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Book Review: The Mexican American community college experience: Fostering resilience, achieving success by Campa, B.

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Abstract

In this book, Blanca Campa, a professor of educational psychology at El Paso Community College (EPCC), gives readers a window into the experiences and perspectives of a small group of faculty and students at EPCC, an urban, multicampus system located on the Texas–Mexico border. Given that the majority of Latinx students enter postsecondary education in community colleges and nearly half of all Hispanic-serving institutions are 2-year institutions, there is a critical need for research on these students. *The Mexican American Community College Experience* draws on research literature from across disciplines and qualitative data Campa collected over the course of several years on the campus.

Disciplines

Community College Education Administration | Higher Education

Comments

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Book Review

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Campa, B. (2017). *The Mexican American community college experience: Fostering resilience, achieving success*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers. 166 pp. \$25.00 (paperback). \$50.00 (hardcover). \$23.00 (ebook). ISBN 978-1-4758-3407-9

In this book, Blanca Campa, a professor of Educational Psychology at El Paso Community College, gives readers a window into the experiences and perspectives of a small group of faculty and students at El Paso Community College (EPCC), an urban, multi-campus system located on the Texas-Mexico border. Given that the majority of Latinx students enter postsecondary education in community colleges and nearly half of all Hispanic-Serving Institutions are 2-year institutions, there is a critical need for research on these students. *The Mexican American Community College Experience* draws on research literature from across disciplines and qualitative data Campa collected over the course of several years on the campus.

The major theme of this work is resilience, and throughout the book, Campa uses research and interviews on how students develop and sustain a sense of resilience despite facing great challenges while pursuing their community college education. The students featured in this book endured traumatic K-12 experiences and balanced demanding family and professional lives while attending college. However, all the participants finished their associate degrees, and in a number of cases, transferred to 4-year universities and pursued their bachelor's degrees and beyond.

The first chapter begins with a discussion of resilience, focusing on how students build competencies such as problem solving, developing a sense of purpose for themselves, and mindfulness to work through tough situations that might threaten their ability or desire to persist in college. The next three chapters focus on teacher qualities and pedagogies that help students and faculty connect. For instance, Campa explains how using Guadalupe Valdes's model of teaching *con respeto* (with respect) and Laura Rendón's validation theory provide meaningful, culturally respectful interactions with Mexican American students. Teaching with these approaches in mind means that, "A professor can enter the student's world and explore and honor his or her inherent personal and cultural knowledge" (p. 113). This reiterates some of the best practices of working with Latinx students, especially the idea that when students see themselves and their backgrounds reflected in their academic lives, they are more likely to persist (Rendón, 1994).

In the final three chapters, Campa talks about interventions that have been successful on the EPCC campus, especially learning communities, the adoption of the Puente Project, and a first-year experience course. The description of the learning community for English Language Learners was particularly interesting, given that there is little research on how to blend first-year experience curricula with content for English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and students. The Puente Project, originally from California, is a first-year experience program for at-risk students which combines a Latino Studies-based curriculum with targeted mentoring and advising in order to increase students' likelihood to persist and eventually obtain a 4-year degree (McGrath & Galaviz, 1996). The first-year experience course, EDUC 1300, is a course that provides students with skills and content to help them be successful in college and beyond. These skills include time management, study skills, and presentation experience. The final chapter briefly discusses forms of social capital and how Campa's students learned how to "play the

game” of college, including learning how to interact with faculty. The book concludes with final reflections on the students and the work of faculty at EPCC.

The Mexican American Community College Experience is written in an accessible way, in the style of popular authors like Malcolm Gladwell. Much of the book reads like a literature review with students’ testimonies sprinkled in to bring the literature to life. This book could have been strengthened by featuring students’ voices and stories more prominently than the literature. While strong literature reviews are useful to researchers and practitioners in this area, most of the literature discussed throughout this book is outdated. Campa cites literature that is at least 15 years old or comes from outside higher education. For example, Campa references Sandberg’s (2013) popular book *Lean In* to briefly discuss the role of mentoring rather than using work that discusses the importance of mentoring in community colleges.

I would also argue that the book does not move the field forward with new ideas or practices that would boost student success. The impact of learning communities is well-documented (e.g., Minkler, 2002; Smith, 2009) as is the Puente Project which, while relatively new to Texas, has been in California since the 1980s (McGrath & Galaviz, 1996). At times it feels as though the book focuses solely on the positive results of the interventions and work of the faculty at EPCC rather than presenting a complete picture of how these interventions occurred.

While there is a brief methods section included in the appendix of this book, there are several unknowns about the data collection and analysis methods that Campa utilized. For example, she is unclear about some of her methods such as how classroom observations were used in her study. Though Campa provides citations for research methodology books she consulted, she does not provide details about the analysis process or any trustworthiness measures put in place for the study. Although Campa also teaches the aforementioned EDUC 1300 course, her role as participant-observer in her research process is unclear. One addition that could have been helpful in this book is a table or summary of the student participants, their gender, majors, and a summary of their experiences. Without this, the participants’ stories that are presented throughout the book feel disconnected, and it is difficult to remember individual narratives.

One point that is worth remembering about this book is the author is not presenting her participants’ stories as typical cases of Mexican American students, though the title seems to imply just that. Instead, these are older students who have returned to their education, and they carry with them experience with extreme adversities in the form of poverty, challenges with language acquisition, substance abuse, career changes, and cultural values that clash between their home and campus lives. Campa intentionally selected participants who were, among other things, from working class backgrounds, and a number of students who participated in this study were also learning English in college. While the accomplishments of the students in this book are impressive and important, it is vital for readers, especially those who are college administrators and practitioners, to know that there is no singular Mexican American college experience and that this book represents a particular focus.

This book could be useful for graduate students and those interested in learning about Mexican American community college students and their experiences on campus. However, it would work best as one part of a long list of references that provide other nuanced perspectives on Mexican American students’ experiences and various methods investigating those experiences.

Citations:

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Author biography: Erin Doran is an Assistant Professor at Iowa State University who studies Latinx community college students, especially those placed into developmental education.