictures of people, participants stressed that people on campus are an essential aspect of diversity. Moreover, students talked about people in their interviews, stressing how various symbols such as art and signs are powerful expressions of how the people on campus create and contribute to an environment that promotes sense of belonging, a commitment to equity and justice, and physical and emotional safety (Banning & Bartels, 1997).

Diversity, however, can no longer only be compositional, as a true understanding of diversity must be enacted through contexts on campus (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). McGregor (2004) states that space can make a difference to students and can be vital to supporting them. Spaces on campus that represent diversity are essential, yet participants suggested that HSIs should also think about the intentional expressions conveyed by these spaces. The most significant physical space mentioned by participants was the Cultural Center at one of the two sites, with students like Stephanie saying that the cultural center is a space where she feels excited to go because it gives her what she needs and wants as a student. Yet space as a form

of diversity is more than physical and includes the people who fill the space, and the artistic expressions within the space. Samura (2015) suggests that space is socially constructed in the way that people interact with one another, and that space is produced by what people do, which the participants stressed. Spaces that feel like racial diversity is excluded, however, are also important, as is the absence of space, as suggested by Amy (Samura, 2015).

The way students' perceived diversity suggests that all three themes are interconnected. Multiple students talked about the cultural center and its importance as physical representation of diversity. Yet students also talked about the art and the people inside the Center. This suggests that the ideal contexts for dynamic diversity at HSIs are layered. Creating a physical space is important; however, the feelings created within the space are essential, ranging from feelings of belongingness to feelings of empowerment that can be enhanced through art, murals, and sculptures, as well as people and resources provided. Diversity and servingness at HSIs must be represented in multiple contexts, across multiple structures for serving, and interconnected in meaningful ways.

Implications & Conclusion

This study makes an important contribution to HSI research by focusing specifically on the educational contexts, or structures for serving, that facilitate students' perceptions of diversity. Here we offer practical implications for HSIs to consider. First, HSIs must design and support physical spaces that have an expressed commitment to serving diverse students. This includes cultural centers, which have historically fostered safety and security for students of color on college campuses while enhancing and preserving their cultural knowledge (Patton, 2010). All spaces on campus, however, must support the basic needs of students at HSIs, especially the needs of low-income and potentially housing and food insecure students, which are a growing population (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Our findings show that this support can and should be offered by health centers, counseling centers, student success centers, and more. Davila and Montelongo (2020), for example, argue that innovative learning spaces, such as computer labs and math tutoring centers, must also become spaces that effectively serve low-income and students of color at HSIs.

Second, HSIs must design artistic spaces and expressions that can serve as essential contextual cues for supporting diverse students. Art, including murals and sculptures, that are

centered on students' racial, cultural, and linguistic ways of knowing and being can be powerful. Garcia (2013) found that students and faculty at one HSI regularly referred to the ethnic studies murals found in one building on campus when talking about the institution's identity as an HSI. HSIs should utilize federal funding received through grants to develop spaces that validate students' races and cultures. For example, UTSA used Title V funds to design a center for first-generation and transfer students, and they were intentional about using warm and bright colors reminiscent of the Southwest, and hung pictures of cultural icons such as Frida Khalo (Rodriguez & Gonzales, 2020).

Finally, HSIs must recruit, hire, and retain faculty and staff on campus who have an expressed commitment to diversity, and to serving diverse students. The research is clear that faculty at HSIs continue to be predominantly white (Vargas et al., 2019), with calls to increase the diversity of faculty and staff on campus in order to facilitate servingness (Garcia et al., 2019). While some institutions now require a diversity, inclusion, and equity statement in their application processes, they should start to think more critically about *how* faculty show this commitment beyond a potentially performative statement that never results in action. In this study, we found a unique way that faculty expressed their views on diversity, through door decorations, which could easily be a part of the interview process for new faculty and staff at an HSI, with a prompt that would allow candidates to show their mock door decorations. Learning from this research, candidates could also be asked about the art in their offices, or to write up a mock proposal for a new mural on campus.

Future research should continue to explore art, people, and space as diversity at HSIs, rather than focusing so intently on cross- and same-race interactions, and students' racialized experiences. Moreover, photo elicitation should be used in the research process, as students perceive diversity differently than researchers, with students in this study showing us specific contexts that provide meaning as they think about how HSIs express commitment to diversity and servingness.

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"Without them I couldn't pay for my education, so here I am": Latinx college graduates' experiences with and perceptions of their student loan debt

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to examine the experiences of Latinx students with their student loan debt. Guided by McKinney et al.'s (2015) Student Borrower Behavior and Attitudes model, we framed our study around the following themes: *sources of information, rationale for borrowing,* and *the burden of debt*. Findings underscore the importance of financial literacy and provide insight as to how institutions can better support Latinx students in making informed decisions about borrowing loans to pay for and finish college.

Keywords: Latinx students, HSI, student loan debt, borrowing perceptions, financial literacy

Introduction

Student debt has been reported as a major economic crisis, mainly driven by negative media reports (Baum, 2016). In 2018-2019, $151 billion dollars in federal financial aid was disbursed to students, of which $93 million (62%) was in the form of federal student loans to 6.2 million undergraduates (College Board, 2019). The combination of rising tuition and decreasing government support contributed to borrowers relying more on loans to attend college (Furquim et al., 2017). Due to this increased reliance on loans, understanding how students decide about acquiring student loan debt to pay for college is critical (Boatman et al., 2017; Zerquera et al., 2017).

The purpose of this study was to explore students' knowledge of and experiences with student loans. The following research question guided the study: *How do Latinx college graduates describe their experiences with borrowing student loans to pay for college?* We focus exclusively on Latinx students because of their known aversion to borrowing, which we discuss in the next section. We then provide background information regarding Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), review research on student loan debt, and present our guiding theoretical framework. In subsequent sections, we discuss our research methods, findings, study implications, and conclusions.

Literature Review

Latinx Student Loan Aversion

Research on Latinx experiences with student loans emphasizes their aversion to borrowing (Boatman et al., 2017). This is problematic given that non-borrowing Latinx students have been less likely to attain their degrees (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008). Boatman et al. (2017) also suggested that avoiding borrowing is more dependent on context. They noted that family influence plays a major role in Latinx decisions to borrow, and speculated that Latinx students were more averse to borrowing because of having less familial capital than their White peers (Boatman et al., 2017). Yet, debt aversion only paints a partial picture of borrowing behaviors for Latinx students, especially when considering other facets of this student subgroup. Aside from being deemed debt-averse, Latinx students have typically come from low-income communities who struggle with paying for college (Rendón et al., 2012). Such high college costs may also deter financial support from parents (Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018), leaving Latinx

students without the option to avoid borrowing. This situational context can explain why from 2004 to 2016, Latinx student borrowing increased from 42% to 46% (UnidosUS, 2019a). In Texas, where the current study takes place, Latinx students were found to have higher debt burdens than White students (Baker, 2019a), further challenging the debt aversion narrative. Such data suggests that avoidant behaviors towards borrowing generalized to Latinx students are misconceived. In fact, educational debt has steadily increased for Latinx families, from 14% in 2007 to 20% by 2016 (UnidosUS, 2019a), making it critical to increase our understanding of how Latinx students navigate student loans.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are federally-designated postsecondary institutions that have at least 25% Latinx undergraduate student population. The total number of HSIs nationwide has grown consistently since the creation of the designation in 1992 (Valdez, 2015). In 2017-2018, there were 539 institutions that met the 25% or above enrollment criteria (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2020). Moreover, 30% of undergraduates received federal student loans at HSIs,[1] underscoring the necessity of debt that many Latinx students must take on (College Scorecard, 2020).

In their systematic review of research on HSIs, Garcia et al. (2019) concluded that the concept of serving students was predominantly based on student-level outcomes, institutional experiences, organizational policies, and externalities. Their review emphasized the concentration of low-income students attending these institutions, but without apparent themes surrounding student debt issues. This lack of attention is surprising given the noted avoidance of borrowing by Latinx students and their high enrollment numbers at HSIs. Latinx students have also been more likely to receive Pell Grants (Núñez et al., 2016), and less likely to borrow federal student loans (Cunningham et al., 2014). Additionally, HSIs typically have fewer financial resources, resulting in less capacity to offer institutional grants (Santiago et al., 2016), and thus increasing their students' reliance on loans. This situation is exacerbated when considering undocumented and/or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) statuses of

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[1] Authors' calculation is based off average reported percentage of undergraduates receiving federal student loans in 2019. According to the College Scorecard Data, 461 institutions met the federal HSI designation definition, with 437 reporting student loan data.

some Latinx students, due to their ineligibility to access federal student loans (UnidosUS, 2019a). These circumstances make HSIs an important setting in exploring the role of student loans in Latinx higher education.

Research on Student Debt

Research on the impact of student loan debt has focused on traditional outcomes such as persistence and degree completion (e.g., Avery & Turner, 2012; Dowd & Coury, 2006; Kim, 2007; Museus, 2010). The majority of this work is quantitative with mixed or inconclusive results. For example, some research has shown positive outcomes associated with loans (e.g., McKinney & Burridge, 2015; Museus, 2010; Wiederspan, 2016) whereas other studies indicate a negative relationship (e.g., Dowd & Coury, 2006; Kim, 2007; Noopila & Williams Pichon, 2020). Negative impacts from student debt include influence on borrower health, financial management, credit card debt, years to homeownership, and the ability to save money (Cho et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2017; Henager & Wilmarth, 2018; Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2015).

On the other hand, limited qualitative research exists regarding student perceptions and experiences with borrowing student loans (Baker, 2019b). Some of this work focused on students while they were still enrolled and prior to entering repayment (Zerquera et al., 2017). Other research explored how knowledgeable students were of their debt (e.g., Akers & Chingos, 2014; Andruska et al., 2014; Hira et al., 2000) and concluded that students either underestimated the cost or were not fully aware of how much they borrowed. This disconnect is further complicated by misperceptions of the price of college relative to earnings potential based on a students' field of study (Akers & Chingos, 2014; McKinney et al., 2015). Baker (2019b) examined Black student perceptions of their debt and found that students with higher levels of debt had reconsidered their postsecondary and career plans. Undergraduate debt specifically, irrespective of race/ethnicity, has been found to negatively impact students' likelihood of pursuing graduate degrees (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). Conversely, students were encouraged to attend graduate school as a way to delay student loan repayment (Zerquera et al., 2017). Findings from these studies underscore the need to further examine student experiences with loans across racial/ethnic groups (McKinney et al, 2015; Perna et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

We applied McKinney et al.'s (2015) model of student borrower behavior and attitudes to describe how students make sense of borrowing. These experiences were shaped by student sources of information on borrowing, their reasons for borrowing, the benefits of borrowing, and their perceptions of how debt impacted their future. Drawing from Perna's (2006) college choice model, McKinney et al. (2015) identified multiple contexts important to understanding students' decisions and perceptions about borrowing. These contexts include informational (i.e., cultural capital), institutional (i.e., high school and college), and social, political and economic contexts. According to McKinney et al. (2015), each of these contexts shape the behaviors exhibited by student borrowers. The individual context refers to financial literacy students possess regarding borrowing; the institutional context discusses the setting at which student borrowers gather loan information and make decisions about borrowing; and the policy context explains the external factors involving federal policy, social expectations around borrowing, and current economic conditions that influence borrowing decisions (McKinney et al., 2015). Their model serves as a lens for unpacking Latinx students' borrowing experiences.

Research Methods

Study Location

Gulf University (pseudonym) is a large, diverse urban HSI located in southeast Texas. In 2018-2019, of the approximately 46,000 students enrolled at Gulf University, 32% were Hispanic, 25% were White, 21% were Asian American, and 10% were African American. The institution's location in Texas is also pivotal because of the state's high number of HSIs, the second highest of any state with 96 institutions, and Latinx students comprising 40.1% of the state's undergraduate count (HACU, 2020).

Participant Selection

Upon IRB approval, the financial aid office sent a recruitment email to 1,100 graduating seniors who had at least $20,000[2] in federal student loan debt. In total, 34 potential participants responded. Researchers scheduled interviews with 17 individuals, and of those, 10 participants

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[2] Average amount of student loan debt at study institution was $19,750 according to College Scorecard data.

self-identified as Latinx. Participants recieved $25 gift cards upon completion of their interview. Table 1 includes demographic information of the participants including their pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Major	Gender	Race/Ethnicity*	Age
Cece	Business Marketing	Female	Hispanic	33
Cristobal	Kinesiology	Male	Latino	25
Christopher	Psychology	Male	Hispanic	22
Doug	Philosophy	Male	Hispanic	25
Giselle	Religious Studies/Psychology	Female	Hispanic	39
James	Computer Science	Male	Latin	22
Lisa	Technology Digital Media	Female	Hispanic/White	36
Marissa	Economics	Female	Puerto Rican/Irish	45
Patty	Psychology	Female	Hispanic/Latino	24
Roberto	Computer Engineering	Male	Hispanic	24

Self-identified

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred in the Spring of 2018 through individual semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. Participants were asked questions related to their borrowing experiences throughout college, as well as their general understanding of student loans and repayment. Authors 1 and 3 conducted interviews in-person with participants, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Audio transcriptions were reviewed and cleaned for initial analysis, then uploaded into Dedoose qualitative analysis software for further analysis. Significant statements from the transcription data were identified and open coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), then categorized and placed into themes (Saldaña, 2015). The next step in the analysis involved reviewing researcher analytic memos, debriefing sessions, interview notes, and follow-up analysis of transcripts by all three authors, first

separately, then collectively as a group, for triangulation purposes (Creswell, 2013). Throughout this meaning-making process of the data, we searched for common or shared experiences based on reflective and inductive analysis and interpretation of participants' accounts (Moustakas, 1994). After consensus among the researchers, the most representative quotes from the emergent findings were chosen to support each theme.

Researcher Positionality and Study Limitations

Qualitative research involves a process of reflection by researchers regarding their previous experiences and current perspectives that might shape aspects of the study (Milner, 2007). We were reflexive in that we recognized how our personal biases might influence the findings from the current study. In his former role as a student loan consultant, author 1 was responsible for conducting loan counseling, financial aid, and financial literacy workshops for college students, high school students, and families. This experience provided him with an insider perspective on students' general understanding of the student loan and financial aid process. Author 2 held previous roles as an academic advisor and mental health counselor at public and private postsecondary institutions, also giving him insider knowledge of the financial aid process and the effects student loans can have on students' personal lives. Author 3 holds a significant amount of student debt, and therefore, is similarly situated to several of the participants in this study.

A few limitations must be noted in the interpretation of the findings. First, this study describes the perspectives of student loan borrowers who attended a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized to all Latinx students, particularly for those who do not have student loan debt. Also, while the majority of our participants indicated they were low income, we did not focus on unpacking this context, as it was beyond the scope of the study. Future research should explore specifically how parental income, wealth, and family contributions influence perceptions of student loan debt.

Findings

Drawing on our theoretical framework, we organized our findings around three themes: *lack of institutional guidance, rationale for borrowing*, and *the burden of debt*. From these themes, we

discovered where participants obtained information about loans and borrowing, how they rationalized the choice to borrow, and how they processed what their debt meant to them.

Lack of Institutional Guidance

Participants obtained information about student loans from various contexts, including parents, siblings, friends, and strangers. Institutionally, some expressed obtaining information from the financial aid office, while transfer students acknowledged obtaining information from a community college. In many circumstances, the information was incomplete or unavailable from the study institution. Even though participants were enrolled at an institution designated as "Hispanic-serving", their informational needs were unmet. For example, when asked about what type of information she received from the institution's financial aid office, Cece states:

> Nothing. Nothing. I never got any information from anybody in the [financial aid] office… I didn't have HBSA like the Houston based, Hispanic business, I didn't have any of that to turn to, to say, "Oh, we're all first generation, here's my people… but I didn't have that here.

Cece's experience not only explains the lack of information made available, but also highlights the disconnect between the institution, an HSI, and its Hispanic students seeking connection. Cece's experience was not unique. Daniel's experience with having a limited source of information from the institution went beyond financial aid offices and into faculty. He wondered what their role was regarding financial aid-related information, sharing:

> I don't know if there's any faculty help on these things. Although I'm sure they've helped lots… But, mostly just things I've done on my own, I haven't gotten as much information from the people.

These findings resonate with existing research on HSIs that tries to define the concept of servingness into specific processes, like institutional programs and policies (Garcia, 2019), while also hinting at the typified lack of resources at HSIs (Santiago et al., 2016). Two other participants expressed similar feelings regarding information from the institution. For example, Marissa stated, "I'm constantly coming up against information that if I had a year ago, I could've applied… I didn't even know that assistance was available…" Christopher, expressing his sense of being on his own, adds: "The only information I got I sought out myself. The [institution] did

not support me in explaining what student loans are." This palpable lack of information that participants reported from their institution, an HSI, confirms the work still left to do at these institutions and their capabilities to serve.

Rationale for Borrowing

Similar to other research, our participants rationalized borrowing as a necessary means to an end for attaining a college degree (Norvilitis & Batt, 2016). Cristobal summarizes this sentiment by saying:

> It kind of sucks that our system is set up like this, but at the same time, it's like what are you going to do?... But yeah, it has very much so broadened my horizon, so now I don't feel bad because ... student loans have helped me get through college. Without them I couldn't pay for my education, so here I am.

For this reason, participants sought out the information they needed, regardless if it came from the institution or not, and were committed to borrowing. Roberto describes how he gathered information from strangers stating: "Just from my talking with random people, not necessarily to educate myself, just from my coming up. I never had a targeted discussion on that beforehand. It was just from what I heard." Other participants made financial decisions without fully understanding the details of student loan borrowing. For example, on the amount of loans to accept and take out, James stated: "I actually didn't know that until this semester that you didn't have to take out everything." Interestingly, several of our study participants acknowledged their lack of experience with managing money and the intricacies involved in borrowing loans (e.g., how credit and interest rates work). James continued by sharing his willingness to borrow despite having this lack of financial literacy: "I just kind of just took them… even then, I didn't even know about interest rates." Participants intentionally sought out information and made conscious decisions to borrow with whatever knowledge they could gather in order to attain their degrees.

Several participants expressed borrowing as a trade-off, such as Cece when she states the following:

I didn't go into it thinking that like it was free money or anything like that. I'm very aware of interest rates, I'm very aware of what things cost, and we definitely do the trade-off, right? The opportunity costs, what's going to be worth for me now to borrow this money versus if I don't, and then I don't finish this degree, what am I not getting in return? It made sense to do it.

The rationale to borrow came with an understanding of the eventual payoff from obtaining a degree. Cece, who may have had an advantage in understanding the intricate details of personal borrowing as a business marketing major, articulated this awareness of her debt obligations, as did many of our other participants, which is contrary to findings that reported students having a limited understanding of their loans (Akers & Chingos, 2014; Johnson et al., 2016). Roberto demonstrates this by explaining why he borrowed in the following quote: "I had already heard they would give me about six months until after I graduate to start paying back, and I figured it's an investment... I'm investing in my career." Marissa also saw borrowing as an investment in articulating her ambitious payoff plans, stating:

I feel that I will be able to recoup the investment I have made within probably a couple of years, I should be able to pay it off... but, even if I had not chosen a lucrative field, even if it were to take me 15 years to pay it back, my desire for a degree is so strong, I would've done it no matter what.

Similarly, Giselle said, "I'm going to pay it off and I'm going to do well and this is why I'm giving it my all. It's an investment." These quotes underscore how confident students were in their ability to repay their debt, perceiving it as an investment in their future. Similar to other findings, they were enthusiastic, amid having to borrow loans, towards wanting to complete their degrees (Barnard et al., 2018).

The Burden of Debt

Despite the positive outlook on debt for most of our participants, some expressed feelings of vulnerability, and perceived their loan debt as a burden. Study participants allude to understanding the lengthy process that repayment could be. This was evident in Doug stating: "It's a lot of money so it's going to take a lot of commitment and resources to chip away at." Cece went as far as exclaiming that she won't view money as her own "until [she] can live debt

free". Other participants stated opinions on repayment duration based on various scenarios, such as which career opportunities to prioritize, or how much they can hypothetically pay each month. While Roberto says that he could payoff his loans "in like a year or two", Christopher states: "I think I have a five-year plan but I think long term I'm still unsure. I'm torn between a few paths." Lisa also presented thoughts on uncertain timeline, sharing: "Initially, I was hoping for a two-year loan repayment, now I'm looking at three to four... and so we have been wondering if we need to push that goal from five years to seven years."

Participants described the necessity of obtaining a well-paying job, regardless if it matched their major, while others contemplated joining the Peace Corps as a way to reduce their debt. Others shared how their debt led to contingency plans for graduate school. This aligns with research showing how students are more reluctant to pursue graduate school because of not wanting to take on more debt (Zerquera et al., 2017). Patty described this burden when she stated:

> Before graduating my priority was grad school, and now my priority is looking for work. So that kind of did change. I wasn't... it didn't really hit me that I was going to be like, "I need to look for a job." But now that I did graduate, yeah, it has sunk into me that I need to put aside grad school and look for a job right now.

Christopher shared this same sentiment, but with a notion of acceding to a job that he may not have cared for if he did not have student debt:

> I don't think I want to jump into graduate school because I don't want to pay for it... So I was like, I'll apply to Teach for America because I think they're a national program... They're just a name but I'm getting a job, but they're also giving me money to help pay off my loan.

Participants like Christopher and Patty describe their urgency to find jobs above any other plans. The types of job also matter, as different jobs come with different pay scales to mitigate the repayment amounts. Lisa explains how she plans on dealing with making less money after graduating: "Now I don't know if that's possible, considering it's way lower pay than I was expecting... I'm going to do side jobs, which I already have lined up."

A similarity across all participants' perceived burden of debt was their continued effort to plan for repayment. Whether mentally adjusting their repayment timelines, changing their path from graduate school to immediate employment, or even accepting jobs they may not have considered before, most of the participants still viewed their degree as worth the debt. A few would have done things differently, but none of those scenarios included not going to college.

Discussion

Consistent with prior research, this study reaffirms the importance of loans in helping college students succeed (McKinney et al., 2015). More importantly, our study highlights how Latinx students obtained information about loans while underscoring the importance of financial literacy. Participants expressed self-directed intentions on learning about student loans while simultaneously deciding to borrow. This occurred even when participants did not fully understand loan repayment. As scholars point out, students may not be completely oblivious about their debt but are simply putting it off until graduation (Zerquera et al., 2017). Our study participants reaffirmed this finding when they frequently could not recount specifics on the amount they had borrowed, or how interest rates impacted repayment. However, the majority of our participants still expressed little to no regret in their borrowing decisions.

Interestingly, participants faced their lack of financial literacy with a sense of optimism, as the obscurities surrounding the borrowing process did not dissuade their decisions to pursue a college education. Student loans, while burdensome, were essential in their pathway to degree attainment. Most confirmed feeling this way because they simply lacked the financial resources to pay for their education completely out-of-pocket. Previous research found that Latinx student borrowers saw loan debt as a way to access college and felt the benefits outweighed the stresses of repayment (Barnard et al., 2018). This trade-off presents the following dilemma of student loan debt: while taking on student debt can negatively impact the financial well-being of borrowers, it does not do so to the extent that attaining a college degree positively affects it (Henager & Wilmarth, 2018). Participants also viewed student debt as a requisite for obtaining a well-paying job. However, our participants' plans were altered once they realized repayment was on the horizon, especially for those who had not secured full-time employment.

A few implications from this study must be noted. First, findings underscore the importance of helping Latinx students make informed decisions about borrowing loans to pay for college (Santiago, 2010). Secondly, we provide further evidence for institutions to develop institutional policies that promote smart borrowing behavior among college students (Fletcher et al., 2015). Timely dissemination of information about student loan responsibilities might involve distributing annual information to students about current debt accumulation and projected monthly repayment amounts. Similarly, institutions have developed innovative student loan counseling practices, such as peer-to-peer coaching using students in finance-related majors, to facilitate improvement in the dissemination of loan information (Fletcher et al., 2015). Relatedly, scholars have called for the promotion of adequate financial literacy training specifically targeted at HSIs, in order to help Latinx students responsibly manage their financial aid and student debt (Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018; Santiago, 2010). Taking such targeted measures will help better clarify the ambiguity surrounding the serving aspect designated to HSIs, and lead to the creation of tangible programming with which Latinx students can identify (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Future research should seek to understand how well financial-focused programming can act as an institutional support structure in serving Latinx college students (Garcia et al., 2019). Moreover, further research should also focus on describing student perceptions of the repayment process, and how repayment obligations influences their plans after graduation. In the era of Covid-19 and the concomitant pauses in government collection on student debt, future research should also investigate how government forebearances have affected borrower decisions and paying down their debt. Any changes in federal policy might ripple out to influence other aspects of borrowers' future financial practices.

Conclusion

Postsecondary institutions are obligated to empower students to make educated financial decisions througought college, especially given that more students are borrowing to help finance their education. With this in mind, increasing our understanding of the choices students make in regards to borrowing is essential for keeping college accessible and affordable. Despite the negative attention, our study points to the necessity of student loans in facilitating degree completion for Latinx students. While most of the participants in our study were ambitious about handling repayment, an estimated 20% of Latinx students who began college in

2003-2004 have defaulted on their student loans (UnidosUS, 2019b). Projections also show that approximatey half from that cohort will default by 2024 (UnidosUS, 2019b). Moreover, Latinx graduates are faced with the lowest post-graduation earnings of all racial/ethnic groups (UnidosUS, 2019b), making payoff even more difficult for Latinx graduates. Given these statistics, it is important for institutions and policymakers to understand this complex trade-off in order to create policies that are supportive of and responsive to how students perceive, and make sense of their debt.

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"I Love How We Developed a Community Already":
A Graduate Student Orientation Model for Minority-Serving Programs and Institutions

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Abstract

In recent years, an increasing number of universities have qualified as Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), thanks in part to significant growth in the numbers of Latinx students who are enrolling in bachelor's degree programs. A greater proportion of this student population is completing bachelor's degrees and continuing into master's and doctoral programs. Nevertheless, graduate orientation remains overlooked despite being a rich opportunity to support the identity development of Latinx students. This pedagogical reflection contributes to the discussion of Latinx student experiences by exploring an innovative approach to new graduate student orientation for a master's program in a Chicana/o Studies department at an MSI. The orientation provides holistic support for Latinx students by building an academic community founded on mutual support and bringing greater transparency to the hidden curriculum of graduate education that often elides Latinx students. The essay explores insights from student feedback on the orientation and provides reflection questions to help departments and MSIs bring a more equity-minded, supportive approach to welcoming and retaining new Latinx graduate students.

Keywords: Latinx students, graduate education, student retention, identity development

The purpose of this pedagogical reflection is to share an orientation model that eases new Latinx graduate students' anxieties, through concerted community-building and discussion of the hidden curriculum (i.e. unspoken rules and norms) of higher education, both of which are critical to establishing a strong foundation for graduate school. This pedagogical reflection is offered as one way to develop a comprehensive orientation program that supports the identity development of Latinx graduate students. Such interventions are critical in light of the increasing numbers of Latinx students pursuing advanced degrees, and the corresponding rise in the number of universities qualifying as Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs).

Recent years have seen considerable growth in the number of MSIs across the United States. In 2014-2015, for example, approximately 700 institutions were recognized as MSIs and enrolled nearly five million students of color (Taylor, 2017). Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) now comprise nearly 15% of non-profit institutions, and enroll 63% of Latinx students (HACU, 2018). The growth in the number of MSIs and HSIs is driven in large part by the dramatic increase of Latinx students receiving bachelor's degrees (Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2019). In fact, Latinx students now represent nearly 20% of overall college enrollment (Bauman, 2017).

As more Latinxs are completing undergraduate degrees, it is no surprise that between 2002 and 2012 there was a 103% increase in the number of students who earned master's degrees and a 67% increase in those earning doctorates (Excelencia in Education, 2015). In 2017, more than half of Latinx first-time graduate students were pursuing degrees in the arts and humanities, education, public administration, and social/behavioral sciences (Okahana & Zhou, 2018). Nevertheless, they represent only a small percentage of the overall graduate student population. Significant barriers to post-baccalaureate education remain in place for Latinxs, much of them rooted in the disjuncture between student's ethnic identities and values, and those of mainstream academic culture (Torres, 2006). Latinx graduate students grapple with feelings of alienation from both academic culture and their peers, and often struggle to adapt to the first year of graduate school, leading many to wonder, "What am I doing here?" (Ramirez, 2014). Moreover, one study found that more than 40% of Latinxs with doctorates in social science fields attended universities with lower research profiles (Fernandez, 2020), institutions that often have fewer resources to provide the range of supports that graduate students need to meet their educational goals.

Graduate Orientation: A Critical Form of Support for Latinx Students

Orientation programs are an important way of easing the transition process for all students. Numerous studies have explored the impact of orientation programs on students' ability to navigate and integrate themselves into institutions of higher education. However, graduate orientation remains overlooked at many institutions (Mears et al., 2015; Lang, 2004; Stiles, 2012) and, when it is offered, features widely varying content (Poock, 2004). Such findings are dismaying, as students need specific guidance for understanding how graduate school differs from the undergraduate experience (Brown, 2012).

The days before classes commence are an especially critical window for developing graduate students' sense of identity and community. Taub and Komives (1998) found that this anticipatory stage is the best time for interventions that help students gain realistic expectations of graduate study. Drawing from framing theory, socialization theory, and the scholarship of social support, Mears et al (2015) argue for the importance of graduate student orientations. Their results demonstrate that students who feel supported during their initial contacts with the institution develop a positive frame by which to view their place within it and absorb more information from orientation as their new-student anxiety subsides.

Exemplary departments enculturate graduate students by fostering collegiality within the cohort, encouraging professional relationships between new students and faculty, and clarifying program structure and faculty expectations for incoming students (Boyle & Boice, 1998, p. 87). Studies of orientations in specific academic fields underscore such findings. Benavides and Keyes' (2016) study of public administration and public policy master's programs found that a comprehensive orientation that reflected the mission and purpose of the program enhanced graduate students' retention, learning, and socialization; the greater the socialization component, the less likely students were to drop out of their programs. Davis, Bissler and Leiter (2001) demonstrate that sociology graduate orientations that included hands-on demonstrations and practice of required skills ultimately create cohesion, equalize basic skills, clarify expectations, and familiarize students with their new environment, resulting in a greater sense of security and a smoother transition for new students.

Given their connections to student retention, orientation programs play an especially critical role for graduate students of color. Taylor and Miller (2002), for example, identify six factors that support the integration and persistence of minoritized students. These components

include ethnic and peer attachment; social integration; feeling worthy and competent; reliable alliances through a community of support; guidance in the form of faculty and administrator mentorship; and leadership opportunities. Establishing mentoring relationships is another key aspect of the preparation of graduate students of color because it provides psychological, social, and career-focused supports (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). Unfortunately, many universities focus more on recruiting historically underrepresented graduate students rather than on ways of retaining them (Poock, 2007-2008), despite the fact that students of color, more often than white students, view orientations as playing a critical role in the social transition into higher education (Mayhew et al, 2007).

Students of color often leave their graduate programs because institutions do not comprehensively support their social integration into graduate school—not because they cannot handle the work (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Researchers have argued that a critical aspect of supporting graduate students of color is to establish department cultures where "[i]nstead of insisting that students discard the distinctive competencies that may result from cultural heritage in favor of conforming to the school's cultural standards, students are encouraged to take advantage of such competencies" (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001, p. 554). As Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014) explain in their work exploring the links between graduate programs, self-education, and tribal nation-building for Native peoples: "Faculty, students, and programs that embody respect, engage relationally, and practice reciprocity would necessarily produce a very different kind of knowledge, research, and project" (p. 578). Thus, programs and MSIs that are able to offer orientations that provide a cultural-wealth-based framing early on can radically shift the educational landscape to more comprehensively support historically underserved students.

Transforming Our Orientation Model

Situated within an MSI, my home department was established in the late 1960s as a master's (M.A.) program, though undergraduate degree programs are now offered, as well. The M.A. program historically has attracted a wide range of students, from those who are interested in pursuing a doctorate but want to acclimate to graduate training by first earning a master's degree, to those who plan to work with community organization centered on Latinx communities and seek to develop a solid intellectual base for undertaking that work. Cohorts

generally have ranged in size from eight to fourteen students; nearly all are Latinx-identified, come from working-class, immigrant households, and represent the first in their families to enter higher education. Our graduate courses are offered during evenings and weekends, as nearly all students in the program work full-time and have considerable commutes within the region. As a result, community-building primarily takes place in class because students are often unable to attend campus events, visit regular office hours, or easily meet up with each other to study outside of class. These factors highlight the need for a robust orientation program in order to help them establish a strong foundation and community for their studies.

Through the fall of 2013, our new graduate student orientation took the form of a two-hour social on the evening before the first day of instruction. After a round of introductions, incoming students received a brief overview of the program and general advice about graduate study before transitioning to informal question and answer (Q&A). While students were excited to meet the department community, they described leaving with more questions than answers about how to start the program on strong footing. This approach to orientation also did not provide faculty with the opportunity to share substantive advice about the issues many first-semester Latinx students struggle with, such as confronting writing anxieties and effective time management.

In the meantime, a colleague then teaching in our graduate program organized a series of summer writing workshops to help students develop a current writing project. Her approach was a critical intervention founded on helping students recognize their writing anxieties and learn how to manage them (Negron-Gonzales, 2014). Inspired by her leadership, we began to reflect on how we could incorporate core principles of her workshop into other aspects of our graduate program.

In the summer of 2014 we transformed our department orientation from the brief evening social into a daylong series of workshops to supplement the general university-wide graduate orientation, which included campus tours, introduced students to resources such as the career and writing centers, and provided an overview of requirements, and candidacy. Affirming the culturally-rooted epistemological and ontological knowledge that students bring with them, the department orientation addresses key aspects of the graduate experience for first-generation Latinx students: identity development, core skills for graduate-level education, and the importance of developing a community of support.

Though the sessions have changed slightly year to year, the following represents the core elements of the orientation:

- *Welcome* (15 minutes). The day begins with a round of introductions, and a brief history of how and why we developed this orientation. We emphasize the intended takeaways are to reflect on the knowledge, skills, and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that students bring to the program; discuss concrete approaches to graduate-level work; and build community.

- *Session 1: Developing a Graduate Student Identity* (50 minutes). This session has been revised many times. Initial iterations included a mind-mapping exercise that enabled students to connect their intellectual interests to those of their cohort; later, we created an activity to identify the skills they bring to the program, and those they sought to develop. Currently, this session begins with an activity where students anonymously share what they look forward to in the program and what concerns they have. The purpose of the exercise is to underscore that none of them is alone in wondering, "Do I belong here? Am I ready to start a master's program?" We also outline the differences between graduate and undergraduate education, and share *consejos* (i.e. moral support passed from one generation to the next) compiled by students who recently completed their first year.

- *Session 2: Time Management During a Busy Semester* (50 minutes). This session explores the challenges of juggling the accelerated pace of graduate work, complexity of ideas, and volume of assigned readings. In a powerful group activity, students analyze the syllabus from each of the three core courses first-semester students anticipate taking; each group notes the amount of reading from week to week, and the due dates of assignments. They then transfer this summary onto large monthly calendars posted on the wall, enabling the cohort to gain a big-picture view of the total amount of work across the courses. We then dive into time management techniques, drawing from Rockquemore's (2010) approach of careful weekly planning and identifying priority tasks.

- *Session 3: Reading and Preparing for Class* (50 minutes). Here students learn techniques for managing the reading load while simultaneously critically engaging with texts. We discuss how to prepare questions and organize their ideas for graduate seminars, and then we facilitate discussion of a sample reading. The facilitated discussion

guides the group through a sample "first class," so they can walk into their actual first class meetings with an idea of what to expect.

- *Session 4: Writing at the Graduate Level* (30 minutes). Drawing from the work of Negron-Gonzales (2014), the emphasis of this session is to remind students that writing is not an innate ability but instead a learned skill that improves with practice. Students reflect on the anxieties they bring to writing assignments and learn ways to create positive writing experiences, from committing to a daily writing practice and making writing a social activity to breaking a writing project into more manageable pieces and identifying specific writing goals.

- *Session 5: Overview of the M.A. Program* (20 minutes). We offer an overview of courses, emphases within our program, and options for the culminating experience (write a thesis, undertake an applied project, or take additional elective courses). This session is short so as to not overwhelm students with this information before they have begun their first semester of coursework.

- *Session 6: Student Success Q&A* (75 minutes). The final session features three alumni of the master's program who discuss why they entered the program, their experiences in it, and how they are applying their degree. New students have the opportunity to ask further questions.

- *Closing* (15 minutes). After all participants—including faculty and alumni—share final reflections, we collect anonymous qualitative feedback on the orientation, and end the day with an opportunity for new students to socialize with current students via a potluck sponsored by the department's graduate student organization.

To prepare for the event, incoming students are asked to save the date in August for a mandatory orientation (though technically there is no penalty for non-attendance). Two weeks before orientation, they receive instructions to read the sample article for Session Three and a set of reflection questions about the skills they bring to the program.

Findings Related to Student Perspectives on the New Orientation Model

Students completed a brief, anonymous questionnaire that included three open-ended questions: (1) What aspects of today's orientation did you find most helpful? (2) What changes, if any, would you suggest for next year's orientation? Is there a topic you would like to see

addressed that was overlooked or did not get much time today? (3) Please share a few insights from today that you hope to put into use as classes begin. Thirty-three total responses were collected from the years 2015 – 2016 and 2018 – 2019. Reviewing this feedback reveals a number of important themes.

In response to the first question, most students report "everything" was helpful, singling out two sessions as especially impactful. The first is the time management workshop. Orientation participants explain that the exercise of mapping out a semester of reading and writing assignments across three different classes puts the graduate student workload into clear perspective, underscoring the importance of time management. One respondent explains, "I visually understood how careful I need to be [with] my time." Others share that the session informed them of specific techniques for staying organized once classes begin. For example, a student writes, "I thought it was very interesting learning the different ways to plan out the semester. It added to my planning that I've been using." This response echoes the orientation's overall message to students that they already have many skills for academic success and that the purpose of the orientation is to add to their toolkit.

Students also highlight the "alumni success" panel. Within this subset of responses, students reflect on the power of hearing about alumni experiences in the program, especially the strategies that enabled them to complete the degree. Alumni experiences are "inspiring and made the program realistic and [put it] into perspective." While the alumni speakers may be offering advice similar to that shared in other orientation workshops, it may very well be more impactful coming from near-peers rather than from faculty (Mears et al, 2015). The second theme is that the panel helps orientation participants see the many ways graduates have used their degrees. One participant was moved by hearing how the graduates connected learning to their professional careers. Another explains, "The [alumni] panel was extremely helpful because it allowed me to hear from students who went through the program and how it has helped them." What these comments reveal is that hearing from alumni enables them to envision pathways beyond the master's program. Such a vision is critical because it reminds students that the two to three years spent in the program is only a brief chapter of their lives that should connect to a personal vision beyond graduate school.

Orientation feedback overall points to the role of building community as a way to ease students' anxieties about entering a graduate program. "[T]he opportunity to meet others who are entering the program *before* classes begin was a great way to take the edge off," explains one participant; meanwhile, another emphasizes, "I loved how we developed a community already. This orientation helped 'break the ice.'" Yet it is not simply coming together that proves critical; rather, it is creating a space that acknowledges both the strengths and concerns of Latinx students pursuing a new level of higher education. "I am very relieved this program takes the time to give us some foundations to start with," observes a respondent. "I also really like the discussion on how we feel and our thoughts on the program. It is very reassuring to hear that I am not alone in my fears and excitements." Building on that note, another student reflects, "I learned everyone's fear is the same as mine and that this isn't a competition." Coupled with the encouragement of faculty and alumni, students gain reassurance they will be part of a community of support. For instance, one student writes, "I found it helpful to be reminded that it is okay to not know everything—it will be a journey. I will get through things." Finally, a participant acknowledges, "[I]t was interesting to learn how [staying] connected with others is a part of student success."

In response to the second feedback question (suggested changes), many explain that the orientation addressed most of the questions they had. When they do provide specific ideas, the responses fall into two categories. The first is a request for more information on resources for students, including financial aid, scholarships and grants, and housing. To acknowledge those requests, we have expanded our orientation to provide information and specific contacts for students seeking further resources. The second category is a request to hear more about the various options for completing the program (as mentioned above, choosing an emphasis and culminating experience). We now offer a brief follow-up orientation in January, entitled, "Semester Two: Now What Do I Do?" which goes into more depth in these areas.

In response to the final question about strategies students plan to adopt, two-thirds of participants indicate they intend to engage in careful time management. Responses also illuminate a narrative of discovering—in the words of one participant—that their "graduate student identity is a process." Another observes, "I think we are all nervous and excited, and I think the challenge is going to be to juggle all those emotions and help keep each other going." Such a response reveals the orientation's ability to provide tools and strategies that address the

rollercoaster of emotions students experience in graduate school. Moreover, the response points to the community of support each student can draw strength from and contribute to in pursuit of their goals.

Other takeaways highlight the importance of holding onto the aspirations that led students to the program. "I would like to keep the drive and passion I have now," a participant explains, adding, "I hope to keep in the back of my head the reasons and motivations that I had at the beginning and why I applied in the first place." The root of such statements is self-empowerment, as seen in the following example: "Owning my experience and setting my own pace so as to ensure I obtain what it is I need out of this experience in my own path. Thank you for encouraging us to take ownership over this experience!" The feeling of ownership is reflected in the comments of a student who writes (in all caps), "I CAN DO THIS!!" Thus, the orientation takes Latinx students on a daylong journey from feeling nervous to expressing greater confidence, understanding graduate school is not an end in itself but rather a process of self-discovery enhanced by engaging in a community of support that acknowledges the epistemological salience of their ethnic identity.

Implications for Adapting the Model for Other Programs and MSIs

MSIs and graduate programs can use these strategies to create a new graduate student orientation, or revamp an existing orientation program to support Latinx students.

- *Survey current and/or recently-graduated students about their needs*. It is critical to ask graduate students directly about their needs. The benefit of checking in with current students is that they have some experience in the program to generate suggestions for future student orientations. Research demonstrates that engaging students is a necessary first step towards creating tailored programming (Nesheim et al, 2006; Haworth, 1996; Nerad & Miller, 1996).

- *Consider recent cohorts of graduate students in your department's program.* Who are your students? What strengths do they bring to your program? Are there areas where they seem to struggle, and why? Make note of the trends over time. Some aspects of entering a graduate program have remained present across generations: anxieties about fitting in with one's cohort, fighting feelings of the imposter syndrome, etc. Yet other aspects may have changed with new generations of students who have

access to different tools (time management apps) or perhaps even less experience with going to the library, due to the rise of electronic versions of books, and journal articles.

- **Reflect on faculty within your graduate program.** Where do they struggle the most in supporting students? For example, graduate faculty within my department were alarmed by a rise in "incomplete" grades assigned to graduate students at the end of each semester. Our time management workshop is not only a support for students, but also for faculty to deliver the tools upfront, at the start of the term, to help students stay on track for timely course completion.

- **Choose formats that reflect students' needs and availabilities**. When we began to redesign our orientation, we initially considered a two-day series that would enable us to engage intensively on the critical topics. However, we kept it to a single day given that our students' work schedules and commutes make a multi-day orientation impractical for them. What topics are most important for your students? How much time is needed to provide them with both the knowledge and hands-on practice for each topic?

Ongoing Adaptations in Response to Changing Circumstances

It is critical to constantly assess graduate orientation in order to respond to the changing needs of diversifying student populations. Case in point: As this essay was in development, the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 radically altered the landscape of higher education. Our campus is one that will continue using remote modalities until the health and safety of our campus community can be ensured.

In response to the current inability to bring students into physical proximity, our department is reimagining orientation in a way that maintains coverage and substance with a minimum of synchronous delivery, which can be mentally and physically taxing (Sandler & Bauman, 2020). We are creating a series of brief screencasts to deliver key points of each orientation session. Incoming students will view this content asynchronously, then join a ninety-minute synchronous orientation where they can meet each other and the faculty; engage in small-group discussion about the videos; share their academic success tips; and hear from two alumni. While this format is far from ideal, even an online orientation significantly reduces the anxieties of incoming students (Hullinger & Hogan, 2014). Moreover, the content will remain

available after the orientation through a learning management system module, enabling students to reference the strategies throughout the semester.

An important question emerging from this experience is how faculty and administrators can employ online technologies in ways that build upon the cultural capital of Latinx students—especially during a global public health crisis that disproportionally impacts the home communities of this student population. Such issues will surely stretch our training, skills, and imagination as leaders within higher education. However, we cannot afford to do otherwise if we want to not only recruit but also retain and graduate diverse student populations.

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Entrando en el juego: The Role of Hispanic-Serving Institutions in Fostering Educational and Athletic Outcomes for Latinx Athletes

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Abstract

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) enroll the majority of Latinx undergraduate students and constitute the second-largest institutional type in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (D1). Yet, little is known about the role intercollegiate athletics play in fostering educational outcomes for Latinx students at HSIs. Under the guise of Latinx critical race theory, this qualitative study examined how HSIs operate both the federal designation and NCAA D1 membership in relation to athletic participation and completion outcomes for Latinx student-athletes. Document analysis was utilized to disaggregate data from various reports to identify the HSI-D1 institutions and their Latinx athletes' participation, and graduation rates. These findings were then compared to the overall NCAA D1 averages. Among the findings, Latinx student-athletes graduated at higher rates than non-athletes from the HSI-D1s. However, as an aggregate, these institutions had below average graduation rates of Latinx students and student-athletes in comparison to the national rates across NCAA D1 membership. Furthermore, HSI-D1s provided limited athletic participation opportunities for Latinx athletes. The study concluded with the implications of findings and recommendations for future studies.

Keywords: Latinx Athletes, College Athletics, Hispanic-Serving Institutions

A Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) is a federal designation for higher education institutions (HEIs) that enroll a minimum of 25% of full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate students who identify as Latinx (Mendez et al., 2015) and have at least 50% FTE undergraduate students considered as needs-based (Corral et al., 2015). HSIs comprise over 15% of non-profit HEIs but enroll 66% of all undergraduate Latinx students (Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities, 2019). As such, HSIs play a critical role in providing access to educational opportunities for Latinxs. Given the rising demography of Latinxs, HSI continue to increase numerically; as of 2017-2018, 523 HSIs were established (Excelencia in Education, 2019). Additionally, there are 328 Emerging HSIs (eHSIs), which have Latinx undergraduate FTE of at least 15% but less than 25% (Excelencia in Education, 2019). HSIs constitute the second-largest institutional type in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which is the largest and most well-known association governing college sports at 4-year HEIs. NCAA divides its members into three divisions (D1, D2, and D3); D1 members comprise the most well-funded and competitive level (Sweitzer, 2009).

In 2018, 8% of all NCAA D1, 13% of D2, and 5% of D3 members were HSIs (NCAA, 2018a). Limited research has examined the role of athletics at HSIs in providing educational and athletic outcomes for Latinxs who constitute a small proportion of the NCAA's participants. Specifically, in 2018-2019, only 6.1% of all male and 5.8% of all female NCAA student-athletes were Latinxs (Lapchick, 2020). Slight differences exist across divisions: 5.1% male and 5.4% female (D1), 7.3% both male and female (D2), and 6.2% male and 5.5% female (D3). Minimal research exists that explores the reasons for the low representation of Latinxs in the NCAA. Accordingly, some scholars use the term "los olvidados," the forgotten ones, when describing Latinx athletes (Osanloo et al., 2018), and their disparity in college athletic participation rates.

As HSIs continue to rise in the proportion of HEIs, Osanloo et al. (2018) posit that the existing NCAA demographic student-athlete data is disaggregated by institutional type to evaluate what role HSIs play in providing opportunities for Latinxs to participate in athletics and experience successful outcomes. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine how HSIs operate both the federal designation and NCAA D1 membership in relation to athletic participation and completion outcomes for Latinx student-athletes. The primary research question asked was: What role, if any, do HSI-D1s have in fostering educational and athletic outcomes for Latinx athletes?

Literature Review

The demographics of the U.S. population has shifted, and Latinxs have become the second-largest racial/ethnic group living in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Today, they comprise 17% of the overall undergraduate student body (NCES, 2016). As a result of these demographic shifts, HSI have emerged on the landscape of higher education.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

As part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Title III, HSIs were established to improve post-secondary education for Latinxs (Garcia; 2019; Hirt; 2006; Mendez et al., 2015). HSIs were also created (1) through legislative efforts on behalf of educational leaders who recognized that the growing numbers of Latinxs in higher education need equitable federal funding; (2) educational support programs for significant growth of Latinx enrollment; and most significantly, (3) that institutional cultures intentionally organized to serve Latinx students (Mendez et al., 2015; Santiago & Andrade, 2010). Consequently, even at HSIs, the deficit framing of Latinx students has created many obstacles for them in higher education. Research (Mendez et al., 2015) posits that Latinxs enrolled at HSIs are often viewed as deficit because they are often first-generation college students that are perceived as maladjusted due to living in poverty and attending poorly resourced schools. Still, the broad access to postsecondary education that HSIs provide are essential for Latinxs to succeed in higher education (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Nuñez et al., 2013), but even more so when HSIs operationalize an NCAA membership.

The Role of HSIs

The role of HSIs was constructed with the intent of improving post-secondary education for Latinxs (Nuñez et al., 2013; Santiago & Andrade, 2010); as a result, the HSI designation does not correlate to a particular institutional structure (Garcia, 2019; Hirt, 2006) but rather is identifiable by the students they serve (Hirt, 2006). Therefore, HSIs enact institutional structures within the environments of the institutional host (Gutierrez, 2020). Additionally, HSIs are primarily in select states and cluster regions across the U.S. (Hirt, 2006), which has resulted in a conglomeration of institutional types and identities for HSIs (Hirt, 2006; Renn & Patton, 2017). The structural uncertainty for HEIs in operationalizing the HSI

designation continues to remain contentious (Greene & Oesterreich, 2012), as institutions are not distinguishable between HEIs who seek to serve Latinxs from those who receive the designation based on demographic growth (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Garcia, 2019).

Latinx Student Experience

Between 2000 and 2015, the Latinx undergraduate enrollment "more than doubled" to 37% from 1.4 million to 3.0 million (NCES, 2017, p. 116). Latinx students continue to increase in enrollment in higher education by 15% above all other ethnic categories and in 2017-2018, 523 HSIs enrolled 66% of all Latinx undergraduates (Excelencia in Education, 2019). By enrolling more than half of all Latinxs, HSIs play a critical role in their development (Laden, 2001). Latinxs have made substantial progress in closing the gaps of their White counterparts. However, enrollment is not the same as completion, as persistence is a significant factor to completion for Latinx which includes familiarity of culture, social context, and faculty make-up (Ponjuan, 2013; Suro & Fry, 2005). Researchers have posited (Rendón et al., 2015) that underserved student populations' experiences differ in higher education from "conferred dominate" groupings (Johnson, 2018) in relation to sense of belonging, when students are left to themselves to self-author and self-navigate higher learning experiences.

Latinx Student-Athletes

Latinxs have risen in proportion of undergraduate students but are underrepresented within NCAA D1 (Lapchick, 2020). Studies on Latinx athletes remain minimal and primarily focus on their college choice (Martinez, 2018), athletic recruitment (Darvin et al., 2017), and undergraduate athletic and academic experiences (Grafnetterova, 2019; Ortega 2019, Ramos, 2018). Additionally, information continues to be limited in NCAA reports, with lack of detailed information about Latinxs, and HSI-D1 members. For example, the NCAA (2018a) database divides members into Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and non-HBCUs. Therefore, as Latinxs and HSIs continue to increase in higher education and athletics, it is imperative that they become part of the larger narrative, as it pertains to equitable participation opportunities within the NCAA.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) (Solórzano, & Delgado Bernal, 2001), which acknowledges the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of systemic oppression relating to Latinx populations. LatCrit consists of five primary themes: (1) race, racism and the intersectionality within other forms of subordination, (2) the role and domination of White ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) experiential knowledge, and (5) an interdisciplinary perspective central to Latinx populations (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Guided by LatCrit (Solórzano, & Delgado Bernal, 2001), this study examined how HEIs operationalize the HSI designation and NCAA membership, as it related to Latinx athletic participation and completion rates for Latinx student-athletes. Throughout this study, LatCrit emphasized that Latinxs' athletic participation and college degree attainment is not just a matter of individual motivation and effort (Núñez, 2014); instead, these outcomes are largely influenced by systemic barriers, and institutional racism.

Methods

This study utilized document analysis; a systematic procedure in which qualitative researchers review or evaluate both printed, and electronic documents (Bowen, 2009). The method of document analysis incorporates content and thematic analysis, and consists of organizing information into categories and themes (Bowen, 2009). This procedure is beyond quantification of data; rather, it involves uncovering themes pertinent to the studied phenomenon. Overall, document analysis involves finding, selecting, making sense of, and synthesizing information from various documents pertaining to the study's research questions (Bowen, 2009). The primary research question this study asked was: What role, if any, do HSI-D1s have in fostering educational and athletic outcomes for Latinx athletes?

Procedures

Data collection and analysis constituted an iterative process consisting of multiple layers. To guide in answering the primary research question, each layer of the analysis sought answers to specific ancillary research questions: (AQ1) What HSIs and eHSIs are NCAA D1 members?; (AQ2) What are the participation rates of Latinx athletes at HSI-D1s?; (AQ3) What are the degree completion rates of Latinx athletes at HSI-D1s? Every layer focused on collecting data from various databases, and reports (see Table 1 below for an overview).

Table 1

Overview of the Study's Procedures and Data Sources

	Layer 1 (AQ1)	**Layer 2 (AQ2)**	**Layer 3 (AQ3)**
Procedures	1. Gather list of NCAA D-1s 2. Gather list of HSIs and eHSIs 3. Cross-check the lists to identify HSI- and eHSI-D1s	1. Gather student enrollment and athletic participation rates by race/ethnicity for every HSI- and eHSI-D1 2. Find participation rates by race/ethnicity for the entire D1 membership 3. Disaggregate this data by institutional type to compare Latinx athletic participation rates	1. Gather all FTE undergraduate student graduation rates by race/ethnicity at all HSI-D1s 2. Gather athlete graduation rates by race/ethnicity at all HSI-D1s 3. Compare tabulated data between Latinx and non-Latinx students 4. Compare tabulated data between Latinx and non-Latinx athletes
Data Sources *(Collected Variables)*	▪ Excelencia in Education Reports: List of HSIs and eHSIs ▪ NCAA Website: NCAA D1 Members	▪ NCAA's GSR Database: Institutional Reports for every HSI- and eHSI-D1 *(Enrollment/Student-Athletes # for Hispanic & Total)* ▪ NCAA Website: Demographics Database Search by Student-Athletes by Race/Ethnicity *(All D1, All D1 -HBCUs included, All D1 HBCUs excluded)*	▪ NCAA's GSR Database: Institutional Reports for every HSI-D1 *(Enrollment/All Students # for Hispanic & Total; Freshman-Cohort Graduation Rates/4-Class Average, All Students, Student-Athletes #, Hispanic; Graduation Rates/Student-Athletes/GSR for Hispanic & Total)*

Note. All collected data were for the academic year of 2017-2018, which was the most available at the time of data analysis.

To address AQ1, layer 1 focused on cross-checking the directories of HSIs, eHSIs, and NCAA D1 institutions. Layer 2, which corresponded to AQ2, consisted of an examination of the Latinx and non-Latinx student-athletes' enrollment rates at NCAA D1s across different institutional types, inclusive of HSI-D1s. To address AQ3, layer 3 analysis focused on student-athletes' graduation rates at HSI-D1s, which were compared with those for all undergraduate FTE students attending the same institutions.

The collected information was recorded in a Microsoft Excel document under different spreadsheet tabs. Two members of the research team reviewed the data and generated additional statistics, such as by combining institutional rates to record the overall rates for HSI-D1, and NCAA D1 membership. Having multiple researchers (peer debrief) collect and analyze data increased trustworthiness of the study. Additional techniques, such as audit trail, and prolonged engagement, were followed to increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Sources

Data from various databases and reports were gathered, disaggregated, and analyzed. At layer 1, a report (Excelencia in Education, 2019) provided a list of all HSIs and eHSIs. The directory of NCAA institutions by division was retrieved from the NCAA's website. Both lists consisted of members from 2017-2018, which was the most recently published year of data at the time of the analysis. The student-athlete participation data for layer 2 primarily came from the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) database housed at the NCAA website. This database provides access to individual reports for all D1 members. Users can look up institutional statistics by cohort years, with the earliest dating 2004-2005. Two types of reports made available are report 1, which provides graduation rates for each athletic team sponsored by the institution; the second (report 2) provides information about (1) graduation rates for all undergraduate FTE students, student-athletes, student-athletes by sport category, and (2) undergraduate enrollment data for all students, student-athletes, student-athletes by sports category. As part of this study, each HSI-D1 and eHSI-D1's (report 2) was downloaded and analyzed. Additionally, to gather the overall Latinxs' athletic participation rates for NCAA D1, a search in the NCAA demographics database was conducted. All collected data for this layer pertained to the 2017-2018 academic year.

The data for layer 3 of the document analysis was also retrieved from the GSR database. Graduation rates for all students and student-athletes by race/ethnicity were collected. Importantly, the NCAA reports included two types of graduation rates: the federal graduation rate (FGR) and Graduation Success Rate (GSR), which is a metric invented by the NCAA. The GSR rate does not penalize institutions for students who transfer to another HEI, unlike the FGR formula where students are considered non-graduates (NCAA, 2018b). In the analyzed NCAA reports, the GSR was only available for data on student-athletes on athletics aid whereas FGR was published for all students and student-athletes.

The collected graduation rates included three types. The first was FGR for 2012-2013, which is a 6-year graduation rate for first-time undergraduate FTE students whose studies begin 2012-2013 and graduated within six years (comparison of all students vs. athletes only). The second was FGR Four-Class Average, which is 6-year graduation rate average for the last four class cohorts – 2009-2010, 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 (comparison for all students, Latinx students, all athletes, and Latinx athletes only). The last collected rate was GSR, which is comprised of FGR plus students who entered mid-year and athletes who transferred into an institution and received athletics aid (comparison of all athletes with Latinx athletes).

Positionality

The first author works as a full-time athletic academic coordinator at an HSI-D1 institution and is a former NCAA D3 college athlete of European descent. The first author's primary research interests include Latinx college athletes, leadership, and administration within college athletics, and athletic academic services. The second author is a director of educational programs at an HSI and is of Latinx descent. The second author's research interest includes examining the organizational structure of HSIs, and issues relating to Diversity in Higher Education. The third author is an assistant professor in Educational Leadership and is of Latinx descent. The third author's research focuses on issues central to faculty and Latinx students, particular to Latinas in Engineering.

Findings

The findings were organized according to the layers from the document analysis:
(1) *NCAA HSI-D1s and eHSI-D1s,* (2) *Latinx Enrollment and Student-Athlete Participation Rates, and* (3) *Graduation Rates.*

NCAA HSI-D1s and eHSI-D1 Institutions

Among the 351 NCAA D1 institutions, 32 were HSIs, 40 eHSIs, and 24 HBCUs in the 2017-2018 academic year. Accordingly, nearly 10% of NCAA D1 members were HSIs, while more than 11% were eHSIs (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The majority of NCAA HSI-D1s were in California and Texas (see Table 2 below). Ten of the states with eHSI-D1s and HSI-D1s were in regions with the largest proportion of Latinxs, which are New Mexico, Texas, California, Arizona, Nevada, Florida, Colorado, New Jersey, New York, and Illinois (U.S. Census, 2018). Overall, HSIs and eHSIs consisted of the majority of NCAA D1 members in seven of the states: Arizona, California, Florida, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, and Texas.

Table 2

States with NCAA HSI- and eHSI-D1 Institutions, 2017-2018

State	Total # of D1 Members	HSIs	eHSIs
AZ	4	1	2
CA	24	12	10
CO	5	-	1
FL	13	3	6
IL	13	1	3
NJ	8	2	3
NM	2	2	-
NV	2	1	1
NY	22	-	4
PA	14	-	1
TX	23	10	8
WA	5	-	1
Total:	**351**	**32**	**40**

Latinx Enrollment and Student-Athlete Participation Rates

In 2017-2018, all HSI-D1s enrolled 656,895 undergraduate FTE students of which approximately 40.5%, or 265,954, were Latinxs. Overall, the HSI-D1s varied in the proportion of Latinx enrollees among the student body. The percentages ranged from 25.8% to 91.4% among the HSI-D1s (see Appendix A). Moreover, a total of 9,258 Latinxs competed in NCAA D1 and approximately 15% of Latinx athletes enrolled at HSIs, 11% at eHSIs, and 4% HBCUs. The remaining student-athletes (70%) attended D1 institutions that were neither HSIs nor eHSIs. Latinx participation varied among the HSI-D1s, with some consisting more than 25% of the student-athlete body. However, a few of the institutions had an abysmal representation of Latinx athletes (see Appendix A for this rate by HSI-D1s).

The disaggregated data revealed that D1 athletes comprised 4.3% of all undergraduate FTE students, where Latinx athletes constituted 1.6% of all Latinx and 0.2% of the overall FTE undergraduate populations. In comparison, at HSI-D1s, student-athletes comprised a smaller proportion of the FTE undergraduate student body (1.4%) where the percentage of Latinx athletes in the overall Latinx FTE population was lower (0.5%), the percentage of Latinx athletes in the overall student FTE population was equal to that of all NCAA D1s (0.2%) (see Table 3 below). Overall, the data suggests that Latinx athletes have a far less chance of athletic participation at HSI-D1s, just the same Latinx comprised the same proportion of student bodies at D1s with similar minimal opportunity in participating in college athletics.

Table 3

Comparison of Athletic Participation Rates, HSI-DIs vs. All NCAA D1s

	% of Athletes in Overall Student Population	% of Latinx Athletes in Overall Latinx Student Population	% of Latinx Athletes in Overall Student Population
HSI-D1s	1.4%	0.5%	0.2%
All NCAA D1s*	4.3%	1.6%	0.2%

Includes all NCAA D1 institutions including HSI-D1s

Graduation Rates

The first data analysis compared FGR between HSI-D1s and the rest of the D1 membership using the six-year FGR for the 2012-2013 class (see Table 4 below). The FGR averaged 57% for all undergraduate students at HSI-D1s, a rate subpar to the overall D1 rate of 68%. In comparison, the FGR for the same class of student-athletes only averaged 60% at HSI-D1s, a below overall average D1 rate for student-athletes at 68%. For HSI-D1 differences within revealed that the FGR for student-athletes (60%) surpassed that of all undergraduate students (57%); the rate was the same between athletes and non-athletes throughout all NCAA D1s. In other words, based on the FGR both students and student-athletes from the 2012-2013 cohort graduated at lower rates at HSI-D1s in comparison to the overall D1. Still, as an aggregate within HSI-D1s, athletes graduated at slightly higher rates than non-athletes.

Table 4

Comparison of Six-Year FGR (Class 2012-2013), HSI-DIs vs. All NCAA D1s

	FGR (Class 2012-2013)	
	All Students	**Athletes Only**
HSI-D1s	57%	60%
All NCAA D1s*	68%	68%

*Includes all NCAA D1 institutions including HSI-D1s

In the second data analysis, the NCAA also reported the FGR four-class average (see Table 5 below), which provided similar findings as the single cohort FGR. Specifically, while the FGR for *all undergraduate students* attending HSI-D1s stood at 56%, the rate averaged 61% for *student-athletes*. The FGR rate was 53% for all *Latinx students* and 60% for *Latinx student-athletes* at the *HSI-D1s*. Still, the national graduation averages surpassed those of HSI-D1s. Specifically, the FGR for student-athletes was 64%, 64% for Latinx student-athletes, and 62% for Latinx students. In other words, all athletes (including Latinx) graduated at higher rates than non-athletes at HSI-D1s, on average, the graduation rates were still lower than those for all of the NCAA D1.

Table 5

Comparison of Six-Year FGR (Four Class Average), HSI-DIs vs. All NCAA D1s

	FGR (Four Class Average)			
	All Students	**Latinx Students**	**Athletes Only**	**Latinx Athletes**
HSI-D1s	56%	53%	61%	60%
All NCAA D1s*	NA	62%	64%	64%

*Includes all NCAA D1 institutions including HSI-D1s

Based on the GSR, an NCAA's metric, Latinx athletes on average graduated at slightly lower rates (81%) than all student-athletes (84%) at HSI-D1s. Notably, the GSR was lower among the HSI-D1s in comparison to the entire NCAA D1 for all athletes (84% vs. 88%) and Latinx athletes (81% vs. 85%) (see Table 6).

Table 6

Comparison of Six-Year GSR (Class 2012-2013), HSI-DIs vs. All NCAA D1s

	GSR (Class 2012-2013)	
	All Athletes	**Latinx Athletes**
HSI-D1s	84%	81%
All NCAA DIs*	88%	85%

*Includes all NCAA D1 institutions including HSI-D1s

Overall, a detailed look at FGR and GSR among the NCAA-HSIs revealed a large difference among the individual HSI-D1s. As an observable trend, when an HSI-D1 reported low graduation rates, typically, the graduation rates were also lower for athletes and Latinxs; similarly, HSI-D1s graduated students at higher than average national rates. In those instances, Latinx students and student-athletes also benefited as they graduated at comparable rates.

Discussion

This study explored the role of HSI-D1s in fostering educational and athletic outcomes for Latinx athletes. College athletics are credited with extending educational opportunities for many traditionally marginalized populations (Denhart et al., 2009); for example, over $2.9 billion is awarded in athletic scholarships (NCAA, n.d.-b). Therefore, it is essential that HSI-D1s recruit Latinx athletes and allow them the opportunity to benefit from both the HSI designation and NCAA D1 affiliation. However, systemic barriers prevent access to underrepresented groups to the NCAA (Hextrum, 2018; Martinez, 2018; McGovern, 2018). As Hextrum (2018) noted, the NCAA's focus on amateurism caters to student-athletes from middle- and upper-class families who have access to economic and social capital, which then converts to cultural capital. This cultural capital is needed at HSIs in furthering support for Latinx students at their respective institutions (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). As LatCrit (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) suggests, the findings of this study exposed the existing embedded systems of power and privilege within intercollegiate athletics, which limit access to students from traditionally underrepresented groups such as Latinxs. While Latinxs dominate the student enrollments at HSI-D1s, the opposite is true about their representation as athletes.

The disaggregation of data from various reports and databases uncovered that there were 32 HSI-D1s with an additional 40 eHSI-D1s soon projected to be HSIs. Combined, these institutions comprise over 20% of the NCAA D1 membership; HSIs and eHSIs constitute the majority of the NCAA D1 members throughout seven states. As the United States continues to experience rise in population growth, so have shifts and increase in demographic growth for Latinxs populations (NCES, 2017); as such, it is likely that NCAA HSI-D1s will also increase in representation across other states.

HSIs are the primary institutional type in educating Latinx students (Hirt, 2006; Nuñez, et al., 2013). However, as this study found, the majority of Latinx athletes participate in D1 sports at non-HSIs. In 2017-2018 academic year, only 15% of all Latinx athletes enrolled at HSIs and 11% at eHSIs. This is problematic given that athletics exist to operate and support the institutional mission of educating students (NCAA, n.d.-a). HSIs were an afterthought on the landscape of higher education and were not federally mandated to serve Latinxs (Mendez et al., 2015). However, shifts in the demographic growth of Latinxs and changes in Latinx student enrollment at HEIs influenced legislation and can be accredited for the construction of the

federal HSI designation (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Mendez et al., 2015). This study focused on furthering scholarship (e.g., Calderon, 2015; Contreras & Contreras, 2015) which questions the institutional structure of HSIs in carrying out the mission to properly serve Latinx students.

Access is just a first step in accomplishing educational equity, as enrollment is not the same as completion (Suro & Fry, 2005). HEIs must also support Latinxs for retention and subsequent graduation. Unfortunately, as the national statistics reveal, Latinxs have been rising in proportion of college enrollees but the rates have not been converting to actual student retention and graduation (NCES, 2017). Scholarship on HSIs reports mixed findings about the effectiveness of this institutional type in graduating Latinx students (e.g., American Council on Education, 2017; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Laden, 2001).

As this study suggests, HSI-D1s graduated athletes at higher rates than non-athletes. Similarly, Latinx athletes graduated at higher rates than Latinx non-athletes. These findings are consistent with NCAA's yearly reports dating back to 1993 indicating that D1 athletes surpass non-athletes in graduation rates in all subgroups based on gender and ethnicity (NCAA, 2018b). Importantly, when compared to the overall NCAA D1, this study found that HSI-D1s graduated students at lower rates across all examined groups (athletes vs. non-athletes, Latinxs, etc.). In other words, students attending HSI-D1s were less likely to graduate than those of their peers at other NCAA D1 institutions. LatCrit (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) posits that systems of oppression are often structurally diverse but are intended to maintain the status quo. For these HSI-D1s, they continue to perpetuate the cycles of systemic oppression for Latinxs when the institutions are not reflective of producing equitable outcomes (Garcia, 2019). LatCrit (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) also suggests that college degree attainment is not central to individual motivation and effort (Núñez, 2014) but rather the educational outcomes of Latinx largely depend on an institution's ability to address issues of racism and negative stereotypes.

Lastly, all NCAA D1s graduated Latinx athletes at lower than the average rate for all athletes. HSI-D1s followed this similar trend, suggesting that Latinx athletes participate in athletics but that educational opportunities are limited at NCAA D1 institutions regardless of the institutional type. This finding is problematic given that the role of HSIs in regard to student life, which includes college athletics, is to serve Latinx students (Contreras & Contreras, 2015;

Mendez et al., 2015; Santiago & Andrade, 2010). Thus, while HSIs are "entrando en el juego" [getting in the game] of the NCAA D1, they still have ways to go to actually foster athletic and educational outcomes for Latinx athletes.

Limitations

This study focused on HSI-DI institutions, due to the NCAA only providing detailed reports about graduation and participation rates for individual institutions. Although eHSIs were noted in this study, only the HSI-DIs examined in this study acquired the federal designation. Lastly, the reports from the NCAA GSR database (e.g., FGR and GSR data) contain information on athletes on athletic scholarship only; as such, the disaggregated data within this study pertained only to Latinx athletes who receive an athletic aid.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study is among the first to disaggregate NCAA data by institutional type in regard to the HSI designation, and the role HSIs play in fostering athletic and educational outcomes for Latinx student-athletes. This study solely analyzed data via document analysis for HSI-DIs; as such, future studies could disaggregate data for NCAA D2 and D3, as to improve academic offerings, and athletic participation for Latinx students. Further, scholars could replicate this study and focus on eHSI-DIs given that many of these institutions will likely earn the federal designation in the future.

The findings of this study suggest that HSIs are members of the NCAA D1 and that Latinx student-athletes from these institutions graduate at higher rates than non-athletes. However, the findings also evidence that Latinxs have minimal opportunities to participate in athletics at HSI-DIs. Based on these findings, the following implications for practice are offered:

1. *Institutions must provide equitable participation opportunities for Latinxs at HSIs.* Latinxs have minimal opportunities to participate in athletics at HSI-DIs. Institutions operationalizing an HSI designation must reexamine their institutional policies to include the participation of student-athletes reflecting the HSIs' intended designation population. For example, D1 institutions could be

pro-active in educating athletic departments on recruitment practices relating to the population the HSI designation is intended to serve.

2. *Transparency in Latinx student success is needed.* As this study suggests, Latinx student-athletes have higher completion rates than non-student-athletes, as well as all other ethnic and racial groups. However, there is minimal data published on NCAA repositories reflecting the academic success rate of Latinx student-athletes. As an example, when considering the institutional choice, Latinxs could benefit from additional data relating to enrollment and successful graduation rates of Latinx student-athletes at HSI-D1s.

Conclusion

Given that HSIs constitute the second-largest institutional type in the NCAA and continue to expand rapidly, it is important to examine the role of intercollegiate athletics at these HEIs in terms of their contributions in fostering educational outcomes for Latinx student-athletes. The findings of this study fill a void in scholarly literature and provide foundational knowledge useful for other researchers who study Latinxs in college athletics, which is the most understudied subpopulation of NCAA student-athletes today.

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Appendix A

Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the NCAA D1 (*n* = 32) by State, Conference, and Enrollment

Institution	State	Athletic Conference	UG FTE Latinx Enrollment	Latinx Athlete Enrollment
University of Arizona	AZ	Pac-12 Conference	26.4%	6.6%
California State University-Bakersfield	CA	Western Athletic Conference	57.3%	16.9%
California State University-Fresno	CA	Mountain West Conference	51.7%	10.3%
California State University-Fullerton	CA	Big West Conference	43.4%	33.2%
California State University-Long Beach	CA	Big West Conference	41.7%	15.6%
California State University-Northridge	CA	Big West Conference	48.5%	23.3%
California State University-Sacramento	CA	Big Sky Conference	31.5%	11.7%
Saint Mary's College of California	CA	West Coast Conference	27.6%	14.2%
San Diego State University	CA	Mountain West Conference	30.4%	8.5%
San Jose State University	CA	Mountain West Conference	27.9%	13.5%
University of California-Irvine	CA	Big West Conference	26.5%	25.0%
University of California-Riverside	CA	Big West Conference	40.5%	26.7%
University of California-Santa Barbara	CA	Big West Conference	26.7%	7.5%
Florida Atlantic University	FL	Conference USA	26.2%	8.4%
Florida International University	FL	Conference USA	66.4%	17.2%
University of Central Florida	FL	American Athletic Conference	25.8%	7.2%
The University of Illinois at Chicago	IL	Horizon League	32.6%	10.2%
University of Nevada-Las Vegas	NV	Mountain West Conference	28.9%	7.4%
Fairleigh Dickinson University-Metropolitan Campus	NJ	Northeast Conference	34.3%	13.9%

Saint Peter's University	NJ	Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference	45.1%	22.9%
New Mexico State University-Main Campus	NM	Western Athletic Conference	58.6%	17.3%
University of New Mexico-Main Campus	NM	Mountain West Conference	47.9%	8.3%
Houston Baptist University	TX	Southland Conference	35.7%	16.8%
Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi	TX	Southland Conference	49.6%	14.9%
Texas State University	TX	Sun Belt Conference	37.2%	9.9%
Texas Tech University	TX	Big 12 Conference	27.8%	12.1%
The University of Texas at Arlington	TX	Sun Belt Conference	28.2%	9.9%
The University of Texas at El Paso	TX	Conference USA	82.7%	17.9%
The University of Texas at San Antonio	TX	Conference USA	54.6%	20.8%
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley	TX	Western Athletic Conference	91.4%	31.5%
University of Houston	TX	American Athletic Conference	33.2%	1.7%
University of the Incarnate Word	TX	Southland Conference	56.1%	28.2%

Appendix B

Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the NCAA D1 (*n* = 40) by State, Conference, and Enrollment

Institution	State	Athletic Conference	UG FTE Latinx Enrollment
Arizona State University-Tempe	AZ	Pac-12 Conference	20.4%
Northern Arizona University	AZ	Big Sky Conference	23.7%
California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo	CA	Big West Conference	16.8%
Loyola Marymount University	CA	West Coast Conference	21.2%
Santa Clara University	CA	West Coast Conference	17.7%
Stanford University	CA	Pac-12 Conference	15.6%
University of California-Berkeley	CA	Pac-12 Conference	15.3%
University of California-Davis	CA	Big West Conference	21.5%
University of California-Los Angeles	CA	Pac-12 Conference	22.3%
University of San Diego	CA	West Coast Conference	19.6%
University of San Francisco	CA	West Coast Conference	21.6%
University of the Pacific	CA	West Coast Conference	19.8%
University of Northern Colorado	CO	Big Sky Conference	20.5%
Florida Gulf Coast University	FL	ASUN Conference	20.3%
Florida State University	FL	Atlantic Coast Conference	20.3%
Stetson University	FL	ASUN Conference	15.9%
University of Florida	FL	Southeastern Conference	21.2%
University of Miami	FL	Atlantic Coast Conference	21.8%
University of South Florida-Main Campus	FL	American Athletic Conference	20.2%
DePaul University	IL	Big East Conference	18.9%
Loyola University of Chicago	IL	Missouri Valley Conference	15.5%
Northern Illinois University	IL	Mid-American Conference	17.9%
New Jersey Institute of Technology	NJ	ASUN Conference	20.0%

Rider University	NJ	Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference	15.0%
Seton Hall University	NJ	Big East Conference	17.7%
University of Nevada-Reno	NV	Mountain West Conference	20.6%
Iona College	NY	Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference	23.5%
Manhattan College	NY	Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference	21.8%
St Francis College	NY	Northeast Conference	21.6%
SUNY at Albany	NY	America East Conference	17.2%
La Salle University	PA	Atlantic 10 Conference	17.5%
Abilene Christian University	TX	Southland Conference	17.0%
Baylor University	TX	Big 12 Conference	15.2%
Lamar University	TX	Southland Conference	16.5%
Sam Houston State University	TX	Southland Conference	23.2%
Stephen F Austin State University	TX	Southland Conference	18.8%
Texas A & M University-College Station	TX	Southeastern Conference	23.4%
The University of Texas at Austin	TX	Big 12 Conference	23.1%
University of North Texas	TX	Conference USA	24.4%
Eastern Washington University	WA	Big Sky Conference	15.4%

A Culturally Validated Model of Student Success Services and Academic and Curriculum Enhancements at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Abstract

Though college enrollment rates for Mexican-American students have increased over the past years, Mexican-Americans still have one of the lowest rates for degree completion. However, more work is recognizing the strengths of students of Mexican descent, particularly those related to culture such as familism, and calling for asset-based programs that validate the student to increase student retention and persistence. Programs infused with such an approach likely address aspects that improve performance amongst Mexican-American students; however, evidence-based assessment is limited. This paper will detail an asset-based program that uses a culturally validated model of student success services and academic and curriculum enhancements at a Hispanic-Serving Institution to increase overall Latinx student retention and persistence. The program infuses Validation Theory (Rendon, 1994) to address cultural strengths of students and validate their life experiences as first-time freshmen, by creating a culturally relevant curriculum, enhancing culturally relevant student support services, and promoting education equity. Students involved in this program report a high level of belongingness at the university as well as have higher pass rates in their culturally validated courses. Recommendations are discussed for implementation of such a comprehensive program at other institutions as well as implications for higher education.

Keywords: Latinx, First-Year Programs, Retention, Higher Education, Validation Theory

Background

Rates of college enrollment have increased over the last 20 years for all groups, with Latinx students showing one of the largest increases (22% to 36%); however, they are still one the minority groups with lowest enrollment overall (i.e. 59% Asian, 42% White, 37% Black and 36% Latinx, 24% Native American) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Of the US Latinx population, Mexican-Americans make up the largest subgroup and Mexican-American youth are one of the fastest growing populations in the US (Flores, 2017). Once enrolled in college, the disparities in higher education persist as 30.3% Whites receive a college degree, compared to only 9.1% of Mexican American students (U.S. Census, 2010). Many challenges that Mexican-American students face in higher education include traditional stressors such as academic, financial, and time management (Quintana et al., 1991; Llamas et al., 2020), but also those related to cultural adjustment such as acculturative stress (Crockett et al., 2007), discrimination (Finch et al., 2001), and intragroup marginalization (Llamas et al., 2018), particularly at predominantly white institutions (Von Robertson et al., 2016). Even given these barriers, recent work has begun to identify signatures of resilience in Mexican-American students that can inform asset-based strategies needed to validate students and foster college success (Rendón et al., 2015).

Latinx students often experience a discord between their cultural values, and those of higher education (Torres, 2006; Llamas et al., 2020). In particular, higher education hails from an individualistic culture where competition, independence, and the self are highly valued. However, many Latinx cultures, including Mexican, which are more collectivistic, value collaboration, and group processes (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995; Hofstede, 2001). These values can feel at odds with university culture (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997; Torres, 2006; Morgan Consoli et al., 2016). Students of Mexican descent often have to switch between or differentially balance their professional and personal values and identities depending on their social environment (Sanchez, 2006). This can have adverse effects on mental health (Smith & Silva, 2011; Arbona & Jimenez, 2014) and lead to the decision to leave the university (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Since students' ethnic awareness increases across the college years (Syed, 2010), the university as an institution bears the responsibility to create and commit to an inclusive environment that supports overall Latinx retention (Estrada et al., 2016). In fact, for Mexican-American college students traditional cultural values, such as familism, respect and

religiosity have predicted resilience (Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013). In particular for first year students, the cultural factors such as belonging and cultural identity, as well as more classic factors such as motivation, perseverance, study skills, and social support were beneficial for college adjustment (Llamas et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies increasingly point to the role of peers and feelings of belongingness and a *familia* atmosphere as important factors for Mexican-American students and calls for interventions that not only include academic and financial assistance but address cultural factors as well.

While programs have been begun to infuse aspects of culturally-based assets into their curriculum and services, few studies have evaluated if such interventions improve student performance. This manuscript details a first-year program for Latinx students named Pathways to Academic Success and Opportunities (PASO) that was developed based on past scholarly work to increase retention and graduation rates amongst Latinx students, mainly of Mexican descent. The PASO program as a model of Latino student empowerment via infusion of cultural validation theory and markers of student success are discussed. Overall, PASO aims to create a culturally relevant curriculum, enhance culturally relevant student support services, and promote education equity.

Theoretical framework: Cultural validation theory

Validation Theory, a theoretical and pedagogical framework developed by Dr. Laura Rendon, is based on the experiences of nontraditional college students in invalidating environments and how transformation can occur through validation, thus resulting in enhanced capacity of learning and student success (Rendon, 1994). As a theory, validation serves to challenge antiquated models of teaching and learning to actively engage institutional agents in academic and interpersonal validation so that students can harness and develop their "innate capacity to learn" and be successful. Academic validation can occur in the classroom through culturally enhanced curriculum and interpersonal validation via identities and building upon cultural assets (Rendon, 1994; Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Faculty initiation of contact and interactions with students have been found to play a significant role in student integration into the college experience, and supports academic persistence (Barnett, 2011). Retention of Latinx students and persistence in degree completion remains an ongoing concern for Latinx students in higher education, in addition to understanding mediators of cultural validation in student

success (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Students of color rely heavily on informal peer networks for informational, and social support; therefore, these same types of networks should be facilitated in college (Hallett, 2013), thus providing validation of their established networking capacities.

The PASO program is based on the essential elements of Validation Theory: 1) institutional (validating) agents such as professors and advisors have the responsibility to initiate connections with students that are enabling and confirming, 2) strive to foster self-worth and confidence in learning capability, 3) validation can and should occur within and beyond the classroom, 4) validation is an ongoing supportive and developmental process that continues throughout the students educational journey, and 5) crucial when administered early in the college experience (Rendon, 1994). The cultural component is key in validation, and we operationalize the theoretical constructs of validation theory as "cultural validation" (CV) for the PASO program to reflect the culturally diverse approach that is infused with validation theory. This further builds upon the Yosso (2005) "Community Cultural Wealth Model" by focusing on cultural assets that Latinx students experience, specifically, aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

Since Rendon's theory was established in 1994, recent expansions have included asset-based theoretical framework constructs to include leveraging strengths and Latinx specific assets. These assets further extend Yosso's cultural wealth constructs to include perseverance, ethnic consciousness, spirituality/faith, and pluriversality, thus creating a "student success framework" that can harness innate determination, sense of purpose, giving back, and the ability to exist in different cultural environments (Rendon et al., 2015). Maximizing students' strengths and assets that can support and foster student success, can be achieved through implementation of these asset-based theoretical frameworks founded on validation theory, specifically using a culturally diverse approach (Rendon et al., 2015). Ultimately, cultural validation helps students to become active agents and productive consumers of knowledge in their educational journey. The approaches of the PASO program are based on researched and innovative responses to improving the cultural responsiveness and curriculum, academics, and student success, and support services as detailed below.

An Overview of the PASO program: Model of empowering Latinx Students

The *Pathways to Academic Success and Opportunities* (PASO) program is implemented at a Hispanic Serving Institution in Southern California with a 48% Latinx student population. The goal of PASO is not only to increase enrollment of first time Latinx freshmen students but to serve the Latinx student population upon their arrival to campus. Eligibility for the PASO program includes self-identification as Latinx and a first-generation, low income, full-time student. Additionally, students cannot be a part of another specialized program (i.e., TRIO SSS, College Assistance Migrant Program, Educational Opportunity Program). Upon enrollment, students that fit eligibility are automatically enrolled in the PASO program and sent invitations, announcements, and emails about PASO services. PASO seeks to support Latinx students and address the achievement gap among Latinx students through innovative student services, culturally-relevant first-year curriculum, and meaningful co-curricular offerings aimed at increasing retention, and graduation rates. PASO is based on two main objectives: 1) Culturally-validated (CV) Student Success Services and 2) Culturally-validated academic and curriculum enhancements (see Table 1 at end of document).

Objective 1. Culturally Validated Student Success Services

Improve retention and intervention strategies for academic probation and disqualification. The creative PASO approach targets students on Academic Probation (AP) or Dangerously Close (DC) students. Interventions were implemented by PASO staff to identify 'High Need" students who need academic support, based on University established measures for placement in math and writing for incoming high school students. PASO students that meet these metrics are identified, contacted and directly referred to tutoring centers (Math and Writing), "Pop Up" tutoring at the Latin@ Center, faculty advising, peer mentoring, and academic advising. Notably, pro-active or *"intrusive advising"* is essential to keep students on track academically and monitor their progress. Additional retention strategies included university-wide mid-semester evaluations to identify high risk PASO students and Early Alert progress reports generated from the University's record platform that are relayed to the PASO office. The PASO program advising is centered on a holistic approach to assess the needs of each student and utilize early intervention methods throughout the first semester and year.

Cultural validated counseling and advising services. The PASO program team consists of an advisor and an outreach and retention specialist that together are trained in cultural validation that target increased engagement and outreach to Latinx families. This outreach is geared to identify local school districts targeting Latinx high school seniors during the Fall semester. Once students are admitted, the PASO team continuously contacts admitted students to ensure that their admission, financial aid, and registration is complete. Each spring incoming freshmen are invited to PASO specific program overview workshops that assist students with the college transition in three simultaneous workshops for Spanish speaking parents, English speaking parents, and students. The following topics are covered: high-school-to-university transitional issues; non-traditional support strategies; student services/governing communication systems; getting involved; and acknowledging parental involvement through incentives.

Lastly, the PASO peer mentoring program is thematically centered on "sense of belonging" using evidence-based peer mentoring strategies for Latinx students (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Moschetti et al., 2018). Upper division students are selected and trained in PASO goals and objectives with priority consideration given to previous PASO scholars. Peer Mentors provide information and guidance in the transition from high school to college for first-time incoming freshmen mentees that includes peer assistance with financial aid, admission, advising, enrollment, housing, health, and community resources.

Improving cultural responsiveness in Financial Aid. Improving timely financial aid awards to students is a key practice implemented in the PASO program. Although student financial aid alone does not guarantee retention or graduation, financial aid is a prerequisite for student success. In order to achieve a culturally responsive approach that meets the needs of Latinx students, the program utilizes a dedicated Bilingual/ Bicultural Financial Aid Specialist. This specialist fully implements improved practices for family and student advocacy and improved efficiency of communications of validation requests of applications in a culturally respectful manner. In addition, Financial Aid bilingual workshops are held (financial literacy, loan debt, and scholarship opportunities) for students entering the PASO program. Most notably, bilingual assistance to Latinx families is provided, thus increasing the efficacy of communications and the timeliness of awards.

Foundational support with other Latinx campus resources. The Latin@ student center established a strong partnership with the PASO program. The Latin@ center has been a welcoming place for all students to celebrate and enhance understanding of the Latinx culture, as well as offer services such as printing and access to items like calculators, headphones, laptops, etc. In addition, the Center continually offers support services aimed at helping Latinx students develop the leadership and academic skills they need for success. The PASO Peer mentors support the programmatic needs of the Latin@ Center director. A calendar of events is shared so that PASO Scholars are encouraged to visit the center to create a sense of community, support, and cultural connection. Partnerships are also formed with student organizations like the student chapter of Society for the Advancement of Chicano/Latino and Native American Scientists (SACNAS) to promote events and provide networking for PASO students.

Objective 1 of the PASO program directly addresses elements of Validation Theory. The PASO program addresses that first element of the theory by having advisors and other higher education professionals be validating institutional agents and initiate contact and connections with the students. This model does not rely on students *asking* for help or services, but rather faculty and staff as institutional agents of change. PASO also addresses the third element as it validates students beyond the classroom to encompass campus resources and student services, treating the student's experience at the university holistically. Lastly, to address the fourth and fifth elements of Validation Theory, the PASO program begins to validate students even before they arrive on campus as first-time freshmen with family orientations in Spanish and outreach to high schools. In addition, PASO closely follows and intervenes with students during their first year. Lastly, once a part of the program, students have access to PASO resources throughout their time at the university.

Objective 2. Validating Academic and Curriculum Enhancements

Faculty are trained in either a year-long Faculty Learning Community or intensive summer institute on infusion of cultural validation into their courses. The training is centered around Validation Theory (Rendon, 1994) to create culturally relevant curriculum focused on key elements presented in Table 2 (see at end of document) and each will be addressed from an academic and interpersonal perspective. The academic perspective includes learning

experiences that affirm the student's potential for success, such as guest speakers, inclusion of Latinx and/or the student's history/background in curriculum, as well activities where students witness themselves as powerful learners and opportunities for validation from peers. The interpersonal perspective includes in and out of class agents that foster personal development and social adjustment, affirmation of students as people, ability to build social network or groups, and lastly validation of student's personal identities, and occupational roles. Therefore, faculty create a classroom climate and include activities and/or assignments that:

- Demonstrate Latinxs are valuable contributors to the body of knowledge taught in the classroom;
- Affirm the value of student voice and experience;
- Actively reach out to students for help (not waiting for student to come to instructor);
- Create opportunities for students to validate each other (e.g., peer review, work in teams);
- Build on and focus on academic strengths;
- Provide positive feedback;
- Creating a *familia* atmosphere.

The following are four culturally relevant content examples from courses infused with validation theory. First, in a history course, the Zoot Suit Riot was used to educate the uses and identification of primary sources of information. Second, in an education course to teach about school desegregation, the Lemon Grove Incident was used. In this historical event, Mexican immigrants and their communities were the targeted groups of segregation by school officials during the 1930s, in the then rural community of Lemon Grove, California. This case was the first successful school desegregation court decision in the history of the United States. Third, in an environmental biology course, environmental issues were discussed, including the testing of water for toxins along the U.S.-Mexico border. Fourth, in a neuroscience course, students attend a talk, listen to a podcast or watch a documentary on an issue important to them (i.e. family separation at the border, depression, or stress) and propose a behavioral neuroscience experiment to address the issue. For example, one study addressing family separation at the border proposed separating mothers and pups at birth and looking at

neurogenesis in the brains of offspring. By validating the students in these ways in an educational setting, students will feel "I matter," "Somebody at this institution cares about me," and "I am capable of success."

Objective 2 of the PASO program addresses four of the elements of Validation Theory. First, professors directly reach out to students to initiate contact as agents of validation and do not rely on students seeking assistance. Second, the validated curriculum and course content fosters self-worth and confidence to amplify the learning abilities of the students. The course content validates students not only as scholars, but as members of both the academic community and the community in which they live. Third, with the inclusion of course content relevant for the surrounding community and the student's own community, validation of the student occurs holistically beyond the confines of the classroom. Lastly, PASO students take a series of general education courses their freshmen year that begins their exposure to validated academic and curriculum enhancements early. In addition, by training faculty in upper division courses (via faculty learning communities), as well infusing their courses with cultural validation, the program can continue to support students throughout their educational journey.

PASO First-Year General Education (GE) Courses Validating Latinx Identities & Perspectives

The University first-year courses include a set of two standard GE courses intended to establish college-ready proficiency in writing ability (GEW) and oral communication (GEO). These courses are taught in multiple sections and count toward the "Life-Long Learning and Information Literacy" requirements for Freshman students. Roughly, 80% of the University's first-year students take these courses and prior to the inception of PASO, none of these courses were intentionally taught during the regular academic year with the theme of *Latinx Identities and Perspectives*. With the full support of the Office of Undergraduate Studies, both departments offering the first-year GE courses agreed to launch GEW and GEO with a focus on the Latino students' identity. This included hiring trained faculty in CV, designing courses based on successful methods in other specialized programs (e.g., Education Opportunity Program), developing culturally sensitive curriculum based on the Latinx experience and offering PASO program designated courses in the course catalog. The first theme, *Latinx Identities*, emphasized a focus on the Latinx perspective with discussion built around Latinx

persons, culturally relevant content analyzed through critical theory, and exploration of the Latinx experience and cultural texts. The second theme, *Latinx Perspectives*, centered on student development to examine and present oral presentations with a focus on the historical, political, educational, economic, and cultural developments that affect the diversity of Latinx communities in the United States. The courses also added a cultural validation evaluation to the standard University evaluations for each semester. There are non-validated sections of these courses offered to all other students at the university. However, the PASO students are enrolled into designated sessions for PASO students only.

Evidence of Student Success

Retention and Belonging. In the third cohort, 107 Latinx mentees were enrolled into the Peer Mentoring Program and reported high feelings and a sense of university belonging. Almost all (98% of) mentees responded either "agree" (4) or "strongly agree" (5) on a five-point Likert scale that they feel a greater sense of belonging. Also, one-year continuation rates for these first-time freshmen indicated that mentees in the program (85.5%) was higher than that of student's university-wide (80.8%).

General Education (GE) Course Pass Rates. Course pass rates were calculated for all the PASO GEO and GEW courses, by cohorts and an independent samples t-test was used for analysis. Data collection began with cohorts 2 through 5 and was aggregated by PASO designated courses and the non-validated course sections. For the purpose of this analysis only the pass rates for the Latinx students in the non-validated course sections were compared.

Latinx PASO students completing the culturally validated GEW courses, had significantly higher course pass rates (*M*=86.6, *SD*=2.82, N=7) compared to Latinx students (*M*=79.9, *SD*=1.78, N=7) in non-validated GEW courses, $t(12) = 5.33$, $p < .001$. There were no differences found between the PASO GEO courses (*M*=90.4, *SD*=7.14, N=6) compared to Latinx students (*M*=86.5, *SD*=3.87, N=6, $t(10) = 2.14$, $p=.174$). Although non-significant, it is interesting to highlight that overall combined pass rates were higher in PASO GEO (90.4%) than the non-validated Latinx GEO (86.5%) sections.

It should be noted that at the inception of the program, GEO did not have a PASO section for the first semester of Cohort 2. In addition, pass rates for Cohort 5 Spring semester were unavailable at this time, therefore this incomplete/missing data affects direct Cohort

comparisons by semester and year. Lastly, Spring 2020 data might not provide a valid indicator of pass rates due to COVID-19 and credit/no credit University policy implementations.

Student Course Evaluations. Student evaluations were collected at the end of the courses that included novel culturally validation responsive evaluation items in Table 3 (see at end of document). Evaluations were only included for 3 cohorts (Cohort 3, 4, and 5) as evaluations were not implemented yet in cohort 2. Though a comparison with non-validated courses would be ideal, this preliminary data provides insight into aspects of cultural validation that the students found most helpful. Overall, in both GEO and GEW, students rated the following aspects as the top highly rated evaluations: 1) Representations of my cultural identity were included in course material and/or class topics, 2) Issues that are related to Latinx and the Latinx community were discussed in a positive way (e.g., immigration, jobs, education, bilingual), and 3) My instructor was culturally aware and culturally open (see Table 3 at end of document).

In addition, qualitative data supported these ideas. Students talked about comfort level in the classroom and with the professor, as one student stated, "Overall I am more comfortable being in a class full of PASO students because I feel like I can connect with them and the professor on a different level than I would in another class." Another student stated, "This class made me feel very comfortable and welcomed, knowing that there are other first-generation Latinos like me." Another student talked about the professor making them feel capable. They stated, "I like the class the professor was welcoming and spoke to all of us directly which although is scary for me, being the shy kid, it made me feel like I'm an equal. I really liked how the professor was always making sure we all knew we were equal and capable of so many things. He was a very encouraging person."

Others addressed course content: "Our instructor created a lesson plan that was designed not only to share material from Latinx authors, but also perfected designed to help students connect with the issues discussed in class. The material was relatable which helped facilitate student communication about the issues." One student commented on a reading by Gloria Anzaldua that was particularly defining for them stating: "It helped me open my eyes and realize that Latinos cannot be identified as a single group. We may speak the same language and celebrate the same traditions. However, I believe every single one of us is a special and unique variation of a Latino. We have all gone through different experiences in life and we are not the same. We all come from different families, socioeconomic status, and some even face the

challenges of being undocumented which by itself is stressful and terrifying. We may be Latinos at heart, but we are all different. This difference is what is helping our community expand and better every day."

Implications for Research, Policy and Practice

This work aimed to detail the PASO program, a comprehensive program focused on first year, low-income, first generation Latinx students (Table 1 at end of document), as well to provide evidence of markers of student success amongst Latinx students in PASO. PASO aims to increase retention and graduation rates amongst Latinx students by targeting the specific aims by culturally validating two key facets of the college experience for students, both in student services and in the academic curriculum. The student services side has focused on intervention strategies (intrusive advising and mid-semester evaluations) for academic probation and disqualification, cultural responsiveness in peer mentoring, advising and financial aid, as well as foundational support with other Latinx campus resources. For the academic curriculum, the PASO office has a faculty lead who directly meets with and trains faculty in cultural validation and culturally relevant curriculum with a focus on mandatory first-year general education courses. Both of these aims meet one of the key validating principles of Validation Theory by beginning validation early in a student's educational career (Rendon, 1994).

In the current pilot study, early data suggests that pass rates for core first-year courses are higher for Latinx students in culturally validated versus non-culturally validated courses. This is very important because one of the key concepts of validation theory is that students are validated early in their career, and this may lead to a "sense of belonging" and thus persistence in higher education, and an increase in graduation success. There was a statistically significant difference in pass rates in the GEW course while data suggest a trend towards higher rates in GEW compared to GEO. GEW is a challenging course because of the focus on the writing process and rhetorical and critical thinking skills that are influenced by language proficiency, thus cultural validation (CV) may have the most benefits in such rigorous courses. Students also reported more feelings of belonging at the university, though this was only measured amongst those who had peer mentors. However, this is similar to other first-year courses that have used cultural validation and found that a *familia* atmosphere was created (Quiñonez & Olivas, 2020). Also, as more faculty are trained in cultural validation and methods to infuse a culturally

relevant curriculum, more skills can be honed and students reached, thus a more in-depth assessment in future years is warranted. In fact, currently faculty teaching upper and lower division major courses with high drop, fail and/or withdrawal rates are being targeted for CV training to enhance student learning and persistence, particularly in STEM.

Our suggestion is to begin with pedagogical changes to the syllabus and course structure. This includes inclusive language in the syllabus, explicitly including immigration issues as an excusable class absence and an extensive rethinking of office hours, which in their classic form can be intimidating to students. Faculty may think about relabeling these hours as "student hours," and include a list of topics that can be discussed during this time other than class material, including their own educational journey, and assets each student brings to the classroom. Students could also be encouraged to come in pairs or groups to ensure comfort and ease of these meetings, which serves as a way to build and support peer networks. Once these changes are made, faculty can begin to address the content of their courses as identified by student assessments of 1) representations of cultural identity in course material and/or class topics and 2) discussion of issues related to the Latinx community in a positive way (e.g., immigration, jobs, education, and bilingualism).

Overall from this work, we have the following recommendations:

- Validate student services such as admissions, financial aid and student tutoring services, such as supplemental instruction or any on campus center (Academic Success, Tutoring, and/or STEM Centers);
- Have a designated faculty ambassador in each major/program that can be an easily accessible contact for the PASO office and/or Latin@ center to direct students to;
- Evaluate both culturally validated and non-validated sections of the same course, both quantitatively and qualitatively;
- Focus on validating core courses with high drop, fail, and/or withdrawal rates;
- Enhance collaborations with on campus Latin@ center including enhancement of peer mentoring services and events such internships and/or research fairs.

Conclusion

The Latinx population is growing, however, this growth is not matched by college enrollment, retention, and graduate rates, thus an educational inequity exists. Latinx students are more likely to be first generation students that experience not only traditional student stressors but also significant cultural adjustments. Student success can be fostered through a sense of belonging, cultural identity and perspectives and asset-based strategies that focus on community cultural capitals students bring to the university and in the classroom (Rendón, 2015; Yosso, 2005). Engaging validation theory, specifically "cultural validation", that focuses on both student services and in the academic curriculum for Latinx students can increase college retention and graduation rates.

The PASO model holds promise to enhance the empowerment of Latinx students through a cultural approach that includes the tenets of validation in student services, academic and curriculum enhancement, and general education courses. However, it is important to continually evaluate and operationalize what constitutes "cultural validation", as well as identify any mediating factors, and measure impact and outcomes in both academic and interpersonal contexts (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). It should be noted that CV may be more successful in rigorous courses (writing vs. communication); therefore, type of course and pass rates should be examined in evaluation of targeted curriculum for CV courses. Future research and programmatic efforts should expand upon the asset-based theories to include perseverance, ethnic consciousness, spiritually/faith, and pluriversality, to further develop a framework for retention and persistence success among Latinx students. Expanding Latinx resources (e.g. in community) and increasing institutional support is necessary as a foundation of growth and commitment to Latinx student success. Harnessing current assets and strengths of Latinx students is vital to increase college success outcomes, and these existing and innate capacities should be valued and supported throughout their educational journey.

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Table 1

An Overview of the PASO Program

Objectives	Activities	Overall Expected Outcomes
Culturally Validating Academic Pedagogical Practices	Faculty Cultural Validation Training Culturally Validated Curriculum High Impact Practices Dedicated First- Year PASO courses Required General Education (GE) College ready courses focused on Latinx identity GEO- Oral GEW- Writing	Increase college access, graduation and retention rates Institutionalize evidence-based CV pedagogy across campus curriculum Implement validated strategies for financial aid and advising
Culturally Responsive Student Success Services	Intrusive Advising Retention strategies- mid-semester evals, advising appointments, early alert progress support Early intervention for Academic Probation Dedicated Bilingual Financial Aid Specialist Peer Mentoring Cultural-responsive advising Outreach to families and parents	Latinx student identity development

Table 2

Key Validating Principles of Cultural Validation Operationalized (Rendon, 1994)

1. Validating agents (faculty, program staff, speakers, scientists) initiate and maintain student contact
• Refocus office hours to be "student hours" centered on initiating and fostering connections • Be authentic and learn student names • Offer encouragement and assistance through assets-based approaches
2. Make students feel capable of learning
• Affirm assets/capital students bring to the classroom (e.g., linguistic, familial). • Show students they have the ability to learn and succeed • Identify strengths each student has in learning course material via reflection/discussion
3. Validate the students to build their confidence
• Assign low risk/stakes assignments where students can have small successes • Include guest speakers and course content that feature Latinx individuals • Praise students' achievements and milestones during the course
4. Expand validation practices beyond the classroom
• Connect students with on campus or community organizations • Offer service-learning opportunities with class curriculum • Promote engagement in campus activities with specialized offices/centers
5. Carry out throughout a student's trajectory
• Structure experiences to build throughout educational career • Be a mentor or link with potential mentors and specialized programs • Connect with peer and social networks to support identity development and growth, such as Latinx organizations
6. Begin early in a student's college career
• Start as early as possible and be consistent in all areas • Initiate cultural validation models in first year and transfer orientation and courses • Engage both student and academic affairs in the validation planning and processes

Table 3

First Year General Education Course Evaluation Scores

Course Evaluation Item (Items were rated on a scale of 1-5)	General Education Oral Communication (GEO)					General Education Written Communication (GEW)			
	Cohort 3 Average (Fall 2017 - Spring 2018)	Cohort 4 Average (Fall 2018 - Spring 2019)	Cohort 5 Average (Fall 2019 - Spring 2020)	Average Rating		Cohort 3 Average (Fall 2017 - Spring 2018)	Cohort 4 Average (Fall 2018 - Spring 2019)	Cohort 5 Average (Fall 2019 - Spring 2020)	Average Rating
I frequently participated in class.	3.85	3.90	4.19	3.98		4.05	3.86	3.78	3.9
I felt comfortable asking my instructor questions on concepts I do not understand.	4.03	4.35	4.33	4.23		4.60	4.53	4.42	4.52
My instructor understood my strengths.	3.78	4.08	4.31	4.05		4.53	4.35	4.40	4.43
My instructor urged me to express my opinion in class or in my writing.	4.10	4.15	4.08	4.11		4.53	4.50	4.33	4.45
There are meaningful ways for me to share my life experiences in class.	3.90	4.25	4.50	4.22		4.40	4.29	3.98	4.23
Overall, I feel that I matter to my instructors.	3.80	4.28	4.56	4.21		4.58	4.38	4.37	4.44
The instructor helped me improve my performance in the class based on my strengths.	3.93	4.35	4.63	4.30		4.50	4.43	4.48	4.47

Representations of my cultural identity were included in course material and/or class topics.	4.35	4.63	4.67	4.55		4.75	4.52	4.58	4.62
I read books and articles by Latinos.	3.75	4.20	4.04	4		4.88	4.12	4.47	4.49
I participated in exciting projects and assignments related to Latino issues.	4.00	4.50	4.50	4.33		4.63	3.84	4.22	4.23
Issues that are related to Latinos and the Latino community were discussed in a positive way (e.g., immigration, jobs, education, bilingual).	4.35	4.65	4.82	4.61		4.75	4.36	4.43	4.51
I was introduced to Latino role models in class through guest lecturers, readings, service learning, campus events, and/ or the instructor sharing examples during the semester.	3.93	4.18	4.33	4.14		4.15	3.78	4.02	3.98
My instructor was culturally aware and culturally open.	4.35	4.55	4.79	4.56		4.70	4.55	4.42	4.56
Column Averages	**4.01**	**4.31**	**4.44**	**4.25**		**4.54**	**4.27**	**4.30**	**4.37**

In a State of Becoming: How Institutions Communicate Asian American and Pacific Islander- and Latinx-Servingness Through Campus Artifacts

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Abstract

This study examines the ways campus artifacts communicate Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)- and Latinx-servingness at dually designated Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Using critical ethnographic methods, the researchers collected data at three AANAPISI-HSIs regionally concentrated in a western state. Findings from this study reveal that the campus environments of the three institutions were in a state of flux and are captured through two interconnected themes that emerged from the data: striving to become and undermining progress towards becoming. This study has implications for understanding how AANAPISI-HSIs communicate AAPI- and Latinx-servingness through campus artifacts.

Keywords: Minority Serving Institutions, campus artifacts, ethnographic methods

Physical artwork, signage, graffiti, architecture, and digital platforms are examples of artifacts on college campuses; each communicates implicit and explicit messages about the mission, roles, safety, and belonging related to race/ethnicity (Banning et al., 2008). Campus artifacts also communicate messages about racism and whiteness of an institution. For instance, at historically white institutions (HWIs), whiteness is communicated and normalized through naming buildings after white men. By examining campus artifacts, we can better understand how higher education institutions institutionalize their support for racially/ethnically minoritized students. This paper examines campus artifacts at dually designated Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)—two types of federally designated Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs).

AANAPISIs and HSIs are institutions that enroll at least 10% and 25% Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Latinx students, respectively, of which at least 50% demonstrate financial need, and that take the added step of applying for federal designation through the U.S. Department of Education. Institutions meeting both the AANAPISI and HSI designation requirements can apply for both, hence the name dually designated AANAPISI-HSIs.[1] The federal designation makes them eligible to apply for public and private monies set aside for MSIs.[2] Examining campus artifacts at these institutions is important because most AANAPISIs and HSIs become eligible for these designations after long histories of being predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Certainly, AANAPISIs and HSIs serve AAPIs and Latinxs by providing greater access to college opportunities; AANAPISIs enroll 20% AAPI and 28.7% Latinx undergraduate students, and HSIs enroll 49% Latinxs and 8.3% AAPIs (Espinosa et al., 2019). However, enrolling large proportions of AAPIs and Latinxs and becoming designated as AANAPISIs and HSIs does not mean they change their institutional policies and practices to serve these students, which means that some AANAPISIs and HSIs carry a legacy of whiteness as HWIs. Additionally, considering the relatively low threshold of AAPI and Latinx enrollment required for federal designation, it could very well be that these institutions are still predominantly white. This means that an institution can simultaneously be an AANAPISI, HSI, PWI, and HWI. Moreover, some institutions also meet the eligibility to become dually

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[1] Designations are listed in alphabetical order so as to not privilege one over the other.
[2] Institutions are eligible for funding through Title III and Title V of the Higher Education Act, but with some restrictions (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

designated and may choose to pursue one of the designations and/or grant programs, and not the other, or none at all.

To internal and external members of the institution, these choices imply, whether intentionally or not, that an institution is choosing which racial/ethnic group to serve (Yang & Masulit, 2018). "Servingness," as defined by Garcia and Koren (2020), is an institution's ability to "enroll and educate Latinx students through a culturally enhancing approach that centers Latinx ways of knowing and being, with the goal of providing transformative experiences that lead to both academic and nonacademic outcomes" (p. 2). One indicator of servingness is an institution's structures for serving (Garcia et al., 2019). These organizational-level structures for serving include mission statements, diversity plans, HSI grants, compositional diversity, culturally responsive curriculum, programs and services for minoritized students, etc. Garcia et al. (2019) contend that structures for serving are impacted by external forces, such as federal MSI legislation, and impact Latinx student's validating and racialized experiences, and academic and non-academic outcomes. Additionally, Garcia (2019) also recognizes that "becoming" Hispanic-Serving is a process that happens over time. This body of work demonstrates the importance of organizational structures and the process of transformation an institution must go through to go beyond Latinx-enrolling and HSI designated to being Latinx-serving. While Garcia's work is focused on HSIs, other scholars have documented the complexities behind an institution's pursuit and promotion of the AANAPISI designation and its influence on the institution's organizational culture, structures, and practices (Alcantar et al., 2019; Yang & Masulit, 2018).

This study extends Garcia et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of "servingness" by examining the physical and digital campus structures of serving and applying this framework to dually designated AANAPISI-HSIs. More specifically, this study examines AAPI- and Latinx-servingness through the following research questions: *What do campus artifacts at AANAPISI-HSIs communicate about serving AAPI and Latinx students? In what ways is AAPI- and Latinx-servingness communicated differently through campus artifacts?*

Conceptual Framework

To extend Garcia et al.'s (2019) framework for serving, particularly the structures of serving, to include campus artifacts, this study utilizes Banning et al.'s (2008) equity climate framework. Banning et al.'s (2008) framework is part of a line of inquiry that examines the

impact of physical campus settings on student development. The equity climate framework examines how campus artifacts communicate implicit and explicit messages about equity and diversity. It "is composed of four dimensions: (a) the type of artifact, (b) the equity parameters relevant to groups within the organization, (c) the content of the message [particularly belonging, safety, equality, and roles], and (d) the equity approach level of the message" (p. 42). These dimensions are used to evaluate campus artifacts. Campus artifacts include artwork (e.g., murals, statuary), signage (i.e., building names), graffiti, and architecture (e.g., buildings; Banning et al., 2008). The authors expand the conception of campus artifacts by including digital platforms (Torres & Zerquera, 2012) and a campus' geography (Alcantar et al., 2020).

The level of equity that a campus artifact communicates is assessed at four levels: negative, null, contributions/additive, and transformational/social action. Negative implies the presence of a discriminatory artifact, while null means no campus artifact communicates equity; the artifact, therefore, normalizes the dominant environment (e.g., centers whiteness). The contribution/additive level denotes the presence of positive artifacts, but without an intentional equity approach. The transformational/social action level combines equity-focused artifacts and a demonstrated commitment to equity. Taken together, campus artifacts and their locations communicate organizational culture, values, and priorities about equity. Campus artifacts influence institutional members' meaning-making, perceptions, and actions towards others, impacting decision-making, policies, and practices that affect racially/ethnically minoritized students, staff, and faculty.

The literature on campus artifacts has documented their positive *and* negative impacts on student learning, academic and social engagement, and success (Banning et al., 2008). Research has found that for racially/ethnically minoritized students, campus artifacts are particularly important for social integration, racial/ethnic identity development, and a sense of belonging (Andrade, 2018; Lozano, 2010; Patton, 2006). Most research on campus artifacts has focused on racially/ethnically minoritized students' perspectives at PWIs. The limited literature on campus artifacts at MSIs has highlighted their importance for racially/ethnically minoritized students. A case study focused on the reduced sense of belonging felt by Joy, a Diné (Navajo) woman enrolled at an HSI, in response to her university's seal depicting a frontiersman and Spanish conquistador, and artwork negatively portraying Indigenous people (Desai & Abeita, 2017). The authors highlight that these campus artifacts are "a daily reminder of historical

trauma and erasure" (p. 285) that contribute to Native students' marginalization. Another study highlighted institutional agents' critical role in developing campus artifacts for AAPIs at AANAPISIs (Alcantar et al., 2020). Our study extends this literature by locating this phenomenon within dually designated AANAPISI-HSIs.

As conceptual frameworks, Banning et al. (2008) provide a mechanism for identifying and categorizing campus artifacts with an eye towards equity, while Garcia et al. (2019) surface how these artifacts demonstrate an institution's commitment to serving AAPI and Latinx students. Notably, while Banning et al.'s (2008) framework is equity-centered, it lacks a focus on race/ethnicity, which Garcia et al. (2019) provide. For example, at one level, the researchers identified the type of artifact and its equity messaging. At another level, the researchers inferred whether the artifact highlighted a particular race/ethnicity through its messaging.

Methodology

In line with our conceptual frameworks, this study draws on data collected from a larger critical ethnographic research study of dually designated AANAPISI-HSIs and their campus environments. Critical ethnographies seek to uncover power inequities embedded within social institutions (Carspecken, 1996), in this case, institutions of higher education. Further, ethnographic designs are ideal for studying institutional cultures and environments (Spradley, 1980). As such, the researchers relied on critical ethnographic methods to understand how campus artifacts located at AANAPISI-HSIs reflect an institution's commitment to, and institutionalization of, diversity and equity.

This study was conducted at three AANAPISI-HSIs, regionally concentrated[3] in the west: Desert Community College (DCC), Desert State College (DSC), and Desert University (DU) (pseudonyms). Focusing on AAPI- and Latinx-servingness through campus artifacts at regionally-concentrated AANAPISI-HSIs is important because it helps us understand how public colleges serve two of the fastest-growing and largest populations in this geographical region. Latinxs are the second-largest racial/ethnic group in this region at 29% (U.S. Census, 2020). Although AAPIs are only 10% of the region's population, they are the fastest growing and one of the largest in the U.S. mainland (U.S. Census, 2020). Additionally, over a third of the county speaks a language other than English, with Spanish and Tagalog being the top languages. These

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[3] The region is masked to maintain the anonymity of the institutions.

institutions were selected because they strategically pursued and received AANAPISI-HSI federal designations and grants within the last five years. We provide a brief profile of each institution below.

DCC, a large, public, multi-campus community college, serves a large, urban, metropolitan area. It enrolls approximately 30,000 undergraduates, about one-tenth and one-third of whom identify as AAPI and Latinx, respectively. DCC primarily awards associate degrees but offers several four-year degree options. DSC is a small, public institution located in the county's outskirts, serving rural-suburban and large-urban metropolitan areas. As a four-year institution, it enrolls approximately 4,000, mostly part-time undergraduate students. About one-tenth of DSC's students identify as AAPI and one-third as Latinx. DU is a large, public, research-intensive, doctorate-granting university serving a large, urban, metropolitan area. DU enrolls approximately 25,000 undergraduates, the majority attending full-time. About one-tenth of its students identify as AAPI and one-third as Latinx.

Data Sources and Procedures

In line with ethnographic approaches, and to better understand each institution's campus environment, observation methods were employed to gather various data sources: observation notes, photographs, and documents (e.g., campus maps) available online through the institution's websites. These multiple data sources allowed for triangulation during data analysis. Formal observations were conducted in-person and online via institutional websites for each campus, during the spring and summer of 2020. To ensure trustworthiness, multiple researchers visited each campus. Upon the closing of campuses in late spring due to the global pandemic, only online observations were collected. Researchers utilized an observation protocol to aid in the systematic observation of campus artifacts. The protocol prompted observers to describe the architecture, location of buildings, signage, and artwork, among other things. The protocol also prompted observers to infer the messaging of the campus artifacts, such as how the artifact is reflective of AAPI and Latinx students. During observations, the researchers also collected photographs of campus artifacts that communicated "servingness." Collectively, researchers conducted approximately 17 hours of observations and obtained over 270 photographs.

Data Analysis

To begin our analysis, we reviewed the observation notes, photographs, and documents. Then, we developed a codebook to aid in analyzing the data. Utilizing Banning et al.'s (2008) equity taxonomy for visual data, we developed initial codes related to each dimension: type of artifact, equity group parameters, message type, and equity approach. In the first coding cycle, two research team members independently hand-coded the various data sources using the codebook. Then, we met to discuss discrepancies and revisit the codebook before returning to the data. During the second coding cycle, we engaged in axial coding to uncover patterns and relationships across codes. Throughout this process, we wrote analytic memos to aid in developing new codes, documenting patterns, and uncovering themes (Saldaña, 2016).

Researchers' Positionalities

This 12-member research team held a variety of roles within and outside of the three institutions. Some researchers involved in data collection were members of the community the institution served but had no direct ties to the institutions ("outsiders"), while others held a variety of roles (students, staff, faculty) within the institution ("insiders"). Three-fourths of the research team identified as a member of a racially minoritized group. The three members involved in this sub-study identify as Latinx and Asian American and have scholarly interests in equity and justice in higher education. As such, we drew on our collective knowledge and expertise to gain a unique insight into how institutional environments communicate AAPI and Latinx "servingness" through campus artifacts.

Findings

Findings from this study revealed that these three institutions' campus environments were in a state of flux, or what Garcia (2019) describes as "becoming," and are captured through two interconnected themes: striving to become and undermining progress towards becoming. While some institutions in our study made strides towards distancing themselves from their Eurocentric and racist beginnings, the vestiges of racism at these institutions highlight the tension between simultaneously being minority-serving and historically white.

Striving to Become

We observed similar campus artifacts across all three institutions. However, how institutions mobilized these artifacts for serving AAPI and Latinx students varied in important ways: transformative rebranding, additive targeting, and liminal inclusion. To demonstrate these differences, we present our first theme by institution.

Desert University Transforms by Rebranding

Our observations of campus artifacts at DU suggest that they are in a state of transformational transition, through rebranding and by leaning into its compositional student diversity. DU made efforts to visibly celebrate the institution's diversity-related efforts, creating and relocating student support services, and increasing AAPI and Latinx imagery. Signage displaying institutional slogans and catchphrases were one way institutions signaled that all students belonged. These words were often prominently displayed across campus buildings and banners hanging from light posts. A wall in DU's student union proudly displayed the words, "We are [DU]." In DU's digital space, the "diversity" webpage was one click away from its homepage. This webpage contained hyperlinks showcasing how the institution incorporated diversity in the curriculum, supported diversity through campus services and programming (e.g., themed housing), and made meaning of their AANAPISI-HSI designations.

In addition to visual artifacts, researchers documented how DU increasingly designated central space for diversity efforts. Researchers (via insider knowledge) described how within the last five years, DU shifted from housing diversity programs and services in a campus "building" on the periphery to centrally locating them in the student union. Further, these efforts were now housed under a new department for social justice and diversity, which hired two coordinators for AAPI and Latinx student programming, and support.

In-person and online observations (e.g., exhibition archives) of DU's art museum suggested a shift towards more culturally relevant art exhibits. One researcher described how the past few years witnessed "an increase in Latinx and AAPI artists, including locals" being featured in museum exhibits. A review of the museum's website also supported this commitment to "diversity" through a permanent art collection that reflects the surrounding community, as well as "Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica" and "indigenous traditions" collections. This "shift" seemed to coincide with the institution's AANAPISI-HSI designations. On the other

side of campus, in a university courtyard, a statue of DU's mascot, a frontiersman symbolizing the rebels who "ventured into uncharted" paths, has prominently stood for over a decade. Institutional documents reflected several efforts to remove the controversial mascot, including a commissioned study that reported that the majority of DU constituents did not see a need to take "action" after learning that others might find the mascot offensive. During our writing of this manuscript, and amidst the Black Lives Matter protests, DU has removed the statue. The inclusion, visibility, and removal of these campus artifacts seem to align with Banning et al.'s (2008) transformational level of equity, combining artifacts with a commitment to equity or social action.

Desert Community College Additive by Targeting

Our observations of DCC suggest that there were additive artifacts in the campus spaces. While positive, these artifacts were sparse, targeted, and somewhat inconspicuous. For example, DCC used the phrase "I am [DCC]" on small plaques recognizing staff members, mostly of Color, working on campus. In their digital space, DCC had a single webpage for "diversity and multicultural affairs," which could be located after navigating several pages past the homepage. The webpage described the purpose of the multicultural centers, its resources, and contact information for listed committees, including the AAPI and Latinx Faculty and Staff Committees. A reference to DCC's AANAPISI-HSI designations was hidden in a dropdown menu at the bottom of this webpage.

Like DU, DCC also reallocated campus space to support diversity initiatives. At one DCC campus located in a predominantly Black and Latinx community, buildings and spaces were increasingly named after prominent Black community leaders, including the newly constructed student union named after a Black assemblyman. However, no buildings or spaces at any of the campuses were named for AAPI or Latinx individuals. Within newly constructed and centrally located student unions, two DCC campuses dedicated space for multicultural centers to support diversity services and programming. Notably, the DCC campus, situated in a predominantly white community, decided to forego space for a multicultural center in their student union. While, at first glance, these moves seem to be in line with transformative efforts towards institutional equity, the fragmentation and targeting of diversity efforts across the three DCC campuses demonstrate how these efforts are additive.

Campus artwork, including paintings, posters, and statuary, also reflected institutional commitments to AAPI- and Latinx-servingness, and diversity-at-large. In particular, observations detailed the installation of a series of wood pallet-framed, street-style canvas artwork in each of DCC's student unions. Photographed images of the artwork included skull paintings reminiscent of Día de Los Muertos, their mascot wearing a charro outfit, and an indigenous Mesoamerican man adorned in feathered headgear. Observers noted that culturally relevant art pieces appeared to be confined to student unions. Although the existence of these campus artifacts positively reflects AAPI, Latinx, or other communities of Color, their confinement in specific buildings or obscure locations in the digital space speaks to their additive nature.

Desert State College Liminal Inclusion

The campus artifacts of DSC communicate an attempt to create an environment that reflects its diverse students. At DSC, the phrase "Be state" displayed a unifying message of belonging. DSC's website also promoted diversity efforts through its Community Engagement and Diversity Initiatives Office and "diversity and inclusion task forces." However, details about each task force were not available. In fact, nowhere on DSC's website do they acknowledge their dual designations. The inclusion of information related to the task forces with no information about what they do represent additive equity efforts.

Simultaneously, DSC's artwork reflects intentional support for local artists. This includes a permanent collection of "94 works by 54 local artists," with select Latinx, Native American, and Filipino artists. This artwork was showcased campus-wide and not confined to a single location. One such piece is captured in a photograph depicting a large steel sculpture of DSC's mascot by a prominent local Latinx artist, adorning an outdoor courtyard. As part of DSC's permanent collection, the inclusion of these artifacts suggests a level of equity that is transformational in representing its diverse community.

Undermining Progress Towards Becoming

Institutional efforts to showcase AAPI- and Latinx-servingness through campus artifacts often stood in stark contrast with artifacts reflecting the beginnings of these institutions, including statues, murals, and building names. These artifacts communicated standards of inclusion and exclusion through the persisting whiteness in English-only communication,

manifestations of racism, and campus policing. As these three themes emerged and converged across the campuses, we organize these findings thematically.

English-Only Communication

In all three campuses, the efforts to communicate their commitment to diversity through campus artifacts were undermined through the predominance of English-only communication. All slogans, building names, and the majority of flyers were displayed in English. Researchers noted the few instances in which campus artifacts included other languages. At DSC, this included the title of two art pieces by a Latinx photographer. At DU, another researcher observed a small LCD screen in the corner of the student union that displayed the words "we are" in several languages, including Spanish and Mandarin. At one DCC campus, an observer indicated several instances of bilingual flyers and signs; however, the photographs that accompanied these observations overwhelmingly depicted flyers with program information, scholarships, and student services solely in English. Only two flyers depicted English-Spanish communication, both outlining nondiscrimination policies. DCC was the only campus to have a webpage dedicated to prospective Spanish-speaking students.

Manifestations of Racism

Although all three institutions displayed artwork representing AAPI and Latinx students, only DU had overtly racist artwork on campus. DU even had a webpage on the evolution of the campus mascot, which described how DU had long embraced the "rebel" spirit of the confederacy against its northern rival—a comparison that reinforces the negative messaging of the physical artifact. This webpage also located where images of the retired mascot can be found on campus today, including the DU art museum. While the museum's website denounced the racist imagery that decorates the hardwood floor of the main exhibit hall, it also conceded that the mural served as a "reminder" of DU's racial progress. This active display of a negative campus artifact communicates a recognition and rejection of racism while also paying homage to a racist history.

In a subtler display of institutional racism, at DCC, individually framed photographs of members of the Board of Regents (BOR) were prominently placed on the walls of each student union and other campus buildings. The BOR photographs, a predominantly white and male governing body, were often juxtaposed with nearby "I am [DCC]" plaques featuring DCC staff,

primarily Women of Color. While the photographs provided a sharp contrast between campus demographics and white power structures, other normalized displays of white dominance were communicated through building names. The majority of buildings across all three institutions were named after white philanthropists who donated to support campus infrastructure, student scholarships, and other initiatives.

Campus Policing

Although institutions are (re)dedicating physical space, observations of campus artifacts suggest that these spaces are highly policed. DSC's website proudly touted the presence of security "24 hours a day and 7 days a week." However, nowhere was policing more prevalent than at DCC, where researchers observed a regular police presence and informal and formal signage limiting students' use of space. Multiple police cars were seen parked in college parking lots or on-campus walkways and often in front of the main building entrances, including the student services building. One observer described how campus security often wandered about campus buildings. Policing was also prominent through signage limiting the use of campus space at DCC. For example, a researcher observed a large black piano in the student union covered by a brown cloth, fenced-off on all sides, and containing multiple signs in black and red lettering that read, "do not play/touch." Another researcher observed a white dry-erase board in the student union with a hand-drawn image of the campus mascot and the words "please do not write or erase anything on this board."

Discussion

This study revealed that AANAPISI-HSIs enact and communicate "servingness" through campus artifacts at different levels of equity (Banning et al., 2008). The varying levels of equity aligned with Garcia et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of "servingness" and represent a spectrum of "becoming" minority-serving (Garcia, 2019), particularly through transformative rebranding, additive targeting, and liminal inclusion. "Becoming" rather than "being" AAPI- and Latinx-serving is reflected in the institutions' focus on diversity and multiculturalism, rather than unapologetically serving AAPI and Latinx students. Specifically, while artifacts such as art collections, lists of diversity committees, and multicultural centers support or contribute to equity efforts, they lack equity-centric positions (Banning et al., 2008). This is demonstrated through posted slogans and multicultural offices, and undermined by English-only

communication, manifestations of racism, and campus policing. Only DU's social justice and diversity unit move beyond celebrating multiculturalism to a purposeful action that speaks to institutional transformation.

Further, efforts towards AAPI- and Latinx-servingness were primarily displayed through additive commitments to diversity and inclusion. For instance, many of the campus artifacts that would be considered permanent physical artifacts, such as campus buildings, did not communicate AAPI- and Latinx-serving; instead, they mostly displayed names of white donors. Additionally, one campus made no reference to their AANAPISI-HSI designation. Even the two campuses that did articulate their dual designation on their digital platforms often couched their designation under diversity initiatives or folded under different hyperlinks, instead of prominently displaying it as part of their main webpages. These findings are consistent with literature that focuses on public communication, or more importantly, lack thereof, of HSI designations (Contreras et al., 2008; Torres & Zerquera, 2012). Additionally, the varying levels of equity being communicated through campus artifacts differed by racial and ethnic groups. More campus artifacts communicated Latinx- than AAPI-servingness, demonstrating an imbalance of the dual AANAPISI-HSI designation.

The present results are also consistent with previous literature that emphasizes the multifaceted and complicated nature of higher education organizational identities, especially at HSIs (Garcia, 2019; Torres & Zerquera, 2012) and AANAPISIs (Alcantar et al., 2019; Yang & Masulit, 2018). As demonstrated by our findings, AANAPISI-HSIs must contend with simultaneously being minority-serving and historically white. The juxtaposition between campus artifacts that communicate AAPI- and Latinx-servingness and dominance of whiteness thwart the institution's efforts towards being transformative and truly fulfilling an AANAPISI-HSI mission.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

The present study presents the first attempt to examine servingness through campus artifacts at dually designated AANAPISI-HSIs. More research is needed on campus artifacts at MSIs and dually designated institutions. This could include the examination of campus artifacts that privilege specific AAPI and Latinx subgroups. Future research could also examine campus artifacts from institutional agents' perspectives and how they grapple with these dual

designations. Additionally, future research should examine how campus artifacts at MSIs change over time. Furthermore, researchers could examine the impetus and decision-making about applying for federal MSI grants to support physical and virtual infrastructures.

In terms of practice, we urge institutional agents to think creatively and strategically about how they communicate their commitment to equity and servingness to AAPI and Latinx students, through campus artifacts built into short- and long-term institutional strategic plans. For example, as an immediate action, institutions can commit to displaying AAPI and Latinx student artwork. They can also incorporate signage that welcomes and shares information in various languages. In the long term, institutions can commission campus murals that depict influential figures in AAPI and Latinx communities. They should also aim to have a multilingual web presence. At a minimum, institutions could engage in self-study to evaluate their campus artifacts using Banning et al.'s (2008) equity climate framework, and remove negative artifacts.

Conclusion

This study explored campus artifacts at dually designated AANAPISI-HSIs. It demonstrates the complexities of communicating AAPI- and Latinx-servingness through campus artifacts, particularly for HWIs with multiple, competing missions, and limited capacities to shift from becoming to being MSIs. It is important to note that AANAPISIs and HSIs continue to be an underfunded and underresourced sector of higher education. Thus, these institutions may not have the financial means to invest in permanent campus artifacts to communicate AAPI- and Latinx-servingness and may depend on gifts from primarily white donors to support infrastructure. Examining AANAPISI-HSI campus artifacts is important to demonstrate *if* and *how* they communicate servingness and highlight the need for increased funding to help them progress toward being rather than becoming MSIs. Equity-focused artifacts are an important indicator of AAPI- and Latinx-servingness; AANAPISI-HSIs have a responsibility to implement culturally responsive campus artifacts to serve AAPI and Latinx students.

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Factors Influencing Optimism for Degree Attainment in
Latino First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

Latino first-generation college students face a unique set of challenges that are not part of the college experience of their non-first-generation counterparts. Nonetheless, many Latinos remain optimistic about overcoming barriers that might impede their educational pursuits. The present study was aimed at exploring factors that contribute to Latino students' positive expectations for degree attainment. Utilizing data from a large online survey administered at a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), we found that competency beliefs and persistent determination to overcome challenges significantly influences students' optimism. In addition, strong connections with institutional agents (largely, faculty and student affairs staff) emerged as significant contributing factors. Students who reported having close relationships with their parents also reported a greater degree of optimism about postsecondary success. Implications for programs and services to improve the college experiences of Latino first-generation student, enhance optimism, and increase retention are discussed.

Keywords: Latino undergraduates, first-generation, persistence, optimism, Hispanic Serving Institution, HSIs

Despite increases in diversity, colleges and universities across the nation continue to struggle to retain and graduate students of color to the same degree as their White and Asian counterparts (Shapiro et al., 2017). Latino students (both men and women) who are first-generation college students, defined as being the first family member to attend college, are especially at risk for negative outcomes (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Fisher, 2007). Although today more Latino students are enrolling in higher education than ever before (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2019), retention rates remain unacceptably low (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). The discrepancy between the enrollment and graduation rates for Latino students has implications for their social, political, and community advancement. Examining the nuanced experiences of Latino undergraduates during their pursuit of a higher education degree is therefore warranted.

Models of student departure and retention have typically focused on the institutional and environmental factors that impact decisions to withdraw from colleges. For example, many Latino students who enter higher education are academically unprepared to engage in college level coursework. Pre-college factors, such as low high school grade averages have been linked to college grade point averages (GPA) (e.g., Friedman & Mandel, 2009). Financial limitations are another factor. Latino students are more likely than members of other racial/ethnic groups to work while in college and to fret about finances interfering with their ability to complete college (Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004). In addition, many students experience culture shock once inside the academic environment. For example, Latino students often face discrimination and prejudicial behavior (Yosso, 2005), making it difficult for them to develop a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Such factors decrease the likelihood of students persisting to degree (Crisp & Nora, 2010).

The primary focus on identifying academic and social factors that "pull" Latino students away from completing a college degree limits our understanding of the strengths Latino students possess that enable them to succeed. The role of motivation is understudied in this regard. According to Tinto (2017), "Persistence or its active form – persisting – is another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise. A student has to want to persist to degree completion in order to expend considerable effort to do so" (p. 2). Identifying which factors fuel or diminish Latino

students' motivation can improve our understanding of why many students fail to attain a college degree, despite having strong values and aspirations.

One potential factor contributing to motivation is optimism – that is, one's tendency to hold positive expectations even when confronted with adversity or difficulty (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). An optimistic outlook can have a profound impact on academic performance and persistence to degree, as it helps students cope with the academic pressures and demands of university life (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). If students are not optimistic about succeeding, they may withdraw because there is little reason to continue to invest their efforts (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Thus, a greater degree of optimism provides a source of resiliency to students when dealing with academic challenges. The current study contributes to our understanding of the determinants of optimism, or positive expectations for degree attainment, among a sample of Latino first-generation college students (both men and women) enrolled in a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI).

Competency Beliefs, Determination, and Optimism

To achieve goals, a person must believe that they have the requisite skills. Competency beliefs or self-efficacy (i.e., the belief that one is capable of success at a particular task [Bandura, 1977]) in achieving academic goals can contribute to optimism for degree attainment. In a longitudinal study of first-year university student performance and adjustment, Chemers et al. (2001) found that students who were more efficacious and held stronger competency beliefs tended on average to be highly optimistic about their college performance. Without a belief in their ability to succeed, even those students with the ability to do so may struggle to remain optimistic regarding academic success. In the current study, we explored the influence of competency beliefs on optimism for degree attainment in Latino first-generation college students.

Optimism can play a significant role in the retention of college students by fostering determination (e.g., Solberg Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009), also referred to as perseverance or grit. Many Latino students perceive that hard work, dedication, and effort contribute to their academic success (Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding et al., 2010; O'Neal, Espino, Goldthrite et al., 2016). As found by Chemers et al. (2001), optimistic students perceive their university experiences not as threats but as challenges, which they believe they can successfully handle.

Hence, perceiving that they are in control of their academic outcomes, optimistic students pursue their educational goals with greater determination. The association between the determination and an optimistic mindset was a research question of interest that was further examined in this study.

Connections with Others and Optimism

Another goal of the current study was to explore how interactions and connections with important others contribute to optimism toward degree attainment. For many Latino students, navigating campus culture and finding student resources are challenging aspects of adjusting to college life (Maietta, 2016; Torres, Reiser, LePeau et al., 2006). Positive interactions with individuals in academic, personal, and support service centers can influence a students' sense of connection to the university as well as enhance their ability to navigate campus culture, meet academic expectations, and graduate (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Tinto, 2017). In addition to relationships with student support service staff, positive faculty-student interactions have a beneficial impact on students' academic well-being. For example, research has found that the degree to which Latino students perceive their intellectual capabilities is positively correlated with the frequency and quality of their interactions with faculty (Espinoza-Parra & Collins, 2018). Although support from institution agents seems to enhance student functioning, a recognition of its benefits specific to maintaining an optimistic mindset has not fully emerged in the literature.

Support from peers can also enhance student functioning by cultivating a sense of belonging to the university (Tinto, 2017). Latino students who engage in purposeful activities, such as developing connections to peers through clubs and organizations, are more likely to be satisfied with their college or university experience and hence are more likely to stay committed to their educational goals (e.g., Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007). Relationships with peers from similar backgrounds are also beneficial because Latino students become aware that students "like them" do belong in the academic environment (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015). As students learn that students with backgrounds like theirs experience similar academic challenges yet are able to succeed (Gutierrez-Serrano, Romo, & Chagolla, 2020), they may develop positive expectations for their own academic success. Little is known about the extent of influence that peer connections have on Latino students' optimism for degree attainment.

Positive relationships and interactions with parents may also be a factor contributing to optimism in Latino college students. In various studies, parental support and encouragement have been found to be essential components of Latina's decisions to attend college and make the necessary college adjustments (Cavazos et. al, 2010; Melendez & Melendez, 2010). However, a few studies have suggested that family connections create more challenges for Latino students because their strong desire to continue fulfilling family obligations despite greater academic demands can present obstacles (e.g., Covarrubias, Valle, Laiduc et al., 2019; Espinoza, 2010). The extent to which closeness with parents contributes to Latino students' optimism for degree attainment is in need of further study.

The Current Study

While college enrollment among Latino students is increasing, graduation rates for this group remain low, indicating a need to better understand student resiliency in pursuing academic goals. One factor that may differentiate students who succeed from those who do not is having an optimistic mindset. The purpose of this study was to explore determinants of positive expectations for degree attainment among Latino first-generation college students. This study addressed the following research questions from data gathered through a large online survey administered at a four-year HSI:

1. How do Latino students' competency beliefs and determination to overcome challenges contribute to their optimism for degree attainment above and beyond academic performance (i.e., GPA)?

2. How do Latino students' connections with significant others—institutional agents (faculty, student services support staff), peers, and parents—contribute to their optimism for degree attainment?

Method

Participants

Participants were 198 first-generation Latino undergraduates (154 female, 44 male) enrolled at a four-year HSI in Central California, in which students of Hispanic heritage make up at least 25% of the student population. The students identified as Mexican American, Latina/x, Chicana/x, or Hispanic. The students' undergraduate standings were sophomore = 37.4%;

junior = 28.3%; and senior = 34.3%. About 94% of the students (*n* = 187) reported that they received need-based financial aid. The mean GPA was 3.09.

Procedures

Survey measures were collected as part of a larger institutionally sponsored study. The study was designed to examine the factors that contributed to the persistence of underrepresented first-generation college students, in order to better serve their needs and improve their educational outcomes. Flyers describing the study were distributed across campus offices and sent out through email listservs. Announcements about the survey were made in courses in which first-generation students were enrolled. Interested students were provided with an individualized link to access the survey questions, which were answered on students' electronic devices. The survey took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete. The students who participated received a five-dollar Starbucks gift card.

Measures

Optimism for Degree Attainment. Optimism for degree attainment was assessed by summed ratings associated with two statements: "*I have confidence that I will achieve my academic goals*"; "*I feel confident that I will finish my degree and graduate.*" On a scale from *1* (completely inaccurate) to *5* (completely accurate), students rated the extent to which they believed the statements to be accurate (*M* = 8.3, *SD* =1.8). Higher scores denoted greater levels of optimism.

Competency Beliefs. Competency beliefs were assessed by summed ratings associated with three statements. On a scale from *1* (not at all) to *5* (very often), students rated how frequently they attributed their struggles to intellectual abilities (*M* = 9.8, *SD* = 2.9). A sample item was: "*Do you ever attribute your struggles in courses to 'students being more talented or smarter than you?'*" (reverse-scored). Higher scores denoted greater levels of competency beliefs.

Determination to Succeed. Determination to succeed was assessed by summed ratings associated with six statements. On a scale from *1* (strongly disagree) to *4* (strongly agree), students rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item (*M* = 14.7, *SD* = 2.7). Two sample items were: When I experience academic challenges: "*I feel driven to put*

in more effort to succeed"; "*I lose motivation to work hard*" (reverse-scored). Higher scores denoted greater levels of determination.

Faculty/staff Connectedness. The extent to which the students felt connected to faculty and student affairs staff was assessed using a composite variable of summed ratings to two statements. On a scale from *1* (strongly disagree) to *4* (strongly agree), students rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item (*M* = 4.9, *SD* = 1.5). The items were: "*There are faculty on campus who I feel comfortable talking to about myself*"; "*There are staff who I feel comfortable talking to about myself.*" Higher scores denoted a greater degree of connectedness.

Peer Connectedness. Peer connectedness was measured using a composite variable of summed rating to five statements. On a scale from *1* (strongly disagree) to *4* (strongly agree), students rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item (*M* = 14.4, *SD* = 2.4). Two sample items included: "*I feel well-connected to students on my campus*"; "*I have friends on campus that I could go to for emotional support.*" Higher scores denoted a greater degree of peer connectedness.

Parental Connectedness. The extent to which the students had a close relationship with their parents was assessed using a composite variable of summed ratings to 11 statements. On a scale *1* (completely disagree) to *5* (completely agree), students rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item (*M* = 33.7, *SD* =11.5). Two sample items were: "*I can discuss my beliefs with my parent without feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed*"; "*I am very satisfied with the way my parent and I speak to each other.*" Higher scores denoted a greater degree of parental closeness.

Plan of Analyses

Correlations were computed to assess the relationships among the variables. A regression analysis assessed the influence of competency beliefs and determination (independent variables) on optimism for degree attainment (dependent variable). Grade point average (GPA) was included as a control variable, given its positive relationship with persistence. A second regression analysis examined the effect of close relationships with faculty/staff, peers, and parents on optimism for degree attainment, also controlling for GPA.

Results

Correlations Among the Variables

As indicated by our Pearson correlation analyses (see Table 1), all but three of the variables positively correlated with one another ($ps < .05$). Peer connectedness was not significantly associated with optimism for success, competency beliefs, and parental closeness.

Table 1

Correlations among the variables

	Optimism for degree attainment	Competency beliefs	Determination	Staff/faculty connections	Peer connections
Competency beliefs	.34***				
Determination	.48***	.39***			
Staff/faculty connections	.29***	.22**	.37***		
Peer connections	.12	.13	.24**	.48***	
Parental Connectedness	.26***	.15*	.24**	.17*	.08

*p < .05, **p < .01, *** p < .001

Regression Analyses

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to explore the relationships between competency beliefs and determination to succeed and optimism for degree attainment, controlling for GPA. The analysis was found to be statistically significant, $F(188) = 23.39$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .28$. Students with higher competency beliefs ($\beta = .17$, $p = .015$) and higher levels of determination ($\beta = .39$, $p <. 001$), as well as higher GPAs ($\beta = .14$, $p = .032$), had a greater sense of optimism. The larger predictor was students' reports of determination.

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to explore the relationships between the three connectedness variables (i.e., (1) faculty/staff; (2) peers; and (3) parents) and optimism for degree attainment, controlling for GPA. The analysis was found to be statistically significant $F(197) = 7.94$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .14$. Students with stronger connections to faculty and staff ($\beta = .20$, $p = .006$) and closer relationships with parents ($\beta = .19$, $p = .008$), as well as higher GPAs ($\beta = .17$, $p = .016$), had a greater sense of optimism. Peer connectedness was not significantly associated with optimism.

Discussion

The present study explored factors that contribute to optimism for degree attainment among Latino college students who are the first in their families to attend college. Our findings show that, while high academic performance contributes to optimism, confidence and determination to persist through hurdles also play a major role. More specifically, we found that students who are determined to overcome academic challenges, and who perceive they have the ability to do so, tend to be more optimistic about reaching their academic goals than students who are less determined and less self-efficacious. These attitudes and beliefs are fostered through meaningful relationships with faculty and student affairs staff, as evidenced by the positive associations among these variables. Positive interactions (e.g., understanding, helpfulness) with student support service staff help demystify the college process, as well as make students aware that they are members of a community that cares about them. In addition, a sense of belonging, increased confidence, and resulting optimism can be fostered through positive interactions with faculty, as seen with mentored undergraduate research opportunities (Lopatto, 2010). Faculty involvement can play an influential role on students' educational trajectories, even if the interaction is informal. For example, Shepherd and Sheu (2014) found that students who reported having more informal contact with faculty also reported higher academic achievement and stronger intentions to persist to degree attainment.

Our findings also point to positive relationships with parents as an important contributing factor to Latino students' optimism for degree attainment. Although parents of first-generation college students are often unable to provide their children with the information necessary to successfully navigate complex higher education systems, they provide strong moral and emotional support that sustains their children's drive to do what is necessary to achieve their goals. Parental closeness may foster optimism and strengthen persistence by instilling confidence in their children, which may buffer them when they encounter feelings of isolation and self-doubt. Relationships with parents also contribute to passion and perseverance towards long-term goals through the internalization of family values. Many Latino students report that they are driven to succeed in order to make their parents proud, and to repay them for their sacrifices that enabled them to attend college (Ballysingh, 2019; Gutierrez, Romo, & Chagolla, 2020). A close interdependent relationship with their families may also enhance student resilience by increasing their commitment to pursue a meaningful major or degree. For

example, motivation to attend college to give back to one's home community in the future may be a more powerful academic motivator for Latino than for White students because of Latino students' collectivist cultural orientations (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). In addition, many Latino students report that they are determined to persevere not only for their own gain, but also to pave the way for others in their families and community to move forward in their education and careers (Menchaca, Mills, & Leo, 2016).

Given the influential role of parents on the development of determination and optimism in their children, it is surprising that there are few institutional programs (beyond freshman year) that inform parents on how to support their children as they deal with the pressures related to the many demands of college life. Current support programs tend to focus on helping to ease the transition process, addressing the common first-year challenges encountered by parents and their children. However, students pass through different stages during their freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years, with different concerns, problems, and needs at each stage. Ideally parents would be given an understanding of the university experience beyond freshman year, so that they can continue to be supportive as their children become upper classmen, and proceed toward graduation.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations to consider in this study. Because data was collected at a single institution, the findings may not reflect the experiences of Latino first-generation students at all HSIs. In addition, data was collected through a structured survey with closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions could have yielded more information on how the various variables of interest influence optimism, and produce a richer definition of the concept of optimism itself. The study could also be improved through longitudinal methods to assess whether the degree of optimism changes at different time points along the college trajectory, and whether optimistic students are indeed more likely to persist to degree attainment.

Conclusion

The task for HSIs is to implement policies and practices that nurture a healthy sense of confidence, and foster first-generation students' perceptions that success is within their control. When students are confident, they act decisively to achieve the outcomes they envision for themselves and find ways to overcome the inevitable obstacles that arise. These attitudes in

turn sustain students' motivation to strive to complete their educational goals, and to foster positive expectations that their efforts to attain a degree will pay off. Initiatives and programs that have the potential to amplify the positive influence of faculty, campus support services staff, and parents merit exploration as HSIs pursue their best practices.

Notes

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***Latinx/a/os in Higher Education: Exploring Identity, Pathways, and Success.* Angele E. Batista, Shirley M. Collado, and David Perez II (Editors). Washington, DC: NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Inc, 2018, 358 pp. $44.95. Paperback: ISBN: 978-0-931654-74-9**

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Latinx/a/os in Higher Education: Exploring Identity, Pathways, and Success explores topics that are central to the experiences of Latinx/a/o students and professionals in higher education. Interwoven throughout the scholarly papers are insightful narratives from Latinx/a/o undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and student affairs professionals. The publication is organized into five sections that explore several critical topics for diversifying leadership within the academy, and improving outcomes for Latinx/a/o college students' success.

Part I of this volume is an introduction to the current landscape of Latinx/a/os in higher education. In the opening chapter, Sylvia Hurtado, Joseph Ramirez, and Katherine Cho shine a light on Latinx/a/o college enrollment data trends and disparities in higher education. Hurtado and associates point out that Latinx/a/os are the largest minority group earning bachelor's degrees at four-year colleges, but remain concentrated in public Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and specifically in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Community colleges alone account for half of Latinx/a/o undergraduates (NCES, 2015). The authors note significant differences in college participation by gender, and among Latinx/a/o subpopulations. This opening chapter offers compelling data points that signal important changes in the landscape of higher education.

In Chapter 2, Magdalena Martinez and Melissa L. Freeman provide a historical overview of federal policy advocacy efforts on behalf of Latinx/a/o students in higher education. They highlight prominent higher education policy advocacy actors such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), a national organization dedicated to the advancement of Hispanic Serving Institutions. According to Martinez and Freeman, literature on Latinx/a/o-focused policy in higher education is limited to descriptive case study and state policy analysis and warrants further investigation. For researchers interested in exploring Latinx/a/o-focused higher education policy, they recommend discursive policy models and advocacy

coalition frameworks, two policy models that center their analysis on the roles of actors and coalitions.

Joel Perez and Gerardo Ochoa address the policy and practice implications for undocumented Latinx/a/o students in Chapter 3. The authors provide historical context on immigration issues, and an overview of legislative policies that impact undocumented students on college campus. They discuss the major barriers that undocumented students must overcome in their pursuit of higher education. According to Perez and Ochoa, lack of comprehensive immigration reform continues to create high levels of uncertainty and stress among undocumented students. This chapter recommends professionals in the field of higher education to find creative ways to support, mentor, and assists undocumented students. Creating a rapid response to support undocumented students in crisis is one example of what institutions can do to be responsive to the needs of this vulnerable student population.

Part II explores the complexity of the Latinx/a/o identity in the United States. In Chapter 4, Sofia B. Pertuz provides a brief historical overview of terms and labels associated with the Latinx/a/o community. Pertuz posits that intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, is best-suited to examine the complexity of the Latinx/a/o identity within the institutional structure of higher education. Specifically, the concept intersectionality is useful because it acknowledges an individual's multiple identities (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014). Pertuz highlights common shared values in Latinx/a/o culture such as *familismo and respecto,* and discusses how these values can provide opportunities for students and higher education professionals. Briana Carmen Serrano discusses the issues facing LGBTQIA Latinx/a/os in higher education, and offers recommendations on how to support this student population. According to Serrano, many Latinx/a/os students "face challenges coming out to their families because of religious and family issues that can lead to conflict" (p. 104). Serrano recognizes the acute challenges that transgender students face in higher education settings. To create an inclusive environment for all students, the author recommends gender inclusive facilities, preferred name policies, and inclusive health care to better serve students who may not have support from their family members.

Best practices and models for developing pathways for Latinx/a/o student success are examined in Part III of this publication. In Chapter 6, David Perez II, Claudia Garcia-Louis, Arambula Ballysign, and Eligio Martinez extend Shaun Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement

framework (ADAF) by focusing on the cultural strengths that Latinx/a/o students possess. The authors build on Harper's framework by addressing the important role that familial, community, institutional, and social contexts play in Latinx/a/o students' educational pathways. Chapter 7 of the book is exclusively dedicated to the role that community colleges play in developing pathways for Latinx/a/o students. Edward F. Martinez and Ignacio Hernandez introduce data from the National Center for Education Statistics that reveals that community colleges continue to be the main entry point to higher education for Latinx/a/os students. According to the authors, Latinx students enroll in the community colleges in record numbers in part because they are an affordable option and are located in close proximity to their families. To continue to strengthen this vital pathway to higher education for Latinx/a/os, Martinez and Hernandez recommend hiring and retaining Latinx/a/o faculty, administrators, and staff that can serve as role models. Other recommendations include, disaggregating data on Latinx/a/o students to fully understand their distinct experiences and developing mentorship programs that foster Latinx/a/o students' sense of belonging. Aside from this sole chapter, the publication missed an opportunity to examine the impact that community college transfer pathways have on Latinx/a/os in pursuit of postsecondary education.

The Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC) at Rutgers University-Newark is the center of focus in Chapter 8. Marta Elena Esquilin meticulously describes HLLC's multifaceted approach that distinguishes it from traditional honors programs. HLLC's unique admissions criteria moves beyond traditional metrics (e.g., GPA, SAT scores) by taking into consideration students' characteristics such as leadership skills, resiliency, academic potential, and passion for social change. By employing a holistic admissions process, administrators are able to identify diverse talented students with endless potential for success. The program's success is attributed to its culturally relevant pedagogy that builds on students' knowledge and lived experiences and "empowers students with a social justice framework to explore social inequities" (p.168). Intergenerational learning communities and cohort-based peer mentoring are critical features of the HLLC model that create a sense of belonging among students of color in the program. Esquilin offers a blueprint to design an equitable honors program based on national best practices that support historically underrepresented students from admission through graduation.

In Part IV of the book, Latinx/a/o student affairs practitioners and faculty reflect on their personal and professional journeys to the field of higher education. In Chapter 9, Tonantzin Oseguera reminds readers that "the workforce within higher education has been slow to mirror the diversity of its student population" (p. 190). To close the gap between students enrolled in postsecondary education and the ethnic diversity of the student affairs profession, Oseguera recommends increasing the number of leadership pipeline programs for undergraduate Latinx/a/os. Specifically, she highlights NASPA's (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) Undergraduate Fellows Program, a high-touch mentoring initiative that serves as an entry point to the field of higher education for historically underrepresented students. Oseguera contends that student affairs professionals have significant contact with students, and thus, are well-positioned to serve as mentors and conduits to the profession of student affairs.

Chapter 11 and 13 respectively, focus on Latinx/a/o faculty pathways. William Luis candidly discusses his road to the professoriate. His narrative provides a glimpse into the inequities and racial hostility that many faculty of color experience in the academy. Despite successfully publishing in top-tier journals and serving as an advisor to the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress, Luis was unjustly denied tenure. Lucy Arrellano provides data that illuminates the gross underrepresentation of tenured-track Latinx/a/o faculty nationwide. Arellano contends that a number of hurdles stand between graduate school and the professoriate that keep Latinx/a/os from entering the academic ranks. She notes that few Latinx/a/os are groomed to become professors and "even when some do reach the door, they are filtered out during the search process due to lack of fit because they do not share the background of those in decision-making power" (p. 254). This chapter provides insights about key faculty responsibilities, namely, research, teaching, and service. Arrellano provides important advice for prospective and early career faculty Latinx/a/os. She advocates early career faculty to take on critical issues that pertain to their Latinx/a/o community, well before earning tenure. Both faculty-centered chapters document the injustices weathered by Latinx/a/o faculty in higher education.

Chapters 10 and 12 provide perspectives from accomplished senior-level Latinx/a/o leaders in higher education. Anthony Cruz recounts his journey to the Vice Presidency in Chapter 10. With over 20 years of experience in higher education, Cruz details his most valued

pieces of advice for Latinx/a/o student affairs professionals pursuing senior leadership positions. Most notably, he advises student affairs professionals to "confront challenges and fears head on regardless of how uncomfortable it may feel" (p. 210). His journey to senior leadership was unplanned and presented challenges that required him to be flexible and open to new opportunities. Mildred Garcia, the first Latina President of the California State University system, reflects on her journey to the presidency in Chapter 12. Garcia offers lessons learned in her journey to leadership. She speaks to the power of mentoring and surrounding yourself with individuals with diverse skill sets. According to Garcia, when pursuing the presidency, "not only must it be the right institution with the right students that align with your passion and skill set, it must also be the right time" (p. 245).

In the concluding chapter of the book, Angela E. Batista and Shirley M. Collado discuss the important role that mentors, networks, and professional development have on broadening pathways for Latinx/a/os in higher education. They stress the importance of participating in professional development opportunities that inform best practices such as the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. Batista and Collado's narratives speak to the importance of leveraging the capacity of Latinx/a/os' social capital in spaces that were not historically created for them. They challenge Latinx/a/os to be courageous in their pursuit of new leadership participation opportunities that can ultimately "reveal clarity of purpose and a commitment to work toward changing the landscape of higher education" (p. 314).

Latinx/a/os in Higher Education: Exploring Identity, Pathways, and Success is a compelling culmination of personal narratives and scholarly papers that are supported by research and data. This publication moves beyond deficit-oriented narratives about the plight of Latinx/a/os in higher education. The contributors make visible the triumphs of Latinx/a/o students, faculty, and administrators as they navigate the pathways to higher education success. It is an essential resource and guide for students interested in exploring student affairs as a feasible profession, as well as for seasoned professionals who want to gain a deeper understanding of how to best serve Latinx/a/o students in a postsecondary context. Missing from this publication is an in-depth analysis of the impact that community college transfer pathways have on Latinx/a/o students.

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On Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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Put me on the front cover of a school pamphlet,

just so you can claim diversity

and brag about how you have it.

Use me as proof that you're doing way more

than you have been.

But if that's true then tell me why,

the work you're doing feels stagnant.

You can't imagine,

how difficult it has been

to navigate institutions

that were not created for your skin.

To navigate the culture of classrooms

with rhetoric

that is violent and oppressive,

yet we're expected just to sit.

& listen.

Don't want to dive too much into descriptions,

But on the note of equity, let's talk tuition.

You want diversity so bad

But won't support our transition.

And with no help financially,

we struggle with basic needs

& It's got you questioning

how we ever got in these conditions.

I bet it's the reason why most student workers look like me,

I nod my head and greet them every time they pass by me,

Faculty, students and custodians who remind me

of the resilience we carry

and why we must keep trying.

So, this is why we say that representation matters,

Not only in the posters and pictures you love to plaster.

It matters in the books and research we're told to master,

It matters in the questions you ask, and how you answer.

This is also why we say diversity ain't enough,

What good is a seat at the table,

if I can't speak up?

What good is speaking up,

if people hear but won't listen?

Tell me how it is you plan on making a difference.

Authors' Biographies

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Anahi Ibarra is an elementary school educator in Watts, CA. Raised in South Central LA, she takes pride in being a 1st generation college graduate having earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of California, San Diego. As an undergraduate, she conducted research on the experiences of 1st generation students of color in relation to basic needs security and student involvement in enrichment opportunities. Her experiences and identities help to inform her work as an artist and poet as she seeks to empower and shed light on issues surrounding social inequalities.

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Minerva Gonzalez is the current Program Director of the Pathways to Academic Success & Opportunities (PASO) program at CSUSM and Principal Investigator of the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at California State University San Marcos. She has a BA in Chicano Studies and Spanish from Cal State Northridge and Master's in Public Administration from Cal State Los Angeles. At CAMP she created cultural validation classes and a family like atmosphere that was the inspiration for the current PASO program. Her goal is to create community and higher education coalitions for college access for Latinx students.

Marisol Clark-Ibáñez, Ph.D., is a full professor and chair of Sociology at California State University San Marcos. She is Peruvian-Irish-American whose research expertise includes education, undocumented immigration, methods, and the scholarship on teaching and learning. She served as the Faculty Director for the National Latino Research Center (2015-2020) and was the inaugural Faculty Lead for the CSUSM HSI grant (PASO). Her most recent book is *Unauthorized: Portraits of Latino Immigrants* (2019, Rowman & Littlefield). Collaboration, participation, and social justice are strong themes across her research projects.

Dr. D'Anna-Hernandez, PhD is an Associate Professor in the Psychological Sciences Department at California State University San Marcos. She is a first generation and Chicana scholar. She has expertise in creating curriculum for mentoring diverse students in biomedical research and training faculty in culturally validated course content as well as working with local Latinx communities in community-engaged research, and in investigating the role of stress and the environment on shaping health disparities in in Mexican and Mexican-American women from pregnancy through early childhood.