

A Qualitative Exploration of the First-Year Experience of Latino College Students

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Although the impact of the first-year experience has been investigated, there is little information on what this experience is like for latino students particularly at predominantly white institutions. The primary purpose of this qualitative research study is to understand the first-year experience as recounted by 10 latino college students. The findings include four major themes. Implications for practice are discussed.

Latinos are one of the nation's fastest-growing populations (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1991); demographic projections report that latinos will become the major minority by 2005 ("Facts on Hispanic Higher Education," 2000). However, in spite of this overall growth in the general population, latinos continue to trail whites in terms of college participation rates. Only 27.5% of latino high school graduates ages 18–21 were enrolled in college in 1997 as compared to 46.1% for non-hispanic whites ("Facts on Hispanic Higher Education," 2000).

Tinto (1987) reported that the first year is a crucial period for students to get acclimated to the college environment. Upcraft, Gardner, and Associates (1989) cited "overwhelming evidence that student success is largely determined by experiences during the freshman year" (p. 1).

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Levitz and Noel (1989) described this time frame as a critical period for institutions to establish “a firm and positive relationship with the freshman” (p. 66). The increased presence of latinos in the general population and in higher education has created a pressing necessity to ensure a successful transition to college, particularly during the first year.

While satisfaction with early college experiences is important to students in general, it appears that students of color, particularly those attending predominantly white institutions, face additional challenges (Justiz & Rendon, 1989; Oliver, Rodriguez, & Mickelson, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Justiz and Rendon (1989) reported that many first-year latino students are the first in their family to attend college; may come from low-income households where Spanish is the primary spoken language; may be academically underprepared; and may combat feelings of isolation, especially at predominantly white institutions. How might these social conditions impact the first-year experience, particularly the educational expectations of first-year latino students?

In a study that examined the persistence of incoming black, Mexican American, and white freshmen students, Arbona and Novy (1990) reported that Mexican American students with greater educational expectations achieved higher first-year college grades. Tinto (1993) indicated that an important component of persistence is the willingness of students to work toward the attainment of their goals. Similarly, Astin (1975) reported that first-year college students who strived for a doctorate or professional degree were most likely to persist in college.

Arbona and Novy (1991) conducted a study to examine the differences and similarities between two subgroups of latino college students, specifically Mexican Americans and non-Mexican Americans. Among the various findings, the researchers reported that a large proportion of the students (68% of Mexican Americans and 78% of non-Mexican Americans) did not feel absolutely certain that they would obtain a college degree. Similarly, Malaney and Shively (1995), in a study of how student expectations changed from the beginning to the end of the first year in college, reported some disturbing results. latino students' expectations of graduating from the university were the highest for all ethnic groups (Asian American, black and white stu-

dents) in the fall survey; however, by the end of their first year those expectations plummeted to the lowest in the survey—the only significant drop for any of the four groups. It appears that latino students may become disillusioned with their university experience particularly during the course of their first year.

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Method

The present study was conducted through in-depth interviews using open-ended questions with participants. The interview method is a central data collection technique in qualitative research (Manning, 1992). The advantages to in-depth interviewing include the in-person contact with participants, the opportunity for the researcher to explore topics in depth, and the ability to experience the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of the participants' responses (Manning, 1992). Additionally, this method allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon from the participants' own perceptions, understandings, and cultural frame of reference.

Participants were selected for interviews using a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 1980); sampling in this manner does not seek representativeness or randomness as a goal. As such, it is important to remember that the data reported in this research study simply represent the voices of 10 students. The results are not intended to be viewed as representative of all latino students; it is an understanding of the lived experience as constructed by each participant.

Participants were selected from a group of students who were involved in a mentoring program for latino students at a large, predominantly white, public research university located in the mid-Atlantic United States. The presence of a visible latino population is a relatively recent development. As recently as 1975, latinos represented only 0.9% of the undergraduate enrollment. By fall 1997, there were 24,454 undergraduate students; 4.6% of these students were latino.

Ten participants were interviewed during the spring 1997 semester. There were five female and five male participants; they varied between 18–20 years of age. All 10 participants were enrolled full-time, had attended the university for two semesters, and were completing their first year of college. Six participants lived on campus and four commuted to school. Six participants reported working part-time, with the remaining participants indicating that they did not work. Four participants were born in mainland United States, two were born in Puerto Rico, three were born in Central America, and one participant was born in South America. Their ancestry was rooted in the following ethnic subgroups: three from Puerto Rico, two from El Salvador, two from Mexico, two from Nicaragua, and one from Peru. Eight of the participants grew up in suburban neighborhoods, while the remaining two came from an urban and rural background, respectively. Eight participants reported that Spanish was the primary language spoken in their home. All of the participants were U.S. citizens or permanent residents.

Data Analysis

All interview sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed into a written document to establish a permanent record of the interviews. Qualitative data analysis is inductive and utilizes small units of data to develop larger categories, patterns, and themes that eventually lead to interpretations and findings (Whitt, 1991). The data from these documents were organized by grouping concepts that were related in some way. This allowed for the development of a classification system for major topics and issues. Four broad-based themes were created by identifying recurring ideas, language, and patterns of belief that linked each of the participants' experiences. The four themes—academic and social adjustments, family support and encouragement, involvement opportunities, and ethnic and cultural identity—are briefly described below.

Limitations

Data analysis relied heavily on the judgment of a single analyst. Another limitation was that due to time constraints, follow-up interviews were not conducted over a prolonged period. Follow-up interviews are useful to probe for additional information and provide an

opportunity to confirm the results with the participants; prolonged engagement can reduce misinformation or distortions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Academic and Social Adjustment

When asked the opening interview question, “Describe your first year experience,” nine of the 10 participants began the interview by addressing various academic aspects of their experience. Seven of the 10 participants reported experiencing difficulty in adjusting academically to the university environment and described the differences between high school and college academic work. These same students suggested a lack of preparation from high school. In the words of Carlos:

I don't think high school really prepared me to go to college, you know the amount of work...I thought college was going to be more like high school...here in college you always have to be studying and doing your work and if you don't you'll fall behind and get in trouble. So I don't think high school prepared me to go to college...I used to take all honors classes and supposedly they were preparing me for college...but the work can't compare to college, the amount of work, the amount was little compared to here. If I knew about college, the way it is, in high school I would have put more effort in my classes. Even though I did good in high school I would have done a lot more work to get ready for college.

The perception that high school did not prepare these students for college was not anticipated particularly because many of the participants were enrolled in a high school honors or advanced placement curriculum.

All of the participants in one way or another discussed their social adjustment. For two of the participants it was the inability to make friends or meet people “like me.” Victor, on the other hand, indicated that meeting people was not a problem, rather he made the decision to limit his number of friends to avoid getting “stretched out.” Five of the students discussed their positive experiences in meeting and estab-

lishing friendships. Maria, however, had to experience the large college environment on her own without the benefit of a mentor or in her words without “a guide, a little angel.” Even though the social adjustment of these students into the university environment was different, each participant had to find ways of coping or adjusting to the college environment. Although expressed by some as “challenging,” it appears that most succeeded in making that transition.

Jackie was the only participant who opened the interview question with social adjustment issues, specifically her sense of “not belonging here.” Jackie spent a considerable amount of time discussing aspects of her culture that were missing at the university and how this shaped her first-year experience.

I hate it here...I was born in the Bronx, raised part of my life in East Harlem, moved to New Jersey, all of my life I've been surrounded by Puerto Ricans, I come here and I thought I was the only Puerto Rican in this school. There's no Spanish food anywhere...I would go home like every other weekend. I still can't stand it here but I've learned to tolerate it. I don't think I want to stay next year. I'm not fitting in very well, there's really no one to talk to about back home, nobody understands where I'm coming from, like there's nobody from my environment here, that's why nobody understands me.

Jackie implied that not having access to her culture, defined in its broadest term, was impacting her experience of “not fitting in.” Jackie also indicated that when she speaks of culture, she is specifically referring to Puerto Rican culture. Jackie specifically states that many of the latinos she has met are not from the “ghetto area or the inner city.” Based on these and other statements, Jackie's experience of not belonging may have been shaped in many ways by her cultural, urban, and socioeconomic background and by not connecting with other students from that background.

The experience of not fitting in and not belonging at the University was unique for Jackie. However, various participants expressed additional challenges they had to surmount, including the lack of guidance and support from the on-campus community, challenges of learning to effectively manage their time and learning to not procrastinate, and

feeling “stressed out” about maintaining good grades. All of the participants discussed the role of friendships and what it was like to make friends or meet others on campus; most discussed how simple it was to meet new acquaintances. However, attending a large institution also had its challenges. As described by Oscar, “the anonymity that comes with this place, that makes it difficult.”

Finally, several participants discussed their experiences from the context of being commuter students or as residents living on campus. Many described the advantages or disadvantages of their place of residence. The four commuter students described transportation difficulties such as the high level of traffic, taking the bus to school, and the amount of time and energy involved in commuting to campus. Others described inconveniences such as having to come back to campus to access library and computer facilities. Commuter students also mentioned having to complete chores at home or taking on responsibilities expected of them by their parents and the impact this had on their available time. Those participants who lived on campus discussed the advantages to having campus resources within walking distance and the importance of gaining some independence from their parents. The participants implied that these experiences impacted their adjustment in both positive and negative ways.

Family Support and Encouragement

Almost all of the participants discussed the support they received from their family and their family's desire that they succeed in college. As is true for many latinos, the participants' definition of the family was not only limited to the nuclear family but also included extended family members. When discussing their family they often cited it as a reason for coming to college or indicated a desire to financially assist their families after they graduate. The response from Manuel sums up what many of the participants articulated:

There's been a lot of support, they've [family] stressed it since I was little...my mom was the one to say “go to college” and here I am and happy for it. There is a lot of support. They never pushed me real hard but they were always sort of like a lasting presence always putting in a word when they could...college was definitely

hinted at, they'd say "go to college" but they never said "you have to go to college" so there's been plenty of family support.

Involvement Opportunities

Almost all of the participants agreed there were multiple opportunities for involvement and most were able to provide several examples of student groups or organizations that appealed to them. When asked about the opportunities for involvement, four participants responded that they were volunteering their time in extracurricular activities, and two responded that they had not taken advantage of the many available opportunities. However, four of the participants talked about their decision to not get involved in extracurricular activities in order to establish a firm academic foundation. These students were active leaders in high school; as such they described the difficulty of making the decision to devote their available time to their academic studies, even if it was at the expense of extracurricular involvement. Faced with a challenging academic environment and feeling a lack of preparation to compete and adjust to the rigor of college, these students felt they had no choice but to put off involvement in campus organizations. In the words of Carolina and Esther, respectively:

I've had opportunities [for involvement] but my first year I really haven't wanted to be involved at all, I just wanted to get used to college, to my studies, do well academically, so I didn't want to get involved in any activities...I wanted to see what it was like and see how my first year went by and see if I do have a lot of free time, then maybe I can get involved.

I chose not to be involved during my first year. There are many things to be involved in here, there's the Hispanic Student Union and many other things but I chose not to get involved 'cause I had already made the same mistake [in high school]. It was so hard, I remember talking about this a lot with my counselor. You get so used to getting involved in these things that you feel like a part is missing. I felt like a part of me was missing; I love to keep myself busy and active and it felt like my whole life was just school.

Ethnic and Cultural Identity

In discussing the first-year experience with latino students it was anticipated that various aspects of their ethnicity and culture would weave themselves into how they experienced their first year of college. Several participants expressed their frustration in feeling torn between two cultures. Esther described a “culture clash” that resulted from the process of combining her hispanic background with her American upbringing. She discussed the difficulty of being bicultural due to conflicts with her parents who expected her to live by their cultural norms, which produced a “tug of war” between her experience of having been raised in the United States, and her parents’ expectations.

Attending a predominantly white university with a small enrollment of latinos presented additional challenges to some students. However, several students who had attended predominantly white high schools indicated that they were “already used to it.” This is quite a contrast with Jackie’s experience of moving here from a diverse and predominantly Puerto Rican community. Jackie believed she was facing gradual assimilation and feared a loss of her culture in this environment. It is no wonder that she felt a sense of “not belonging” and a desire “to go home.”

Several participants discussed how latino students tend to “hang around each other” on campus and implied that this often occurs “because they understand each other better.” Perhaps latino students find support, strength, and comprehension with individuals from their cultural background, particularly at an institution where their numbers are so few.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Most of the participants in this research study described a series of challenges, both academic and social, that shaped the way they adjusted to their college experience. These students consistently used the word “adjustment” to describe the process of transitioning to college. The phenomenon of discussing the academic and social environment as a dichotomy was common to all interviewees. In discussing their experiences they spoke about these in two distinct ways, often without a direct acknowledgement of how they influence each other.

Seven of the 10 participants described unexpected challenges that impacted their academic development, particularly their preparedness from high school, the level and expectations of college work, and the “pace.” Many of the students in this study rated grade performance as a reflection of their ability to “make it in college.”

In this study most of the participants indicated difficulty adjusting to college due to a lack of preparedness from high school. This finding is similar to a qualitative study of ethnic minority graduates from ten public universities (Richardson & Skinner, 1992); the researchers reported that the most often cited reason for underachievement was lack of preparation. Is the sense of feeling “overwhelmed” unique to latino students or is this a common phenomenon for most first-year students? Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicated that establishing a sense of competence is an important developmental task for college students. Additionally, many first-year students enter college with a limited or unrealistic set of expectations (Levitz & Noel, 1989); struggle to manage student resources: time, schedules, and finances (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996); and maintain significant outside roles and family responsibilities (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Perhaps these are but a few reasons why so many first-year students ponder if they have what it takes to make it in college and question their academic preparation. Further research is needed to explore this concept.

Latino students who enroll at predominately white institutions are not only adjusting to these developmental changes but may also bring various cultural, economic, social, and political factors that may deter a successful transition. Munoz (1986) noted that latino students face more adjustment problems and stress than their white counterparts, and that latino students perceive themselves as less prepared academically. Quevedo-Garcia (1987) indicated that an understanding and appreciation of these factors is needed if practitioners are to be successful in structuring environments that will help latino college students develop their full potential.

Most of the participants discussed the level of support they received from their families. Latino family literature is often shaped by discussions of familialism, defined as the behavioral manifestations of latinos that reflect a strong emotional and value commitment to family life

(Vega, 1995). Traditional latino culture is defined as family-oriented given that latinos generally have strong ties to their family (Rendon & Taylor, 1990). Regardless of socioeconomic background, if a student comes from a home environment that places a positive value on formal education, that student is likely to experience less stress throughout their transition to college because of familial support and positive reinforcement (Quevedo-Garcia, 1987). Additionally, it has been reported that the family plays a central role in the lives and educational experiences of latino students (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Hernandez, 2000; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Greeg, & Jalomo, 1994).

The participants indicated that support from their families sustained them through the first year of college. University personnel should engage families to assist in their children's transition to college. Bilingual and culturally sensitive parent orientation programs need to be developed to familiarize parents with the college setting; to provide opportunities to meet and develop rapport with college faculty and staff; and to better understand the academic rigor and demands that will be placed on their children. This is crucial because many latino parents are unfamiliar with the system of higher education in the United States (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993).

Similarly, strong ties to the family may influence students who live on campus to return home regularly. Many of the participants in this research project indicated that they regularly went home on the weekends. In doing so these students may have missed out on opportunities to interact with others in school-sponsored events. The importance of staying connected with their families was expressed by several students, even if it meant not getting much school work completed. This phenomenon may have practical implications for how weekend programs are planned by university departments and support units. It may also help explain why many students stay so well connected to their communities and why some students rely on the community infrastructure for support services rather than turning to the campus community for support. More research ought to be conducted in this area in order to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) identified involvement as the key to freshman success. Astin's involvement theory (1984) affirms the belief

that students learn best, and are more likely to persist, by becoming involved in the campus community. Astin asserted that by investing physical and psychological energy in the academic experience, students will have increased opportunities to interact with faculty, staff members, and other students. Involvement allows students to become better oriented to the environment, and to feel more a part of and take interest in college life.

The literature is clear about the importance of involvement. Cited benefits include greater likelihood of persistence (Astin, 1975; Hernandez, 2000), greater involvement in the overall college experience and an increase in satisfaction with college (Abrahamowicz, 1988), and increased social integration (Christie & Dinham, 1991). Latino students in particular may gain additional benefits from involvement; involvement was reported to benefit minority students in promoting cultural and political awareness and in aiding feelings of comfort at the university (Rooney, 1985). Additionally, participation in a student organization played a role in the academic success of Mexican American college students (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995).

However, six of the 10 participants in this research study indicated that they consciously decided to not get involved in cocurricular activities because of the academic demands and the rigor of their first year. College practitioners should not assume that a lack of participation in cocurricular activities is an indicator of marginality or lack of interest. Some of the participants in this study made a choice to defer their involvement in order to be grounded academically. While most of these students indicated an interest in pursuing involvement opportunities in subsequent years, one cannot help but wonder if their preoccupation with their academic preparedness came at a cost. Perhaps if these students had learned to successfully manage their time, schedules, and level of school work they would not have limited their cocurricular involvement in order to adjust academically.

Additionally, when gauging or evaluating a student's level of involvement, practitioners should acknowledge that many latino students find meaningful involvement opportunities in off-campus organizations. Because latinos are family- and community-oriented, it is not unusual for students, particularly commuters, to be engaged in activities away from the college setting. Omission of community involve-

ment fails to take into account the cultural importance and value placed on community obligations.

Finally, several of the students discussed the ways in which their ethnic and cultural identity influenced the way they experienced their first year in college. For some, it was a challenge to live in the margin of two cultures; these students had to negotiate strategies to effectively balance parental expectations with their own definition of what it meant to be latino. The majority of the participants did not experience the cultural shock that is often associated when ethnic minority students attend predominantly white institutions. Rather, because these students had attended predominantly white high schools, it was a continuation of what they had already experienced.

However, it should be noted that most of these students did seek out other latino students. Social scientists have reported that children of latino ancestry often maintain close ties with their cultural heritage. It should serve as no surprise that when these students enter college they would want to connect with others who share a common culture. Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) reported that having an ethnically compatible environment may be important for some ethnic minority students because it provides a context for functioning successfully within the university environment.

Conclusion

This qualitative exploration provided a glimpse of what the first-year experience was like for 10 latino college students at a predominantly white institution. The experiences of these students lead to several conclusions. First, the participants described their first year in college through a series of academic and, to a lesser extent, social adjustments. Difficulty in adjusting academically was attributed to their perception that high school did not prepare them for college-level work. Second, this feeling of being underprepared led most of the participants to forfeit any active involvement in cocurricular activities. Third, this lack of involvement in on-campus activities may have been offset by ongoing support and encouragement from their families. Four of the participants commuted to school and lived at home; several of the students who lived on campus regularly returned to their home on the

weekends and stayed connected with their families. Finally, the participants experienced frustration at feeling torn between the cultural traditions of their parents and their own set of cultural values. While attending a predominantly white institution did not produce cultural alienation for the students in this sample, the participants did seek out support and understanding from other latino students on campus.

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