

SI SE PUEDE APOYAR: HOW SUPPORT FROM HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS CAN AFFECT UNDERGRADUATE LATINX WOMXN IN THEIR IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND COLLEGE COMPLETION

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence and impact of support from higher education professionals on Latinx womxn-identifying students' identity development and college completion. An analysis of current literature allows for an understanding of the different categories of support that Latinx womxn can benefit from and that currently exist. This paper goes a step further by engaging in qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with Latinx womxn at a variety of institution types to further gather data on their college experiences and how they feel support, or the lack thereof, from higher education professionals. This paper provides recommendations and potential solutions that higher education professionals in any functional area can effectively implement to better support Latinx womxn at the university level.

Introduction

Many studies confirm that Latinas are enrolling in higher education (at both the two and four-year institution types) in record numbers, yet the college completion rate for Latina (womxn identifying) students is still significantly lower than other racial/ethnic groups (Field, 2018). In our current social and political climate, Hispanic/Latinx people are being further marginalized in many aspects of everyday life. Whether it is through the educational sphere with threats to the DACA program, or through gun violence in El Paso, Texas, or exacerbating the hate speech and rhetoric against this community, there should be a call to engage in more support for Latinx students. Under the umbrella of Latinx students, Latinas specifically have a larger college completion gap than their male counterparts (Gándara, 2015). If higher education professionals focus on becoming more intentional in their support for Latinx womxn on college campuses at the undergraduate level, they can in turn influence the college completion for this specific student population as well as improve and better support their identity development. There exists a limited amount of research on supporting Latinx womxn's development and college completion, which this paper aims to address.

This gap in the research is important to address because it demonstrates a need to go beyond this white paper and determine how Latinx womxn can be supported through their college experiences. It is also necessary to study this in order to learn ways that can lead to increases in their completion of college and help them gain a further understanding of their own Latinidad. This is also important to study because while incoming student populations are becoming increasingly diverse, the field of higher education in reference to faculty, staff, and administrators remains largely representative of society's dominant groups (i.e., white, high socioeconomic status, male). Due to this disparity, it is imperative for all higher education professionals learn how to support those students of marginalized populations and engage in allyship. Latinx womxn are one of the largest populations of students entering college, so the need to support them must be prioritized (Gándara, 2015). In the new generation now entering college, students are not only more diverse than ever before, but they are also more socially conscious. This means that student affairs professionals have not only an opportunity but also a duty to enrich the experiences of Latinx womxn on campus. For this paper specifically, it is important to establish the terminology usage. Here, "Latinx womxn" and "Latinas" are terms used interchangeably for comprehension purposes of this paper. Furthermore, the term *Latinidad* is defined as "a scale shifting identification, place specific, and has ramifications for national, transnational, hemispheric, and even global modalities of belonging" (Carranza, Garcia-Castro, & Hernandez, 2017, p.3).

Literature Review

Fostering more support and research around college completion for Latinx womxn is a critical and growing issue within higher education. The Hispanic/Latinx community is estimated to become the largest minority group in the United States by 2060, and the gap in the number of Latinx students completing their coursework to graduate with a college degree is actually increasing (Barshay, 2019). In fact, less than a third of all Latinx students in 2009 took the appropriate classes to enroll in four-year institutions (California Postsecondary Education

Commission, 2014). Latino students are therefore less likely than their peers to be college-ready. Another central issue is the fact that Latino students are more likely to enroll in college as part-time students, which lengthens their time to degree and reduces their likelihood of graduating. In October 2011, only 78% of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-old college students were enrolled full time. By comparison, 85% of similar white students were enrolled full time. At the same time, Latinos are becoming the largest minority group seeking postsecondary options (Contreras, 2015). The Latinx population has steadily grown across the country and within higher education. However, it is important to acknowledge that the persistence rates of Latinx students (while higher than other groups in some cases) do not translate into college completion rates (Contreras, 2015). Higher education professionals should work to be more aware of this fact and adjust their practices in order to better support the development of Latina students through different campus resources.

Latinx communities comprise 17% of the population in the United States, a significant increase from only 6% in the 1980s. In 2015, 67% of Latinx students enrolled in college right after high school as compared to 49% in 2000 (Cuellar, 2018). In creating more inclusive environments and promoting student success, institutions should consider how to support the holistic needs of Latinx students according to intersectional experiences. As Latinx women now outnumber Latinx men on most campuses, their needs also differ. Designing leadership programs that provide students a space to make sense of their experiences can generate engagement and enhance success (Cuellar, 2018). While the research on Latinx womxn specifically in higher education is slim, there are still some important statistics that contextualize their experiences. For example, in 2013, almost 19% of Latinas between 25 and 29 years of age had completed a degree, compared to 23% of African American women, 44% of white women, and 64% of Asian women (Gándara, 2015). In addition to the gaps between other racial/ethnic groups of women, there are also even larger gaps with their Latinx male counterparts. Latinas are graduating from high school at higher rates than Latinos and have made significant progress in a number of areas of education over the last decade (Gándara, 2015). While they comprise a growing percentage of incoming college students, Latinas are still often overlooked. This information should prompt more research in the field regarding how to better support Latinx women on college campuses and how a focus on their student development can increase their college completion.

It is important to consider that racial or ethnic minority students have a higher probability of leaving postsecondary education than ethnic majority students. This gap has long term effects that could be detrimental to individuals' long-term social mobility (Carter, n.d.). Latinas strongly feel this gap because they fall within an ethnic minority group that experiences struggle in persisting and has low overall college completion rates.

Most research and literature on how to support Latinx womxn in completing higher education is grouped into solutions for the general Latinx population. This is relevant to mention because it further emphasizes the lack of solutions that are designed specifically for Latinx womxn. One major solution involves a focus on leadership engagement opportunities for Latinx students. The literature shows that connecting Latinx students with leadership opportunities on campus will increase their engagement and sense of belonging, thus driving them toward completion (Gándara, 2015). Leadership is an essential component in accelerating Latino college completion (Cuozzo & Santiago, 2018). Incorporating leadership elements into the roles that Latinx students will gravitate toward (like work-study positions) can enable them to gain leadership skills (Contreras, 2015).

SI SE PUEDE APOYAR

An additional category of support from the research that is generalized to students of color but can be applied by extension to Latinx womxn is a focus of support through mentoring relationships. In a 2017 study by Courtney Luedke, students gained rich social capital in their relationships with staff and administrators of color who valued students' backgrounds and supported them holistically and authentically. Mentors were able to maintain complete honesty in all circumstances with students of color and made themselves available at all times. Students also acquired cultural capital through the social capital established in these relationships (Luedke, 2017). The value of gaining this social and cultural capital can provide spaces for students to grow in their leadership and use this capital to persist and then complete college. More specific ways that staff and faculty can do this is through strategizing ways to help students overcome obstacles throughout college by also sharing cultural capital about campus resources such as tutoring or scholarships. Students in this study emphasized that mentors gave them feedback, both positive and constructive, that would help them be more successful as undergraduates (Luedke, 2017).

The other realm of support that higher education professionals can provide for Latinx womxn is the diversification of faculty and staff on campus. This task requires a more systemic approach and can be more effectively achieved from an institutional or higher-level administrator role. There are also avenues for professionals at any level to better support Latinx womxn students. When leaders build trust and engagement within the Latino community, they not only increase the likelihood of college completion, but they create a culture of shared responsibility among Latino college students and the institutions that serve them (Cuozzo & Santiago, 2018). Latino faculty play a critical role in Latino student retention and climate on college campuses. According to a qualitative study by Frances Contreras (2015), Latinos and faculty of color are more likely to mentor students of color and provide direct research experiences. Increasing Latino administrators and leaders would help support the void in leaders who possess cultural awareness and direct experience in working with Latino communities (Contreras, 2015). With faculty and staff creating intentional mentoring relationships with Latinx womxn students, the students can feel empowered to complete college because they feel they have the support they need. These support networks can manifest not only through mentoring, as previously mentioned, but also by access and student-facing interactions with campus leaders, administrators, and professors who are representative of underserved populations, like Latinx students (Field, 2018).

While leadership development and overall support of undergraduate Latinas can take many shapes and sizes, the three outlined here are the most pivotal, based on the small amount of existing research already or currently being done. Transforming and providing better support systems for Latinas on college campuses through a variety of forms including leadership development, mentoring, and diversifying faculty/staff will help drive them to college completion. In pockets across the country, institutions are adding Latino leadership programs, hiring more diverse faculty, and expanding their cultural programming to achieve this goal, and more institutions should be working toward the same vision (Field, 2018).

Methods and Analysis

There is a lack of research that exists for Latinx womxn-identifying undergraduate level students, specifically in reference to their student development and how student affairs professionals can better support them. Because of this, recommendations on this specific issue were drafted after conducting a series of qualitative interviews with Latinx womxn-identifying students at a variety of public and private four-year institutions (not including community college or technical colleges). A total of six interviews were conducted across three types of institutions (small private, medium private, and large public) with female students that identified as both Latinx and as womxn. While much of their experiences can be considered unique and individualized based on a variety of factors, the semi-structured interview format and questions allowed for deep reflection and rich answers that revealed themes across all interviews and were in connection to their gender and ethnic identities. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A. The questions were developed from the main three categories of support established in the literature: diversification of faculty and staff, providing leadership opportunities, and creating mentoring relationships. There were three main objectives for the interviews:

- To gain insight on how support through leadership engagement and opportunities, both formal and informal, have influenced Latina identity development.
- To better understand how the support of faculty and staff and the diverse representation of faculty and staff affect Latina students during their undergraduate experience.
- To analyze the impact of mentoring relationships for Latina women at the undergraduate level.

The major themes found across all of the interviews are as follows:

Theme 1: Importance of Long-Term Institutional Change

Most if not all of the interviewees intentionally identified and discussed the lack of institutional support they feel. By recognizing that students can identify when institutions do not seem to care about their development or identities as Latinx womxn, higher education professionals can be better aware of the importance of advocating for students' needs, as well as intensify the support given to Latinx womxn on an individual basis. Student affairs professionals should understand that there is a necessity to create programs that educate and enhance the visibility of the community in the long term. The focus of even creating the potential of opportunities for these students makes a world of a difference for them.

One student, Samantha, said that she felt extremely unsupported by her university (medium private) as a whole, and added that the institution "doesn't focus on the importance of Latin or Hispanic culture for students here, and they make a lot of statements but there is no active reach out or questions from them about what we need from the university or what we value." Samantha also said that the university "cares that its students are happy so will always make changes that will 'appease' their students but they don't seem open to institutionalized change and bigger efforts," which emphasizes the importance of intentionality for these students in the support provided.

Another student, Anabelle, talked about her experience of living on campus as a Latinx womxn at a small private university. She felt a lack of support from housing staff and felt it was

SI SE PUEDE APOYAR

proven when “three out of five Latinas on my floor had transferred by the end of the year because it was too hard to adjust.” When asked about specific faculty or staff that supported them, most interviewees mentioned the different cultural and social justice centers on campus that had staff of color who really understood them. This aspect helped them have a better relationship with the institution itself. For example, one of the womxn, Ashley, said, “I feel like I am the best version of myself, in growth, if I think about my entire life, I feel like I'm thriving with the way I feel inside because of places like the [cultural center].” Feeling institutional support as “individualized and focused attention,” as Ashley phrased it, helps these students feel positively toward their institutions and the help they can be provided.

Theme 2: Identity Development of Self through Engagement Opportunities

Many of the interviewees indirectly focused on the impact of imposter syndrome experiences on their identity development. As women of color, many Latinas experienced difficulty adjusting to life in a college classroom because they often felt like they “were not good enough” or “didn’t deserve to be there.” This is an important point to emphasize because the relationship between imposter syndrome feelings and the ethnic identity of being Latinx seems to be complicated and often times negatively impacts the student experience. For example, at least three of the Latinas interviewed mentioned that it was difficult to seek help when they had trouble in the classroom, because growing up in Latinx culturally traditional homes, they were taught to “figure it out [themselves]” and, even more so, were conditioned that it was a “privilege to go to college, and you were lucky to be there in the first place.” Asking for help from resources on campus like tutoring, office hours, or even potential outside leadership or engagement opportunities were all concepts far out of reach for these womxn.

As mentioned previously, having Latinx womxn in staff and faculty positions provided the interviewees with positive experiences that helped them overcome imposter syndrome, learn how to ask for help, and arguably most importantly, understand the strength and power that comes from their Latinx culture and identity as womxn. One of the Latinas interviewed, Daniela, said that leadership has helped her in “endless ways . . . and taught me about team dynamics, and communication with your team, understanding structures and hierarchies, communication, decision-making and responsibility.” Providing unique forms of engagement during the undergraduate experience became one of the main pillars (and in some cases the only one) where Latinas felt unconditionally supported in their growth, self-discovery, and awareness of their Latinidad.

Theme 3: Uplifting and Amplifying the Voices of Latinx Womxn Individuals

The interviews conducted provided further insight into how Latinas conceptualize mentoring. The literature and research in higher education surrounding mentoring in general is very broad. However, the importance of mentoring for Latinx womxn is much less discussed. Due to this, a section of each interview was dedicated to further understanding how mentoring is defined by Latinx womxn. One of the main takeaways from the interviews was that “soft” mentoring can often take form in simply seeing Latinas in leadership roles on campus. Samantha mentioned, “Seeing Latinas in staff and faculty, seeing someone that looked like me has been very inspiring for me.” Anabelle said, “I’ve gained mentorship from my Latinx advisors for my student organization, mostly because I feel like they understand and value my identity.”

Several students also mentioned more individualized and “focused” mentoring from their peers. Two students talked about the seniors who guided them through their freshman and

sophomore years. Ashley shared, “I developed relationships where they brought me into circles where I could connect with other people of color and Latinx people.” Other students felt similarly and mentioned that their experiences were made by peer mentors they could look up to and lean on in times where they felt lost during undergraduate aspects like academics, co-curricular experiences, or family/personal/social life. Samantha emphasized, “Most people on the executive board [of a student organization], especially the people that were older than me, really took me in.” She elaborated on how the mentorship she gained from an upper-class Latina helped her pursue leadership opportunities within student organizations. This example was mirrored in other interviews and also aligns with the Latinx cultural norm of uplifting community in unique ways. This uplifting and amplifying of community needs is a staple of Latinx womxn, and understanding, valuing, and connecting with this aspect is a first step in creating a better foundation of support for them at an institutional level.

Limitations

While these recommendations can be implemented immediately on college campuses, there are some limitations to acknowledge within this white paper. There is always room for more research to be done and to continue expanding recommendations for supporting Latinx womxn on four-year college campuses. One such limitation is the lack of Afro-Latinx representation in the interviews. This is a specific population that requires attention and care, and can arguably be an entirely other sector of research. Additionally, some might say that therepresentation of community college attendance and HSI attendance is lacking; however, it is important to emphasize the goal of this paper is to assess how to close the college completion gap at four-year institutions that have historically left out marginalized populations – specifically the identity of Latinx womxn. The elements of other institution types are another area of research that could be expanded on when studying the Latinx population as a whole. This also brings in the limitation of acknowledging intersectionality. Researcher Collins explains that the term intersectionality references “the critical insight that [identities such as] race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, etc. operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p#). The semi-structured format of the interviews helped students organically add and discuss intersecting identities with their Latinidad; however, not all of these are addressed and they are not specifically incorporated into the interview format. Furthermore, the literature and research often study the general Latinx population of students and will also ignore these intersecting identities because the discussion around these can be so broad. Ultimately, there needs to be a general push in the field of higher education for research studies and data collection on Latinx womxn.

Recommendations for Action

The literature that currently exists on supporting the Latinx population of students at the undergraduate level is helpful, but there is more to be done. It was important for purposes of this paper to combine existing literature with the qualitative study on current Latinx womxn students

to fill a current gap in the literature. When analyzing both of these elements, there are three major recommendations that can serve as potential solutions that higher education professionals at any level can enact in the short- and long-term within their respective institutions. These three recommendations fall under the categories of support previously mentioned.

Recommendation 1: Staff and faculty diversification infused with cultural competence

The first recommendation calls for the diversification of faculty and staff members infused with cultural competency trainings. A reality of the field of higher education both at the faculty and student affairs levels is that change and diversification can happen slowly. Most graduate-level programs focused on some aspect of higher education administration are predominantly white in reference to faculty, staff, students and curriculum. This is also true at the graduate and doctoral level for many advanced degree programs. Studies show that 59% of students who get a Master's degree are white, and that number increases to 62% at the doctoral level. The numbers and percentages only increase when looking at the majority-white professionals who hold faculty roles (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Higher education programs may be diversifying, but not even remotely close to the rate that Latinas are enrolling and entering college at the undergraduate level. Due to this trend, it is important for professionals and institutions to prioritize diversification of faculty and staff and at the same time work to infuse cultural competence, awareness, and understanding into the existing professional sphere.

This cultural competence can be achieved by keeping diversity at the forefront of institutional initiatives. For example, making sure that faculty engage in cultural competency training is an important step. Having these trainings include lessons that are hyper focused on specific identities that are enrolling in large numbers, like that of Latinas, is another example. Staff and other higher education professionals should also engage in cultural competency training. Student affairs professionals can work to plan initiatives for all campus stakeholders that aim to celebrate cultural heritage and thus bring awareness to how Latinas can be better supported on campus. An example of this would be celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month through intentional programming and educational components that allow for the larger campus community to learn about the Latinx population and who they are not only on campus but off campus as well. With a better understanding of identity will come a better understanding, awareness, and effort to support Latinas, which could then improve persistence and completion.

Recommendation 2: Leadership opportunities focused on imposter syndrome management

The second recommendation is for higher education professionals to provide leadership opportunities focused on imposter syndrome management. Based on the findings from the qualitative interviews, a common theme among Latinas is the experience of imposter syndrome, especially in the classroom. These feelings often occur because of the lack of representation in the classroom and other spheres and because of their upbringing, specific educational backgrounds, or a mixture of these elements. Providing a variety of ways for Latinas to challenge their own imposter syndrome and feel empowered to overcome this obstacle means that diverse leadership opportunities are necessary. These must be engaging, enriching, and include educational components for Latinas to understand where imposter syndrome comes from and connect with their identity as Latinas to overcome self-doubt and become confident in their leadership and other abilities.

A concrete example of this can be a womxn of color leadership series. Having specific leadership sessions that help womxn of color enhance their skills and manage imposter

syndrome, while at the same time building community with one another, can directly support Latina womxn toward college completion. This example is important because institutions often claim they do not have the resources or funds to create a program specifically for the Latinx or Latina population. By merging these leadership engagement ideas with other groups of womxn that can foster allyship with Latinas, there is a huge opportunity to establish a positive, ally-oriented support system for Latinx womxn.

Recommendation 3: Create cross-communication and multi-level peer mentoring networks

The last major recommendation is for higher education professionals to intentionally create cross-communication and multi-level peer mentoring networks for Latinas on campus. There are a multitude of ways for professionals to do this, and it is important to identify the positionality and sphere of influence that higher education professionals hold to effectively create these networks. Based on the literature and this paper's qualitative study, Latinx womxn students are already organically working to create mentoring relationships with their peers. Higher education professionals in student affairs can take on roles like that of student organization advisors or programming coordinators to intentionally create and strengthen these networks for Latinas.

Of course, it is easiest for professionals to incorporate these practices if they already have these roles embedded within their job descriptions. However, student affairs professionals that do not have these specific roles can also work to create multi-level networks by becoming mentors themselves or connecting other professionals with students they see every day. Again, it is important to emphasize that this recommendation, like any other, should be implemented by all higher education professionals and not just those who hold the same identities as Latinx womxn. Many interviewees mentioned that they felt mentorship when they believed a staff or faculty member valued, connected with, or appreciated their identity. This is something that all higher education professionals at any level can work to implement into their professional philosophy. Centering mentorship as part of student advising—whether that be in academic or student organization advising—can help to create a solid foundation of support for Latinx womxn in all different functional areas of higher education.

Discussion and Conclusion

Latinx womxn are entering college at a higher rate than many of their counterparts in reference to race/ethnicity, gender, and other overlapping identities. However, the research and literature show that they are not completing college at the same rates. While more research is needed to interpret these statistics, there is a need within the field of higher education for professionals at all levels to engage more intentionality in supporting Latinx womxn at the college/university level. If higher education professionals can enact these recommendations on their respective campuses, the gap in Latinx womxn graduating from the university level may begin to shorten. After a close analysis into the different categories of support that have already been studied, the recommendations presented go one step further with added context from a set of qualitative interviews to present solutions that are inclusive and understanding of the unique experiences of Latin womxn.

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SI SE PUEDE APOYAR

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Support in Leadership/Engagement Opportunities

1. Please state your name, year, and list the different organizations you have had a formal or informal leadership position/experience with in your undergraduate career.
2. In what ways have you felt supported (or not supported) by your undergraduate university as you worked within these leadership roles?
3. How has your involvement in different organizations influenced your leadership development?
4. What was the extent of your understanding of your Latina identity when you first arrived at your undergraduate institution? What about at the end of your experience?

Support by Faculty/Staff

5. How would you describe your classroom experiences at the undergraduate level?
6. How would you describe your experiences living on campus at the undergraduate level?
7. In what ways, if any, did you feel your institution supported overall change in terms of support for the Latinx community?
8. Can you describe any times where you had faculty/staff that you interacted with who held similar identities to yours? How did that feel?
9. What resources have been especially helpful for you in your time as an undergraduate student leader?

Support through Mentoring Relationships

10. Were you able to find mentor(s) during your undergraduate experience that helped enhance your leadership skills?
11. What people, if any, have played a significant role, in shaping your undergraduate experience?
12. Do you think you have developed a better sense of who you are through your undergraduate leadership experiences and mentors?