

**Latin(x)periences: An Analysis of The Latina Experience In Higher Education
Mellon Public Humanities Grant**

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I. INTRODUCTION:

New data suggests that Latinos, are the fastest-growing minority group in the nation. The U.S Census Bureau estimates that the U.S Latino population has reached over 60 million in 2018. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Rapidly, Latinos are redefining the resemblance of the “American family” today across all mediums. Sociologists predict that by 2050, Latinos will be the largest represented demographic in the nation. (Pew Research Center, 2016). Although, with the rapid growth of the Latino population in the U.S, Latinos are critically behind by having the lowest national retention rate within any racial group.

With 1 in 5 women in the U.S identifying as Latina, it is critical to ensure academic success and invest in their post-secondary education. UCLA Professor of Education Patricia Gándara who served in the 2015 project *The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics*, accounts that Latinas are least likely out of all ethnic groups to complete a four-year degree. This alarming statistic calls attention to the faults in the U.S educational pipeline for academic success for Latinas. Data suggests that they are a multitude of factors in which it serves as a catalyst for low enrollment and retention rates especially within first-generation students enrolled at four-year universities. Common indicators such as social capital, cultural isolation, academic burnout, and family expectations contribute to the staggering statistics of low education completion among Latinas (Oyserman, 2011).

Research from *The National Conference of State Legislatures* (NSCL), indicates that the largest achievement gap is identified within New York State where only 32% of Latinos graduate from an accredited four-year university, compared to national statistics of 52% of Whites (NSCL,2014). Demonstrating the unequal distribution of educational attainment, gravely

impacting Latinas. With recent evidence suggesting that today more important than ever most entry-level jobs require a bachelor's degree, it is apparent that Latinas are placed in a financially vulnerable population than their White counterparts.

Based on the data presented, higher institutions need to be held accountable in fostering an environment for first-generation Latinas. In which it allows access for equitable opportunities on campus, as well as cultivates an environment to support Latinas and ensure full completion of a four-year degree. To facilitate the tools for educational access and opportunity, the university must acknowledge the cultural contingencies which greatly impact a majority of first-generation Latina students. Whereas it manifests in educational instruction, class and faculty representation, inclusion and engagement, and initiatives that serve this population.

II. CONCEPTS & KEY TERMS:

To further grasp the multiple contingencies that exist within the profile of a first-generation Latina student, it is critical to delineate the structures within the Latin(x) culture and community. This ensures a deeper understanding which could be effective in combating the risk of drop-out. Also, it is essential in designing an inclusive environment for students. One key concept presented among the Latin(x) community is *familisimo*. The notion that immediate family and paternal connections are highly valued within the community. Familismo could manifest in one's beliefs and attitudes in regards to education, financial status, relationships, and kinships, as well in gender roles (Esparaza, 2008). For many traditional Latin(x) families, this core concept is vital as it served as a method of survival for several generations.

The concept of survival and adaptation is a prevalent theme within Latin(x) communities, *cultural acculturation* is a process carried by most first-generation students. Latinas internally

process this concept as they pursue higher education when they balance and adapt to two different cultural environments (Pérez, 2008). This manifests with the use of language or “code-switching” or engagement with their culture on campus. This concept could activate *cultural isolation* within the student. *Cultural isolation* is an automated response to the reduced access of one's culture in their environment (Myers, 2019). Examples could include; lack of representation in the student body and faculty, lack of cultural engagement on campus, and lack of tools and resources in their native language (Schneider, 2012). *Cultural isolation* is detrimental to the student because it could exemplify social isolation when the student does not feel a sense of belonging on campus. Increasing the risk of discontinuing their education.

Social Capital is a key principle especially within Latinas because it holds the answers in cultivating relationships and establishing a network that allows educational attainment (Pérez, 2008). Family sociologists argue that *social capital* is sought after within Latin(x) communities as they see a positive correlation for social mobility and financial success within the U.S. In addition to *social capital*, *cultural relevance* is a fundamental concept when discussing educational attainment in first-generation Latinas. Studies have shown that first-generation students respond to educational materials when they see themselves reflected or they're able to establish a deeper connection.

III. BACKGROUND:

A common structure that is frequently found within a Latina's identity is a strong connection to one's family and cultural heritage. The sense of familismo is used as a safety net before embarking on one's journey to achieve higher-education (Esparaza, 2008). This net typically consists of immediate family members who embody the role of a protector in which they oversee one's decisions for their future. Family psychologist's outlines in her research the impacts of familismo as something positive, rather than authoritative. Stating "Theory suggests that familism may play a positive role in students' academic adjustment. Specifically, the theory of social capital sustains that the trust and interconnectedness that emerge from supportive social relations help foment a mutual sense of obligation and expectation between individuals. These bonds, in turn, encourage positive academic behaviors"(Esparaza, 2008, pg. 193).

Implying when there are close internal ties and a family that is working as a unit, it serves as a positive reinforcement on the student. Ideally, for most of a student's life up until college, the student is supported by their family, by establishing motivation to achieve higher education thus gaining social capital. These positive reinforcements are continuously integrated within their family dynamic and social participation. However, if the tie is broken due to family conflict or the student goes away for college, it critically impacts the student's academic success, whether emotionally, physically, or mentally. This phenomenon as Balacer suggests "First-generation students, often leaving their families behind, are often unprepared to cope with such change. This strife can often lead to disengaging from the college, which affects their ability to persist: "... Integration, or the degree of students' academic involvement on campus, both in and out of the

classroom, is significant in impacting persistence, transfer, and degree attainment” (Balacer, 2018).

Balacer suggests that first-generation students are especially vulnerable in the period of transition from a high school student to achieving higher academia, inflicting emotional and mental stress. Stressors such as being placed in a new environment, and not having the safety net of one's family can contribute to social isolation on campus. Balacer also reiterated a key point, “Latina/o first-generation college students are learning a new culture and language when considering going to college, not only because they are the first in their family to undergo a postsecondary educational experience, but because the culture of independence in higher education may be different from their cultural values. An important factor to consider is that Latino culture places a heavy emphasis on family and a collectivist mentality” (Balacer, 2018). Suggesting that first-generation students take on a double identity when they’re on campus, having to re-learn a different set of cultural values and expectations from which they have been accustomed to.

This phase of transition is often overlooked by the university, by not employing services that foster an environment where the administration could alleviate one's anxieties and emotions that a student may carry. (Reason, 2007). The inclusion of cultural programs and centers on campus can serve as positive experiences provoking a sense of acceptance on campus. By either culturally relevant programs targeted for the Latina demographic, it minimizes the likelihood of social isolation on the student.

Although according to a 2017 study only 11% of universities nationwide met the needs of their Latina population. (HSI, 2018) The study examined several parameters of diversity and

inclusion among college campuses and suggested that most universities failed to meet their expectations outlined in their mission statement. This failure implicitly isolates Latinas and prescribes an unsuccessful road in achieving their degree, however many persist. This persistence is fueled by expectations from their family which motivates the student to continue with their academic journey. Although, it may cause conflict when students seek emotional support from their family. It could be argued that “Students who are the first in their family to attend college may also face a lack of support from family members who have not experienced nor understand the problems students experience. Parents who have not attended college also may not understand that time pressures of college may interfere with the performance of family obligations”(Phinney, 2003, pg.716). Phinney suggests that first-generation students struggle in coping with this transition and it is further driven when they no longer have access to emotional support or tools provided by their family network or university.

These tools should be allocated by the university and designated for students who historically are at a much higher risk of not completing their degree. Physical spaces, mentorship programs, informational sessions, and digital tool-kits are essential for incoming university students. Personalizing these tools that are culturally relevant ensure higher rates for academic success and achievement.

IV. RESEARCH PROBLEM:

Hunter College's Office of Institutional Research reports in their 2018 FactBook that 23.8% of it's enrolled undergraduate students self-identify as Hispanic. It also reported that 64.8% of it's enrolled undergraduate students self-identify as female, from 2014-2018 both

statistics have steadily increased. (Hunter College, 2018) With less than a quarter of Hunter College's population identified as Hispanic, I was motivated to examine the Latina experience at Hunter College. The purpose of this assessment was to gauge the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate Latinas enrolled at Hunter College and its correlation to their engagement with Hunter College student services. In efforts to ensure their academic success and improve the overall experience at Hunter College.

For this investigation, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to measure the student's experience. Student's used a survey tool where they were able to anonymously describe their experiences at Hunter College using a psychometric scale, as well as answer to yes or no questions.

The following parameters included in the assessment:

1. The use of Hunter College's Resources (*EX: Libraries, Office of AccessABILITY, Tutoring Center, and Wellness Workshops*)
2. Academic Experience and Faculty Interaction
3. Personal Experience and Emotional Engagement On Campus

I outlined those parameters because I believe there could be a possible linkage of the utilization of the college's resources with overall satisfaction and experience. The goal of this assessment is to identify how can Latinas at Hunter College feel supported by its faculty and administration throughout their college career. As well as collect data that could serve as indicators of student satisfaction whilst complying with the college's values for student diversity and inclusion. With the end goal of fostering an environment in which enriches the student's education, and creates safe spaces for the student to cultivate a sense of belonging and cultural acceptance.

V. DATA COLLECTION & METHODS:

For this assessment, I utilized *Qualtrics*, a management and data collection software to conduct the assessment. The assessment itself was designed comprehensive enough to collect the participant's demographics, academic history, and experiences as well as any additional feedback. The user understood that this assessment was completely confidential and for research purposes. The gathering of data took place over a two-week period. The following data summarizes critical information gathered from the assessment.

Part 1: Demographics

- Age: **53%** of participants identified within the age group of 18-20 years old.
- Nationality: **62%** of participants identified themselves of Dominican origin or background.
- The language spoken at home: **90%** of participants speak Spanish at home.
- First Generation: **40%** of participants identified as a first-generation student.
- Highest Educational Attainment of Parent: **60%** of participants had at least one parent who completed a postgraduate degree.
- Enrollment: **85%** of participants are enrolled full time.
- Employment: **95%** of participants stated they work on campus or outside of campus.
- Transfer Status: **60%** of participants were previously enrolled in another higher institution before entering Hunter College.
- STEM Major: **75%** of participants pursue a degree within the STEM field.

Part 2: Utilization of Resources

- Office of AccessABILITY Services: **23%** of participants have used resources given by the office of AccessABILITY.
- Career Development Services (CDS): **40%** of participants have used CDS services.
- Personal Counseling Services: **12%** of participants have used personal counseling services.
- Wellness Workshops: **5%** of participants have attended a wellness workshop.
- Departmental Academic Services: **25%** of participants have seen a departmental advisor.
- Academic Support and Tutoring Services: **38%** of participants have used academic support and tutoring services on campus.

Part 3: Using the scale of (*Often, Sometimes, Never*) please respond to the following “I” statements:

I have visited the writing center during my time at Hunter College:

- **35%** of participants responded *sometimes*.

I have had difficulty in getting the courses I need:

- **60%** of participants responded *often*.

I have changed my major:

- **40%** of participants responded *sometimes*.

I feel my professors cared about my academic success:

- **55%** of participants responded *often*.

I feel represented at my school:

- **33%** of participants responded *sometimes*.

I feel respected by my peers inside the classroom:

- **85%** of participants responded *often*.

I was able to find clubs or support groups that suited my interests:

- **45%** of participants responded *sometimes*.

I feel overwhelmed with my course load:

- **72%** of participants responded *often*.

I know where I can get emotional support services on campus:

- **33%** of participants responded *never*.

I know where I can get financial support services on campus:

- **16%** of participants responded *sometimes*.

VII. ANALYSIS:

I was able to gather a substantial amount of evidence from the assessment indicating a positive correlation of the following themes and criteria across all respondents. Using methods of cross-tabulation the data illustrated:

1. It could be suggested that *low* use of academic services such as seeking assistance from a departmental advisor could lead to an *increased* likelihood of academic stress.
2. It could be suggested that students who are *less* likely aware of emotional support services on campus are *less* likely to attend personal wellness workshops and counseling.
3. It could be suggested that students who are *less* involved on campus, feel they're *less* likely to be represented on campus.
4. It could be suggested that students who have a parent that has achieved a bachelor's degree are more likely to seek out Career Development Services (CDS).

In particular, this data suggested evidence that overarching themes such as cultural engagement, academic burnout, family engagement, and persistence are relevant among this population sample. Correspondingly accurate to data gathered by sociologists from the past decade.

VIII. DISCUSSION :

From the results, one corresponding theme that emerged was the correlation of cultural engagement and representation on campus. There was a significant trend that most students who did not engage with student activities, clubs, or student government there more likely to feel isolated, underrepresented, and uninterested with campus life. Researchers have found that the first year of a student is critical as it shapes their college career. Noting “Although one might assume that students’ social and personal competence is shaped largely by their out-of-class activities, research reveals that changes in these areas are also attributable to the courses students

take, their experiences within their courses, and the academic majors they choose”(Reason, 2007, pg. 272). Participants in the study expressed that the lack of social interaction or establishing a kinship with other students affected their general attitudes of the college.

For first-generation students especially, a range of emotions emerges when attending school in their first year. Either excitement, fear for the academic and social pressures that can be internally or externally rooted. For most first-generation students, not having a paternal figure advising the student would also greatly affect their academic experience (Esparaza, 2008). It is valuable for a student to not navigate their first year alone as it could lead to academic stress and acute depression or anxiety (Esparaza, 2008).

Endorsing emotional support and counseling services that are accessible and intended specifically for Latinas are advantageous for students. Introducing these services before arrival would be useful for the student to transition into campus life. Not only is it critical to make aware of these services but having staff that represents this specific population as well. Research suggests having personnel that looks like the student would make the student feel more secure in their environment (Cooper, 2013). As well it would bridge a cultural gap that could be lacking in other areas in the student’s life on campus.

Having counselors that are familiar with one's culture could be utilized to the student's advantage. Studies have shown that having a common ground where a student can voice their concerns, frustrations, and emotions and be understood in its cultural context has a huge impact (Cooper, 2013). This bridge of connecting students with staff that represents them is also accurate within the classroom. Cultural relevance within the curriculum has proven successful among students of color (González, 2005). One study has shown how this cultural relevance

could go beyond the material, but incorporating language. Offering resources, materials, and academic spaces where the Spanish language is incorporated have demonstrated favorable results, especially among female STEM students (Stevenson, 2019). There has been evidence that “the Spanish language allows them to maintain communication with their families and communities, enabling them to participate in a set of interactions and relationships. These, in turn, form the support networks needed to enact resilience in overcoming obstacles to pursuing their interest in STEM—an interest seen by society as incongruous with their gender and ethnicity”. (Stevenson, 2019)

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS:

As an institution of higher learning, it is fundamental that equal access, opportunity, and engagement is embedded in its practice. Making it simple for Latinas to flourish in their academic career as well as contribute to their personal experiences (Ward, 2012). There are several ways that an institution such as Hunter college could serve the Latina population inside and outside of its campus. There are several methods to develop a course of action to provide the ultimate experience for incoming students or undergraduates. I have included below a five-fold plan to ensure the academic success for Latina students at Hunter College.

A. Invest In Cultural Spaces:

Allocate cultural spaces on campus catered to Latinas. These spaces could provide an enriching environment where students feel safe and accounted for. As well as serve as a location where workshops, club meetings, and panels could be held. Ideally, collaborating with the Africana and Puerto Rican/Latino Studies and the Women and Gender Studies Department at Hunter college it could be used as an asset in curating events exclusively for this population and increasing engagement.

B. Maintain Open Lines of Communication:

Inform students before coming to campus all the different resources that are available. A digital booklet or database that students could access can alleviate any anxieties they may have. This booklet could contain e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and a description of different types of programs and aid that are available on campus.

C. Mentorship:

A mentorship program that serves for all phases of a student's career. This program can be in partnership with CDS and alumni of the college. This encourages students to develop partnerships with one and other and maintain that strong sense of security and familial engagement that was previously highlighted in a family dynamic.

D. Transitional Programs and Family Engagement:

A transitional program catered for first-year students and transfer students that will allow for on-set participation on campus. This optional program could be a week-long program before entering the academic semester in which several activities, trips, seminars, or discussion groups could take place, to ease the transition. Highlights of the program can be sent to the student's family in the form of an E-blast in their preferred language to maintain family engagement and connection.

E. Institutional Assessment Tool:

An assessment tool is critical for the college to deploy each semester or annually. This allows the administration to gauge students and the college's performance in all areas as well as pinpoint which areas are needed for improvement. For each academic year, the college should access the help of faculty and staff a set of outcomes and goals for the incoming class.

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