

Reforzando las Redes: Supporting Latina/o Undergraduates at a State Flagship University

Journal of Hispanic Higher Education

1-22

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DOI: 10.1177/1538192717741671

journals.sagepub.com/home/jhh



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Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of self-identified Latina/o students at a flagship state university. From a university-provided list of self-identified Latina/o undergraduate students, 117 responded to an online survey and 10 elected to participate in follow-up interviews. Students were asked about their participation in on-campus student clubs and organizations as well as interactions with faculty and staff. Nora's student engagement model framed the qualitative exploration of three emerging themes, students' levels of engagement in student organizations, their perceptions of levels of faculty support and accessibility, and their views about faculty and staff's understandings of the unique and diverse roles of Latina/o students. Implications for university administrators, faculty, and staff are discussed.

Resumen

Este estudio investigó las experiencias de estudiantes que se identificaron como latina/os en una universidad estatal. Ciento diez y siete estudiantes respondieron a un cuestionario en línea y diez eligieron participar en entrevistas de seguimiento. El Modelo Nora de Estudiantes Comprometidos (2003) enmarcó la exploración cualitativa de los tres temas emergentes, así como su opinión del entendimiento de los roles únicos y diversos de estudiantes latina/os de sus profesores y administradores. Implicaciones para administradores, profesores y personal universitario se discuten.

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Keywords

higher education, Latina(o), qualitative, resilience, student involvement, retention

The college experience can be challenging for many students, but for those from racial and ethnic minority groups the stress can be even more pronounced (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). One sizable group of ethnic minority students who have traditionally been underrepresented in public 4-year universities is Latina/o students (Urbina & Wright, 2015). Researchers have noted that campus climate—whether positive or negative—can facilitate or hinder adjustment and academic outcomes for such students (Urbina & Wright, 2015). Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of these students on university campuses where they remain in the minority.

This issue has recently taken on greater importance as the number of Latina/o students continues to increase in higher education institutions. By 2011, Latina/o students accounted for 17% of 18- to 24-year-olds in college, compared with only 11% 5 years earlier (Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015). However, as a group Latinas/os struggle with college persistence, and trail other ethnic and racial groups in the rates at which they graduate from 4-year institutions (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Salas, Aragon, Alandejani, & Timpson, 2014). Possible reasons for this lower persistence include high school academic preparedness (or lack thereof), access to campus support systems, interactions with supportive individuals, and perceptions of campus climate (Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011; Crisp et al., 2015; Nora & Crisp, 2012).

It has been widely suggested that Latina/o student persistence rates improve when universities make concerted efforts to help them integrate into social and academic communities where they can develop strong interpersonal relationships (Arana et al., 2011). Doing so has positive implications, especially for the adjustment and academic success outcomes of Latina/o students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs), where they are culturally distinct from most classmates, as well as most faculty and staff (González & Ting, 2008; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004).

To examine these issues, Nora and Crisp (2012) and others have recommended qualitative research in which Latina/o students describe their university experiences and perceptions of support. Such research should also investigate the role of relationships between students and faculty/staff to understand how positive or negative interactions may influence outcomes (Hernandez, 2000; Nora and Crisp, 2012; Urbina & Wright, 2015). As Crisp et al. (2015) noted, “Rigorous qualitative case studies, narrative-based inquiries, and ethnographic studies are needed to provide a rich description of students’ experiences, perceptions, and behaviors specific to the college environment” (p. 265).

Theoretical Framework

The framework that informed the analysis of data in this study was the student engagement model (SEM) proposed by Nora (2002, 2003, 2006; see Figure 1). This model highlights factors that affect the persistence of Latina/o students in higher education.

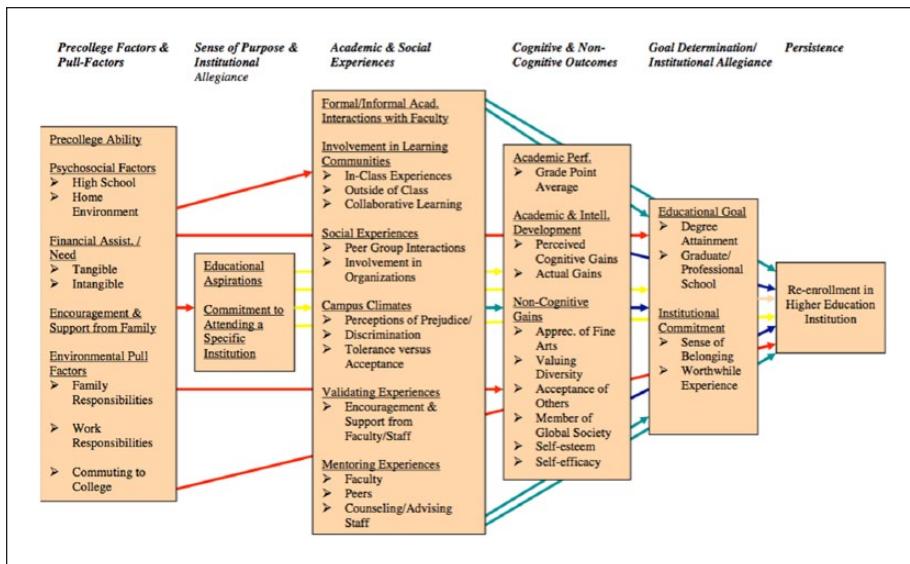


Figure 1. Nora's (2006) student engagement model.

It is multifaceted, and consists of six major components: (a) (precollege and) pull factors, (b) sense of purpose and institutional allegiance, (c) academic and social experiences, (d) cognitive and noncognitive outcomes, (e) goal determination/institutional allegiance, and (f) persistence. Because of our interest in students' participation in on-campus groups and interactions with faculty and staff in the current study, the SEM component of primary interest was "academic and social experiences," with "pull factors" playing a secondary role.

The category of "academic and social experiences" encompasses several factors, including academic and mentoring interactions with faculty and staff, class involvement, peer-group interactions, campus climate, and validating experiences (see Figure 1). The importance of these factors for the persistence of Latina/o undergraduates is well documented. In particular, researchers have noted the importance of two key elements in this area: (a) interactions and mentoring experiences with faculty and staff, and (b) finding a supportive (Latina/o) community, which is often accomplished through involvement in on-campus organizations and activities (Hernandez, 2000).

"Pull factors" were also considered in the present study because they have been shown to influence Latina/o student engagement in higher education (Nora, 2003). The positive pull factor most relevant to the present study was familial encouragement of continued enrollment in college, which may influence students' academic performance and successful integration into campus life (Nora, 2003). The environmental pull factors that may present challenges for Latina/o students were those related to family and off-campus work responsibilities (Arana et al., 2011).

Literature Review

Involvement in Student Organizations

The literature documents extensively the benefits associated with involvement in activities outside of the classroom. Tinto (1993) affirmed social integration to college life as paramount to student success and retention. In this context, Astin (1993) advanced the notion that higher levels of student involvement in college life may lead to greater levels of learning and personal development. Participation in campus activities, membership in student clubs, engagement in career-related organizations, and involvement in leadership development initiatives can enhance students' social integration (Christie & Dinham, 1991), enrich satisfaction with the overall collegiate experience (Abrahamowicz, 1988), and increase the likelihood of college persistence (Pasarella & Terenzini, 1991; Nora, 2003).

Latina/o college student involvement continues to expand in colleges and universities across the country as these pluralistic ethnic groups become an increasingly growing segment of the college student population, including colleges and universities not classified as Hispanic-serving institutions. Scholarship regarding Latina/o college students' involvement in campus activities provides evidence that participating in student organizations influences academic and social integration outcomes among underrepresented students (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Hurtado & Kamimura, 2003). In a study at a large Southwestern public university, Mayo, Murguia, and Padilla (1995) found that formal social integration had a positive effect on grade-point average (GPA) for students of color.

Ethnicity-focused student organizations—such as the Latino Student Alliance, Mujeres, and Organization of Latin American Students—provide additional avenues for student involvement. Although there may be more Latina/o-focused organizations on campus, the literature reveals that students of color participate more in general student organizations than minority-focused student organizations (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Rooney, 1985). In this context, participants in this study followed this pattern as they gravitated more toward nonethnic-focused student organizations while still expressing strong views about involvement in Latina/o-focused organizations.

Involvement in political student organizations and/or off-campus community agencies can also enhance Latina/o students' persistence in completion of a college education. Historically, political advocacy and organization have been central factors in Latina/o, Chicana/o equality national movements (Martinez, 2005). The Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) is one example of a grassroots movement that has contributed to the rich histories of Latina/o college students taking up and joining the ranks of a political community, seeking to redress societal inequities affecting communities of color. In a study examining underrepresented college students and their involvement in different types of student organizations, including politically affiliated entities, Baker (2008) identified no previous studies investigating the relationships between political participation and academic benefits. However, the political science literature provides evidence that political involvement is positively related to

issues of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Hamilton & Fauri, 2001). Given the strong histories of Latina/o political student involvement, these developmental outcomes may affect the overall college student experience. At the state university where this study took place, MEChA promotes political advocacy and empowerment, in addition to other goals.

Faculty and Staff Support

There is a vast amount of research suggesting that faculty and staff support of Latina/o students—or at least student perception of support—has important implications for adjustment and outcomes in 4-year institutions (Arana et al., 2011). In one study, it was reported that Latina/o perceptions of whether faculty and staff were student centered were positively associated with academic adjustment for those students (Hurtado et al., 1996). Conversely, those who perceived less support for students like them were more likely to have negative adjustment outcomes.

Support can come in various forms and meet certain student needs. For example, one primary way faculty and staff can assist minority students is to help them navigate university programs and policies (Arana et al., 2011; Urbina & Wright, 2015), as they are less likely to come from homes in which parents or other family members have attended university. In the same vein, faculty and staff can assist students in maneuvering the hardships of college that most students experience, helping them understand that while they may experience some unique difficulties, their classmates from majority groups are also adjusting to a new environment.

A second way faculty and staff can support Latina/o students is to be available to meet outside classroom hours, providing flexibility to those who may work off campus and need multiple options for times and way to meet. Flexibility is especially valuable for Latina/o students who have family or work obligations that exceed those of typical university undergraduates (Urbina & Wright, 2015). Such support is important because students who have ongoing contact with faculty outside of class are more likely to perform better academically and eventually graduate (Crisp et al., 2015; Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado et al., 1996). They also report higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience. Relationships with faculty who are themselves racial and ethnic minorities may be the most significant types of relationships, but studies have also found that nonminority faculty members also play a role in academic adjustment and outcomes of Latina/o students (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004).

A third way that faculty and staff support matters for Latina/o student academic success and retention is by validating ethnic cultures and communities, especially those that have historically experienced discrimination in PWIs (Salas et al., 2014). Many Latina/o immigrants and second-generation students maintain close identification with their home cultures, and as such university faculty and staff should provide opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with others who share those cultures (Hernandez, 2002). Rendón, Garcia & Person (2004) referred to these as *validating experiences*. Some have suggested that administrators at 4-year universities should offer workshops and other professional development trainings to all staff

around issues of diversity and inclusion in addition to creating safe spaces for Latina/o students to explore their own racial and ethnic identities (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015).

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of self-identified Latina/o undergraduates at a midsized flagship state university, with a focus on their engagement in on-campus clubs and organizations and the relationships they have with faculty and staff. Both factors have been shown to influence the persistence and success of Latina/o students and other members of underrepresented groups in higher education (Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez, 2002; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Nora, 2003). The specific research questions guiding this study were as follows:

Research Question 1: What do Latina/o undergraduates at a midsized flagship state university report about involvement in on-campus student organizations?

Research Question 2: What do these Latina/o undergraduates report about their experiences with faculty and staff? How do they access appropriate supports and resources?

This university is in a metropolitan area with a population of approximately 200,000 people. Historically, the student body has been overwhelmingly White, mirroring the population of the state. However, in the 10 years prior to data collection (fall 2004-fall 2014), the number of self-identified Latina/o undergraduate students increased from 603 to 2,001, growing from 3.7% to 9.7% of total undergraduate population. While this is a small change in the overall ethnic makeup of the student body, it constitutes an increase of 150% more Latina/o undergraduates on campus.

This suggests that efforts to recruit Latina/o students to this university have been successful. These students have more of a physical presence on campus now than ever before. However, improvements in retention and on-time graduation need to follow. For students entering the university as freshmen between 2003 and 2010, 4-year graduation rates among Latina/o students increased by 10.9% (from 34.3% to 45.2%) but continued to lag behind those of White students by 6.8%. It is also alarming that fewer than half of Latinas/os during that time period graduated on time. This issue takes on urgency, given the long-term financial implications of extra years spent in acquiring a bachelor's degree, and is attenuated for Latinas/os who are more likely to be impoverished than their White peers (Nora, 2003).

This study was undertaken to elucidate the experiences of Latina/o students on campus, as well as to generate an initial assessment of their specific needs and concerns related to persistence. We also sought to highlight the strategies that Latina/o students used to navigate a system they may not perceive as responsive to their needs. A key goal of this study was to inform university faculty members and administrators around the country who are facing similar challenges.

Method

The research team that undertook this study consisted of four members: two tenure-line assistant professors, one in the Department of Romance Languages and one in the College of Education; and two advanced doctoral students in the same two departments. All team members self-identified as Latinas/o, are bilingual in Spanish and English, and all had extensive experience working with bilingual Latina/o communities in professional capacities.

Data for this study were collected and analyzed in three phases: In fall 2014, a member of the research team consulted with the Office of Enrollment Management, the Office of the Registrar, and the Office of Institutional Research to access a list of self-identified Latina/o undergraduates enrolled at the university. The undergraduate population was approximately 20,000, and the final list of Latinas/os contained approximately 1,700 names—representing about 8% of total undergraduates. Concurrently, other members of the research team accessed existing online institutional data about Latina/o students' academic performance, persistence, and on-time graduation rates, and conducted a literature review to identify experiences and concerns that may affect undergraduate Latina/o students' experiences at predominantly White public state universities.

Survey Measure

Using the information provided by university administrators alongside findings from previous research, we created an online Qualtrics survey of approximately 50 questions addressing the personal and familial experiences, involvement patterns, perceived institutional supports, and financial aid concerns that might be relevant to students in this context (see Table 1). Questions were a combination of open response and Likert-type scale. In this article, only findings from the first three sections will be discussed.

Survey Respondents

In winter 2015, the survey was distributed via e-mail confidentially to 1,700 self-identified Latina/o students. The survey was made available in both Spanish and English, and potential participants were provided links to both languages. One hundred seventeen surveys were completed—111 in English and 6 in Spanish. About 65% of respondents were female, 35% were male; all four classes were represented (26% freshmen, 17% sophomore, 31% junior, 26% senior); and most students (69%) were considered in-state students. A majority (78%) lived off campus, whereas 22% lived on campus. 86% were U.S. born, while 14% were born abroad, mostly in Mexico or Central America.

In terms of ethnic self-identification, survey respondents were given five options (or they could select “other”): 24% identified as Mexican American, 21% as Latina/o, 19% as Mexican, 15% as Hispanic, and 10% as Chicano. Among the 11% who chose

Table 1. Survey Content Areas and Sample Items.

Content area	Sample items	Response
Experiences at the university (18 questions)	I have had positive social/academic experiences at (institution name) so far. I believe it is important to be involved in Latina/o-focused clubs and organizations. Please list the on-campus clubs and organizations you are involved in.	Likert-type scale (5 point, strongly disagree—strongly agree) Open response
Family experiences with the university (five questions)	My family understands the experiences I've had at (institution name). Sometimes I experience stress because of competing demands from my family and my schoolwork.	Likert-type scale (5 point, strongly disagree—strongly agree)
Institutional supports (17 questions)	I have good relationships with my instructors/professors. I am informed about services available to current students.	Likert-type scale (5 point, strongly disagree—strongly agree)
Financial aid (nine questions)	I have been informed by (institution name) about financial aid options. It is easy to access information about grants and scholarships from (institution name).	Likert-type scale (5 point, strongly disagree—strongly agree)

“other,” students were most likely to identify as biracial/mixed race (nine students). A small number chose more than one identifier (e.g., “I identify as Latina, Chicana, and Mexican”), and very few students indicated that they were from a different national group (i.e., Dominicano). About 60% came from bilingual homes in which both Spanish and English were spoken regularly, while approximately 20% came from homes in which Spanish was spoken exclusively, and 19% from homes where English was spoken exclusively. Only one student came from a home where another language, Japanese, was spoken.

Qualitative Interviews

In spring 2015, a member of the research team conducted semistructured qualitative interviews with 10 survey respondents, who responded to the call for voluntary interviews, to delve deeper into the issues raised in the surveys. Interviews followed a semistructured protocol and ranged from 15 to 45 min long, averaging about 25 min each. Study participants were given the choice whether to conduct the interview in Spanish or English. Four students opted to speak mostly in Spanish, and the remaining six preferred to speak mostly in English.

Findings

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed through the lens of Nora’s (2003, 2006) SEM (see Figure 1). Findings are therefore presented in two broad areas: (a)

academic and social experiences, and (b) pull factors. Across these two areas, three main themes emerged: First, students had varying levels of engagement (and comfort) in student organizations, including Latina/o-focused groups. Second, students suggested that there were supportive faculty and staff on campus, but they were not always easy to find, and they may not meet everyone's needs. Third, students felt that all faculty and staff need to understand the needs, roles, and responsibilities of Latina/o, first-generation, nontraditional, and transfer students.

Academic and Social Experiences

Theme 1: Engagement in student organizations. In terms of the overall experiences of participants in this study, it should be noted that the vast majority of those surveyed indicated positive academic and social experiences at the university (88% and 93% *agreed/strongly agreed*, respectively). In addition, 95% indicated that they felt confident they could be successful at the university; however, they personally defined success. It is important to keep this overall context in mind when attending to the nuances of student responses that are presented throughout this section.

As part of the “academic and social experiences” component of the SEM (Nora, 2003), peer-group interactions and involvement in clubs or organizations are supportive factors in the successful persistence of Latina/o students. Therefore, we asked students to identify the on-campus clubs in which they participated. Most students (68%) believed that such involvement was important, and approximately half (49%) reported that they were personally involved in at least one club or organization (see Figure 2). The nonethnically oriented clubs that were noted most frequently were career related. Of the 61 respondents who listed at least one club, 20 named career-related organizations, most commonly those sponsored by the College of Business (American Marketing Association, Women in Business, Sports Business Club, Entrepreneurs Club, etc.; González & Ting, 2008). Other popular clubs and organizations were sororities/fraternities (nine respondents) and intramural sports (eight respondents). Clubs and organizations that were listed with much lower frequency were those related to the arts, religion, and political action (approximately 1-2 people each).

These findings suggest that Latina/o students were actively involved in a wide range of on-campus activities, and that they expressed a variety of interests. We were specifically interested in participants’ involvement in ethnically oriented (primarily Latina/o-focused) clubs and organizations because research suggests that finding an ethnic community can be challenging for Latina/o students at PWI, but that doing so is critical for their success (Crisp et al., 2015; Hernandez, 2000). Failing to develop a sense of community can have dire consequences for persistence and graduation (Salas et al., 2014).

The most notable finding regarding participation in Latina/o-focused clubs and organizations was the sizable gap between the percentage of students who agreed/strongly agreed it was important to be involved in these clubs (51%) and the percentage who were actually involved (21%). While ethnically oriented clubs were the most frequently mentioned groups in which students participated (33 times), only 19 students self-identified as participating in those groups. In other words, the small number

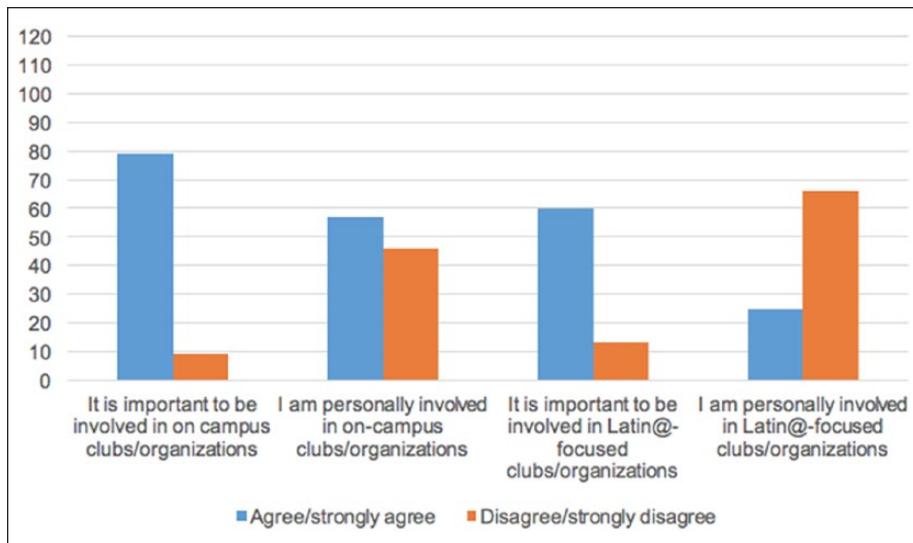


Figure 2. Survey results related to involvement in on-campus clubs and organizations.

of students who were involved in Latina/o-focused clubs (such as Chicano Student Union, GANAS, and Mujeres) tended to also be involved in other ethnically oriented clubs (such as the Native American Student Union or the Multi-Ethnic Student Alliance). In addition, in response to the open-ended survey question, “What other services, programs, or multicultural/diversity initiatives would be helpful?” the most common responses were the need for more opportunities to meet students of color (11 respondents) and more information about what ethnically oriented clubs already existed on campus (six respondents). Thus, despite the existence of at least a few Latina/o-focused clubs, overall participation was low, and several students who completed this survey felt that there were not enough events or opportunities to meet Latinas/os, or that they did not know how to get involved in such groups.

To further examine this seeming contradiction, we addressed this issue in the qualitative interviews. Some students reported that they did not feel welcome in Latina/o-focused groups based on their appearance, language preference, or status as a transfer student. For example, two participants explained their initial experiences with Chicano Student Union in the following ways:

Al principio comencé con Chicano Student Union, que es este . . . fui no más a ver cómo estaba, eh la verdad que no me sentí tan este eh, no sentí que la gente era tan abierta, o sea, ya todos tenían sus propios gigs, o sea su propio grupillo de amigos, entonces como yo era transfer, como que no, no me sentí así tan cómoda, entonces eh dejé de ir.

At first I started with Chicano Student Union, which was . . . I went just to see what it was like, and the truth is that I didn't feel very, um, eh, I didn't feel like the people were very

open. I mean, everyone already had their own gigs, I mean their own group of friends, and me, because I was a transfer, I didn't feel very comfortable. So, I stopped going. (Interview 5, female, senior, transfer student)

The first time I went to a Chicano Student Union meeting, I literally didn't have like a single person talk to me there . . . uh, which is pretty . . . and I just thought like I was getting a lot of looks and stares because like I don't appear to be Latina, but even if I really wasn't I don't understand why there isn't still this acceptance if I just wanna go and be part of that space. I know it's a safe space, but especially being Latina it's pretty disappointing. (Interview 7, female, senior)

The second student described herself as a Mexican American who looked White, and expressed frustration about not being accepted in what was supposed to be a safe space on campus. Unfortunately, these two students were not the only ones to express discomfort with Latina/o-focused groups, which suggests that their presence on campus is not enough to meet the needs of all self-identified Latinas/os. Perhaps, this explains the fact that 17 students highlighted the need for more opportunities to meet other Latinas/os on campus. This need was also expressed in two of the interviews, in which participants noted the lack of visible diversity on campus:

OK, uh, so, first year that I got here, I was like "wow" there is not Latinos here. Like, it was, I was lucky enough to have my FIG (freshman interest group) assistant be a Mexican also, so we kind of had like a connection, me and [name], but other than that I've been like . . . it is more challenging to find people, it's more than anything else. Like, I just . . . that I can't talk to the people in my room about pozole o menudo, like I normally do with other family members and friends. (Interview 2, female, year unknown)

I am gonna be honest, I don't really see that many Latinos on campus . . . for me, it's like seeing a unicorn 'cause they are rare. (Interview 3, female, sophomore)

The perceived invisibility of Latinas/os at this and other state universities has deep implications for how Latina/o students feel welcome and integrated or not. In this case, the first student's comments about pozole or menudo suggest that she struggled to make cultural connections with her classmates from dominant groups. Later in the interview, she noted the need to "educate, not just Latinos, but everyone about Latino culture." The existence of a greater variety of Latina/o-focused clubs might begin to address some of these issues.

Theme 2: The role of supportive faculty and staff. In the SEM (Nora, 2003), faculty-student relationships are a key part of students' overall academic and social experiences. These relationships can include informal interactions in which faculty and staff provide encouragement or validation, or they can be more formal mentoring or counseling experiences. In all cases, what matters is that students feel valued and supported (Arana et al., 2011; Hurtado et al., 1996). While research indicates that supportive faculty and staff need not share an ethnicity or culture with students (Hernandez &

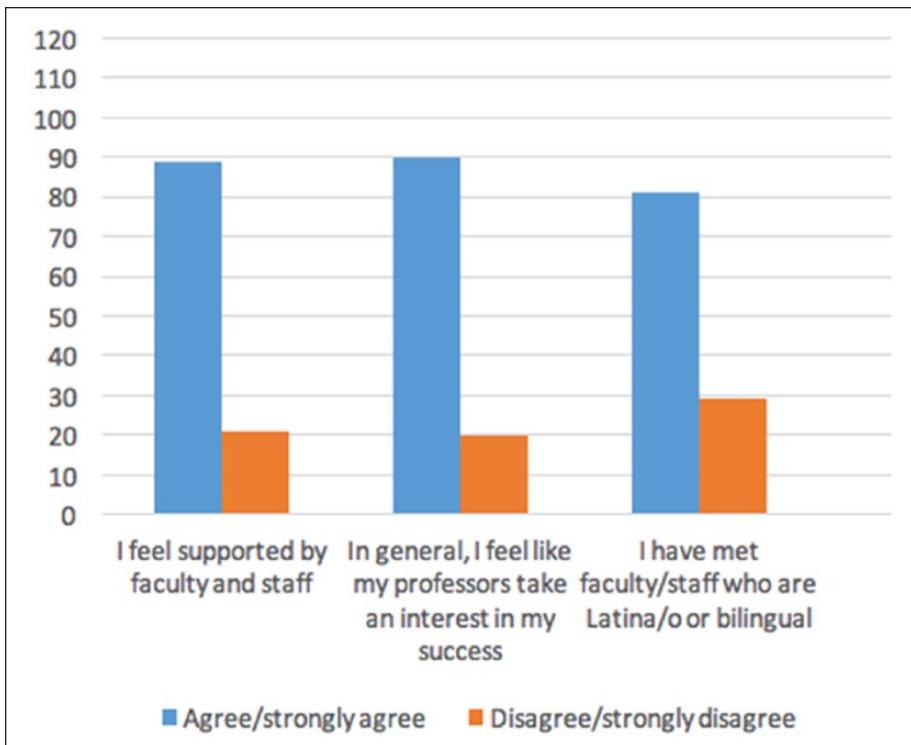


Figure 3. Survey results related to relationships with faculty and staff.

Lopez, 2004), those relationships may have particular relevance for young people of color.

In this study, a majority of participants (74%) indicated that they had met Latina/o or bilingual faculty and staff, and most agreed/strongly agreed that they felt supported (81%) by faculty and staff who were invested in their success (82%; see Figure 3).

The importance of these positive relationships cannot be underestimated. In particular, faculty and staff can help students navigate programs and policies that may be unfamiliar to them (Arana et al., 2011; Urbina & Wright, 2015), build mentoring relationships to support academic achievement (Crisp et al., 2015; Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado et al., 1996), and validate the cultural values that students bring from their home communities (Rendón, 1994; Salas et al., 2014).

A close analysis of the interview data highlights some of the nuances in students' experiences with various faculty and staff. On one side, students praised instructors who supported and encouraged them, as in the following two examples:

I had a fabulous professor during my fall term . . . who really took into account my culture and my experiences and really went on with that . . . he was really accepting, very open, and really gave me opportunities to go to the environmental conference in law school and it was just great. (Interview 2, female, year unknown)

You always have that one professor who totally, it's an inspiration to be in their class, then you go to their office hours and they really want to see you to do well, so that . . . it's always good . . . you know when someone doesn't have an investment in your education, it's hard to be invested yourself, so that lower your confidence, but I had really good experiences. (Interview 8, female, junior)

On the other side, however, several students raised concerns about how faculty and staff lacked flexibility in working with Latinas/os who were also nontraditional or transfer students:

Muchas veces los maestros esperan que . . . se complete el material aunque vean que el estudiante no está aprendiendo, ¿verdad? y a veces muchos de ellos, el estudiante busca el apoyo necesario con respeto a ellos, pero no están, muchos de ellos no están available, cuando el estudiante necesita tiempo para verlos.

A lot of time the teachers expect that . . . expect you to complete the material even though they can see that the student isn't learning, right? And sometimes, a lot of them, the student looks for the necessary support with respect to them, but they're not there, a lot of them are not available, when the student needs time to see them. (Entrevista 9, male, year unknown, nontraditional student)

Algo que estaba intentando recientemente fue que agarré un internship con una licenciada de inmigración y es, este, que voy a ser un paralegal. Entonces apenas lo agarré, entonces fui con el de Estudios Internacionales que es mi major y les fui a decir, "eh, me agarré este internship, ¿qué puedo hacer? Me falta una clase más de extern que es requerida, pero el tiempo es horrible, voy a tener que viajar desde name of city, (two-hour drive), a acá y, pues, sería tan ilógico, que prefiero tener otra clase que pueda, este, reemplazar esa clase." Y pues la profe como que no me quiso ayudar, como que dijo "no, es requerida." No sé qué tanto. "Nosotros somos estrictos en este departamento y no sé qué tanto." Entonces, este, pues andaban bien deprimida.

Something I was trying to do recently was to secure an internship with an immigration lawyer, and, I'm going to be a paralegal. So as soon as I secured one, I went to International Studies, which is my major, and I told them, "Eh, I got this internship, what can I do? I'm missing one extern class that is required, but the time is horrible, I'm going to have to travel from name of city, (two-hour drive) to here, and it's totally illogical, so I prefer to take a different class if I can, replace that class." And so, the professor, she didn't want to help me, so she told me, "No, it's required." I don't know why. "We are strict in this department." And I don't know why. So, I left very disappointed. (Interview 5, female, senior, transfer student)

One resource that was raised by students in both the survey and the interviews as critical to their feelings of inclusion and success at this university was the Academic Support Center (ASC) that offers programs and services for students from underrepresented groups, and is staffed by bilingually proficient staff from underrepresented groups as well. One interviewee explained how helpful talking with her ASC advisor was, saying,

He definitely helped to get perspective and when I needed to rant, I ranted and he listened and he was nice, because he was like “I just want to help you” and like “I want to help you to get through this.” (Interview 3, female, sophomore)

Another participant noted the role of ASC as a connector on a campus that can be overwhelming:

La universidad es enorme, entonces no hay ese mapa donde diga recursos, tal edificio . . . no fue hasta spring term del primer año que de verás, del 2012 o 2013 cuando finalmente fui a agarrar asistencia para la depresión y allí, me sugirieron “oh, vete a Living Center or is it Teaching Center, uh, y a ASC” y fue ahí donde . . . se abrieron más puertas. Conocí a un consejero ahí y me dijo: “¿sabes qué? Tienes que ir a Multicultural Student Union, para conocer otros grupos” y fue ahí donde me conecté con Mujeres, con Chicano Student Union con otros grupos de diferentes culturas.

The university is enormous, and there's no map that says where the resources are, in that building . . . it wasn't until spring term of my first year, honestly, of 2012 or 2013 when I finally went to ask for help with depression, and there they suggested that I go to Living Center, or is it Teaching Center, uh, and to ASC. And it was there . . . going there opened more doors. I met a counselor there who told me, “You know what? You need to go to the Multicultural Student Union, to learn about other groups.” And it was there that I connected with Mujeres, with Chicano Student Union, and with other groups from different cultures. (Entrevista 4, female, year unknown, transfer student)

El Centro de Apoyo Académico (ASC, English) aprendí de eso y me gustó que era un lugar a donde la gente podía ir, y los estudiantes podían ir y tener un lugar donde se sentían un poquito más apoyado o más, más comodo con la gente que estaba ahí. No se sentían tan extranjeros en la universidad.

The Academic Support Center, I learned about it and I liked that it was a place where people could go, and students could go and have a place where they felt a little more supported or more, more comfortable with the people who were there. They didn't feel so much like strangers at the university. (Entrevista 6, year unknown)

A takeaway from this theme is that while students reported that there were supportive faculty and staff on campus, they were not always easy to find or access (Salas et al., 2014). In addition, there was a prevailing idea that *all* faculty and staff need to be sensitive to the needs of underrepresented Latina/o students, not only faculty who themselves identify as minorities. This is further discussed in the next section.

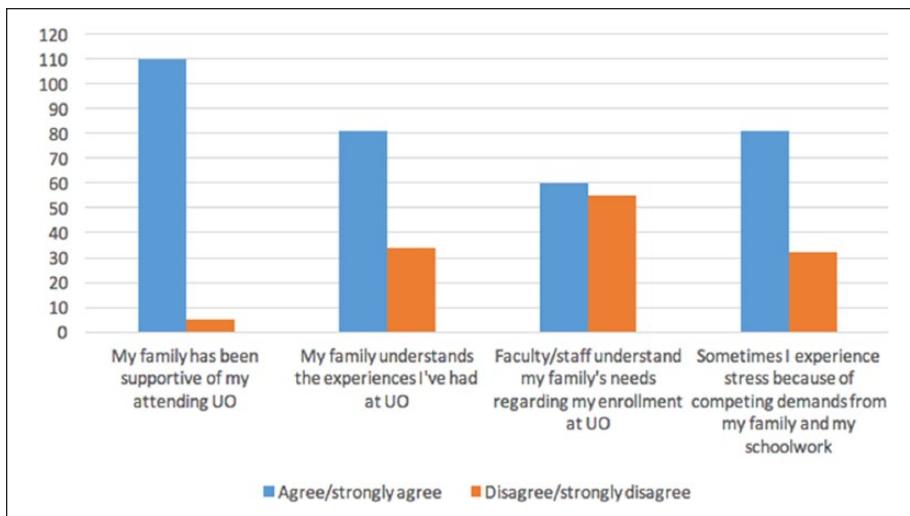


Figure 4. Survey results related to pull factors.

Pull Factors

Theme 3: The need for cultural competence among faculty and staff. Another major component of the SEM is what Nora (2003) called “pre-college and pull factors.” These factors are those that might affect a student’s decision to remain enrolled in higher education, and they include concerns such as caring for family members, working off campus, or commuting instead of living on campus. Nora and others (Hernandez, 2002; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Nora & Crisp, 2012) have noted that students who have family responsibilities or work off campus have more difficulty integrating socially and academically, and are more likely to withdraw from universities.

In the present study, we examined various pull factors that could negatively affect Latina/o student success at this state university, including the role of family in their experiences. In addition, we considered the possibility that a strong orientation toward family (*familismo*) could be an asset rather than a negative pull factor (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Therefore, the first question we asked related to this issue was whether students felt that their families had been supportive of their decision to attend this university. The survey results were overwhelmingly positive, with 96% agreeing/strongly agreeing (see Figure 4). In interviews, students also noted the critical role family support contributed to feelings of confidence that they could be successful. The following examples are representative of interview comments:

My parents are actually very supportive. 100% supportive, uh, they help me financially, they help me with moral support, that, like I can call them and talk to them about my troubles, or anything like that. (Interview 10, male, first-year student)

Like I remember the first day moving into the dorms, when they pulled away the first time, I was like this feeling that my heart was in two places. I've really wanted to be here, but they were leaving but you know . . . my mom had her little thing when she sent me the (name of university) goodies, just like shoes and pillows and stuff to kind of reminding me "Here is your focus," you know, you are at college, I'm like "OK." And, like . . . I don't know when I go home, they understand I do homework even though they don't want me to be doing it. But I feel really bad, they want attention too. Balancing that it's kind of hard, (but) she was very supportive and very willing to give a lot of advice, which is nice. And, I mean, I can't think of any way where my family could have been more supporting of me going. (Interview 8, female, junior)

On the contrary, when students were asked about whether they felt that their parents and other family members understood the expectations they faced at the university, responses were more mixed. Only 70% felt that their families understood the experiences they have had, while 30% felt that they did not. When students were asked about how well they thought university faculty and staff understood their families' needs, positive results were even lower. Slightly more than half of participants (52%) agreed/strongly agreed that "faculty/staff understand my family's needs regarding my enrollment," with 48% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. Students felt that in many cases faculty and staff did not know—nor did they try to find out—what pull factors might make social and academic engagement challenging for them. Thus, while they may have felt academically supported, they did not necessarily feel emotionally supported or understood. In particular, participants noted the conflicting expectations of family and university personnel about what they should prioritize or what responsibilities they should take on. On one side, family expectations caused stress for some students:

Both of my parents fully support me, but as you know, there is the días, "Why are you going so far away?" it's just really the distance of like "You could be going to this school down the street, but you are going all the way to name of state." (Interview 2, female, year unknown)

Mi mamá me dice que entonces por qué vengo a la universidad, mi abuelita me decía por qué tanto estudio . . . que quiero ser licenciada, "por qué ocho años? Mejor una carrera cortita y cásate con niños."

My mom asked me why I am going to university, my grandma asked me why I study so much . . . it's that I want to be a lawyer, "Why eight years? Better a short career, so you can get married and have kids." (Entrevista 5, female senior, transfer student)

On the contrary, faculty and staff expectations felt burdensome for some students. These expectations were related not only to academics but also to socioeconomic class and status as nontraditional, working students:

Yo siempre he tenido que ayudar a mi mamá con los papeles del gobierno, con . . . o sea, no sé, yo he tenido que traducir, he tenido que ser intérprete en las citas, en todo eso,

entonces yo a veces voy a la casa . . . eh ayudo con eso de negocios. Me imagino que los demás no tienen que hacer esas cosas y su fam . . . sus padres saben muy bien el inglés, pues yo siento que a lo mejor muchos Latinos tienen una responsabilidad más como los, este, hablantes principales de la familia.

I've always had to help my mom with papers from the government, with, oh, I don't know, I've had to translate, I've had to be an interpreter at appointments, and all that, so sometimes I go home to help with those transactions. I imagine that others don't have to do those things, that their parents know English very well, so I feel that probably a lot of Latinos have this responsibility more than, of being the principal speakers for their family. (Entrevista 5, female, senior, transfer student)

Me gustaría que los profesores y los consejeros entiendan de que, es difícil cuando tienen una clase de 500, pero de que no todos venimos eh, de una familia donde, eh, esto ha sido algo . . . que conocen el sistema, que conocen cómo es la vida universitaria, que hay gente que viene de . . . que los padres ni fueron a la secundaria, entonces que a alguna gente le va a hacer falta un poquito más de ayuda; que no es solamente tirarlos a la piletta que naden solos. Hay que ayudarlos un poco más porque no tienen ese apoyo o esa situación familiar que es lo mismo que tienen otros estudiantes.

I wish that professors and counselors would understand, it's difficult when they have a class of 500, but that not all of us come from a family where that has been something . . . that knows the system, that understands what university life is like, that there are people who come from . . . whose parents didn't go to high school, so some people are going to need a little bit more support; that it's not just about throwing them in the pool and letting them swim alone. They need to help them a little more because they don't have this support or family situation that other students do. (Entrevista 6, male, year unknown)

They kind of take for granted that anybody who is at college, comes from middle class, upper middle class, that kind of background and they kind of tailor some discussions around that assumption and, I don't know, I feel like maybe, some professors should be more aware that there are people from all socioeconomic background here. And, you know, there is much that one way to get to college, so, I mean that hasn't happened a lot, but I remember one class, it was particularly rough, I was kind of looking at the professor like "Do you realize that these people you are talking about with that, you know, derogatory sense, I was those people . . . I grew up in a trailer." (Interview 8, female, junior)

This final issue was one that students were clearly passionate about, and their comments speak to the critical need for all faculty and staff at public PWI to have more nuanced understandings about the students they serve. They need to exhibit true cultural competence that goes beyond just celebrating the presence of Latina/o students on campus.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the experiences of self-identified Latina/o undergraduates at a midsized flagship state university, with particular emphasis on

their participation in on-campus clubs and organizations and their relationships with faculty and staff. We used the SEM (Nora, 2003) as an explanatory framework to examine key factors that might influence the success of Latina/o students on this campus. These factors were indeed salient for participants in this study, and students raised issues related to them in both the surveys and the interviews.

Overall, students who participated in this study felt positive about their academic and social experiences at the university, and a large majority felt confident about their academic abilities, which echoes previous research (González & Ting, 2008). In many cases, students found supportive faculty and staff when needed, but they also highlighted the need for more comprehensive supports to facilitate social and academic integration (Salas et al., 2014). In addition to better opportunities to meet other Latinas/os and build relationships with faculty and staff of color, they pointed to the need for structural changes that would shift perceptions about nontraditional students from underrepresented groups throughout the institution (Nora, 2003).

One way that universities like the one in the present study have attempted to create a sense of belonging for underrepresented students has been to sponsor ethnically oriented clubs and organizations. For some students, these clubs provide a safe space for identity development and cultural affirmation. Some have even suggested that having close relationships with peers who share similar experiences can foster the creation of “academic families” that mirror sibling relationships and recreate a sense of *familismo* for Latinas/os far from home (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007); however, our findings shed an interesting light on the role of these Latina/o-focused groups in the lives of our participants. Like González and Ting (2008), we found that a majority of students did not personally get involved in such groups, despite the fact that a high percentage thought it was important to do so. They suggested several possible reasons for this lack of participation, including the “developmental readiness of 18 to 22 year olds to make a behavioral commitment related to ethnic identity, or internal struggle with the meaning of one’s identity in the context of a White majority culture” (p. 208). Our findings do indeed suggest that some students felt uncomfortable with the definition of “Latina/o” that they perceived to be held by members of Chicano Student Union in particular. They felt a lack of inclusivity that could be problematic on a campus with such a small number of Latina/o students. As one participant observed, “*los Latinos no somos muy unidos, entonces eh . . . eso, lo hace mucho más difícil*” (The Latinos, we’re not very united, so that makes it much more difficult, Entrevista 4).

Another possible reason for low levels of participation among participants in this study is that pan-ethnic Latina/o groups may not be perceived as relevant or welcoming to those who identify with specific countries of origin. In the present study, only a quarter of students self-identified primarily as Latina/o, while almost half primarily identified as Mexican or Mexican American, and the final quarter as Hispanic or Chicana/o. This diversity requires an acknowledgment that Latinas/os are not a monolithic group (González & Ting, 2008; Jones-Correa & Leal, 1996), and complicates universities’ efforts to serve the increasingly diverse student populations that are enrolling every year.

It should be noted, however, that for the small number of Latinas/os who chose to be active in ethnically oriented student organizations, the experience was meaningful, and most viewed it as a critical support for their successful persistence at this university. Thus, expanding the number and type of ethnically oriented clubs and organizations may enable more students to engage productively, and create the spaces for cultural affirmation and development they desire.

In terms of interactions with faculty and staff, several students highlighted the invaluable services provided by the ASC on this campus. Through advising, mentoring, and cultural programming, this center connected students to caring faculty and staff and services related to academics as well as emotional and cultural needs. For some students, it was one of the few places on campus where they felt truly supported. One implication, therefore, is the need for universities to build on existing strengths like the ASC, and to make them visible to students as soon as they enroll in the university. A way to do this would be to engage staff from such centers as cofacilitators of orientation sessions held for all incoming freshmen and transfer students.

The final major finding of this study was that students expressed strong opinions about the need for *all* faculty and staff on campus to have increased levels of cultural competence. This awareness should relate not only to the ethnicity of students but also to their experiences as nondominant, often nontraditional students. For example, understanding how the needs of transfer students or those who work off campus may differ from those who live and work on campus is essential (Arana et al., 2011). Faculty and staff need to exercise flexibility when working with such students (Urbina & Wright, 2015). There is also a need for faculty and staff to view these students as part of communities and families rather than as individuals (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). As one student noted, “*no es el hijo solo o la hija sola en la universidad, es la familia entera que está yendo a la universidad*” (It’s not only the son or daughter at the university, it’s the entire family who is going to university, Entrevista 6). Universities should therefore engage families in conversations about the expectations of the university, in addition to listening to families explain their expectations for their children as members of Latina/o families and communities.

In addition to these implications for university administrators, faculty, and staff, there are fruitful areas for future research addressing these issues. For example, in the present study we did not investigate Latina/o students’ academic achievement or outcomes, but it would be interesting to consider how engagement in particular types of clubs or organizations contributes to their academic development and persistence decisions. In addition, further qualitative research should consider the specific reasons why students choose to be involved (or not be involved) in ethnically oriented clubs, and what they perceive as specific barriers to developing mentoring relationships with faculty and staff. Future research could also investigate the perceptions of faculty and staff at PWI about Latina/o, nontraditional students to better understand their expectations of such students, and the steps they are currently taking to meet the needs of those students.

This study presents a quantitative and qualitative examination of the experiences of Latina/o students at a state flagship university, a notable contribution to the literature

on this growing population (Crisp et al., 2015; Nora & Crisp, 2012). As the number of Latinas/os grows in the United States, the number of Latina/o university students will also continue to grow. Given the low retention rates and well-known difficulties they encounter on many campuses, it is critical to understand the factors that influence their success (Nora, 2003). The present study is a small, exploratory step toward this goal. Despite its value, we recognize that there are also limitations: For one, “involvement” was not defined on the survey, so respondents could interpret it however they wanted. Some students may have considered themselves to be involved even if they had attended only one event, while others may only have considered themselves involved if they regularly attended meetings or served in a leadership role. A second limitation was that the number of self-identified Latinas/os who responded to the survey was low, representing only about 10% of the Latina/o student population on this campus. This is an issue to consider moving forward, as the experiences of those who responded to the survey may not be representative of all Latina/o students. It is possible that those who voluntarily responded are also more engaged in university life overall. It is also likely that those who responded have stronger opinions about the issues we were investigating than their classmates who did not. These possibilities should be considered when interpreting our findings.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The Center for Latino/a & Latin American Studies provided financial support for the research of this article.

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