

Mattering and marginality: Urban Latino Males in Higher Education

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This qualitative study illuminates the post-secondary experiences of 10 urban Latino males using the lens of mattering and marginality (Schlossberg, 1989). When most Latino students successfully enter higher education, they are faced with challenges:

- * Possessing lower social capital than their predominantly white academic peers (Tierney & Venegas, 2006);
- * The pressures of financially supporting their family (Perna, 2006);
- * Being a first generation college student (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004); and
- * Surviving the racially hostile campus environment (Elmers & Pike, 1997).

Site Selection: We identified one community college, one four-year state college, and one large private research university, which serve large numbers of Latino students in a demographically diverse region on the Western part of the US.

Participation Selection: We contacted each of those sites to recruit study participants. Participants were selected on a volunteer basis through snowball sampling procedures (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). It was not possible to focus on only one point of access to Latino males at two- and four-year institutions. There were no restrictions on the participants, other than identifying as a male from a Latino background.

Data Collection & Analysis: We used semi-structured individual interviews, participant observations and reflexive field notes to illuminate the experiences of 10 Latino male college students. The narratives were verified with participants as part of a triangulation process which included member checks and data analysis by those conducting the interviews as well as those trained to code data, but not included in the data collection process (Creswell, 1994).

After data reduction, we identified four major themes:

1. **Motivation to attend college** — the students' internal or external influences to pursue higher education. "The single critical variable in my life that drives my success is probably not wanting to be like my mom. She had me when she was fifteen. And so while she is successful now because she got a vocational degree, [I'm] not taking the same path." - Michael
2. **Importance of environment** — the factors of physical "space" on student. Being away from that comfort zone and not only that like I feel like this is a quote, they said "If you're away from home, you're away from failure." – Chuy
3. **Impact of Mentorship** — peer or professional individuals who have impacted the student. "My professor; his name is Professor [Springer]... He inspired me to be a researcher. It's a good area of study, especially in public health. You learn about things you can change. That's what I want to do and he inspired me to do that type of academic career." – Jack
4. **Mattering** — the students, sense of importance and value. "What is significant is not that I took the grad school [class] but I felt for the first time somebody valued my potential." - Demeter

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Implications for policy

As the enrollment of ethnic and racial minorities increase in postsecondary education (Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, 2009), the need to have a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and pathways to academic success is imperative to promote a positive educational environment. Here are some of our recommendations for policy, both at the institutional and governmental level:

- (1) Develop institutionally sponsored male of color support groups and professional mentoring programs.
- (2) State and federal outreach programs should incorporate and promote graduate studies at earlier periods.
- (3) Develop practices for first-generation, low income students to connect with faculty and staff mentors, who are empathetic to marginalized communities.
- (4) Provide institutional incentives for collaboration between academic and student affairs to promote the retention of males of color during their scholastic tenure either through undergraduate research.

Key references

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