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Latino Men & Community College Environments: Understanding How Belonging, Validation, and Resources Shape Experience

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Abstract

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Keywords

Latino, men, transfer

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This phenomenological, qualitative study explored how Latino men at community colleges made sense of their campus environments and how those experiences influenced the college-going process. Using Harris and Wood's (2013, 2014) socio-ecological outcomes (SEO) model, this study included the perspectives of 130 Latino men who participated in focus groups at seven community colleges in the southwestern United States. The study found that professors, academic advisors, and peers played an important role in creating an environment that validated and fostered a sense of belonging. In addition, the study found that Latino men had difficulty accessing resources. Latino men expressed concern regarding transferring to a university and how that transition might influence access to resources. Findings suggest that Latino men may benefit from a sense of belonging and feelings of validation uniquely fostered by community college environments. Results also underscore gender and cultural norms for navigating resources and the transfer process.

Keywords: Latino; men; transfer

Latino men frequently begin their journey through the higher education pipeline in community colleges (CCs). As a result, CCs across the nation are now charged with improving the retention of Latino men by enhancing their

campus environments. For Latino men, campus environments can influence how they experience the campus climate and access resources, as well as how they develop a sense of validation and belonging on campus (Harris

& Wood, 2013). And, while there have been numerous studies and reports centered on Latino men *or* campus *or* men of color in CCs, fewer studies have focused specifically on the topic of Latino men in CCs. Furthermore, of those studies which have focused on Latino men in CCs (e.g. Rodriguez, Massey, & Sáenz, 2016; Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Sáenz, Mayo, Miller, & Rodriguez, 2015; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015), less work has focused explicitly on the experiences of CC Latino men and their environments.

For Latino men, the college-going process may introduce a host of other challenges particular to the experiences of being both a person of color and a man of color within this environment (Harris & Wood, 2013). The extant research highlights how Latino men are often socialized to not seek academic or emotional supports (Sáenz et al., 2013) and, while on campus, are forced to cope internally with obstacles rather than seeking help (Rodriguez, Lu, & Bukoski, 2016; Sáenz et al., 2015). These men sometimes experience achievement-related conflicts within these environments related to seeking status, establishing dominance, and avoiding behaviors perceived as feminine (Sáenz et al., 2015; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015). In contrast to the above challenges, research has shown that CC institutional agents, such as professors and academic advisors, can demonstrate support of Latino men by showing a strong ethic of care and creating meaningful connections (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Given the specific challenges

Latino men face (Sáenz et al., 2013), better understanding the relationship between these students and their environments may help campuses better serve Latino men and improve persistence, transfer, and graduation rates. A socio-ecological understanding of the experiences of Latino men within the unique context of the CC is needed in order to understand how environmental influences manifest themselves in dynamic ways. This study addresses an essential gap in the literature by utilizing a phenomenological, qualitative approach to understand how Latino men on CC campuses make sense of their campus environments, specifically their interpersonal interactions with others on campus, including faculty, advisors, and other students, and their utilization of campus services. The following research questions framed this study:

1. How do Latino men at CCs make sense of their experiences with campus environments?
2. How do these experiences with their CC environments influence the college-going process for Latino men?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized Harris and Wood's (2013, 2014) SEO model to understand the campus environment experiences for Latino men in CC settings. The model is divided into three domains: *inputs* (background and societal factors), *socio-ecological domains* (non-cognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos domains), and *outcomes* of student success. The model was selected due to

its focus on socio-ecological domains and their influence on the unique experiences of college men of color as well as its ability to account for various inputs, such as students' previous educational experiences and cultural backgrounds, in order to understand how Latino men interact with their environments.

This study primarily focused on the *campus ethos domain* of the model, which examines *internal validation*, *sense of belonging*, *connectedness*, and *campus resources*. The campus ethos domain explores campus climate and interpersonal relationships, which influence sense of belonging and campus connectedness. Within the model, *internal validation* refers to the way in which institutional agents, such as faculty and staff, create validating experiences for Latino men. *Sense of belonging* and *connectedness* explore the ways in which Latino men feel as though they belong and are connected to peers, faculty, and services within their institutional environment. *Campus resources* refers to the way in which Latino men have access to and feel a sense of self-efficacy toward various on-campus resources at their institutions.

Methods

This phenomenological research study examined the campus environment experiences of Latino men at seven CCs in the southwestern United States. A phenomenological approach illuminated how Latino men made meaning of their experiences with campus environments (Willis, 2007). This method suited the study's purpose because it focused

on the lived experiences of Latino men and their environments and allowed the researchers to discover hidden meanings in how these students made sense of their environments (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The research study included the perspectives of 130 Latino men who participated in 23 focus groups. All participants identified as Latino men over the age of 18 and were enrolled at one of the seven participating CC research sites. Students were recruited through relationships with campus administrators and through snowball sampling. Most students came from backgrounds in which fathers had completed elementary school or less (34%), or had completed some or all of high school (36%), and mothers had completed elementary school or less (39%), or had completed some or all of high school (39%). More than half of participants came from homes with total incomes of less than \$40,000 per year (65%) and more than half of participants were working part- or full-time while going to school (59%).

Each student in this study participated in one focus group which lasted approximately an hour and a half and included 4-8 participants. The study's principal investigator used relationships with campus personnel to establish connections with possible study participants and organize logistics for site visits. Invitations to participate in the study were primarily circulated via institutional list-servs. Interview protocols and coding procedures were guided by the study's theoretical framework. All focus groups were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Transcripts were then

coded (initial open coding, followed by a more detailed codebook coding), and significant patterns within the assembled data were noted and hypothesized as possible explanations and propositions for the findings. Although phenomenology has traditionally been associated with the interview technique, recently scholars have argued for employing the focus group method within interpretive phenomenological analysis (e.g. Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010; Sáenz et al., 2013; Sáenz et al., 2015). To establish trustworthiness, members of the research team met frequently to discuss each step of the study and shared memos addressing areas of potential biases, researcher positionalities, and emerging findings and implications.

Findings

Professors and Peers Encourage a Sense of Belonging to CC Campuses

Latino men felt a sense of belonging and connectedness to the CC environment through their interactions with professors and peers both inside and outside of the classroom. Latino men felt that the intimate nature of CC environments facilitated relationship-building between students and professors. The size of classes within the CC environment facilitated relationship-building and a welcomeness to engage on campus: “As compared to larger institutions, the contact that you have with instructors is a lot closer, as well as the interaction between the instructors and the interaction between the instructors with the

students.” Another student echoed this sentiment:

I definitely feel better about talking to instructor[s] when you’re in a smaller classroom than when you’re in a bigger classroom because they have more of an ability to remember who you are, remember your grades, remember what you wrote down, remember where you sit.

Latino men also felt that these relationships extended beyond the classroom and made them feel as though they were a part of the campus community. As one student expressed, “Because the classes are kind of small, the professors can become your friends and you ask them questions whenever you want.” Similarly, another student indicated that, “[the professors] become your friends, and actually if you see them out in the street, or in the campus, you say hi to them so you don’t just go walking like a stranger.”

Several students contrasted their positive experiences within the CC environment with their negative impressions of larger, four-year universities. One student connected small class sizes to the way in which faculty members welcomed and interacted with their students:

It’s like, the initial feeling you get when you walk into class, it’s like your teacher welcomes you. It’s not like one of those university level professors that can shrug you off ‘cause they have like, literally, 400 people in the classroom...I feel that here they really, they really get to know you.

Another student, who had already attended a larger university, contrasted his experiences in CC with the four-year institution:

I've been at universities and they suck. My teachers suck, um my, my classrooms, the people there, because the teachers suck, the students there suck too... some teachers are just horrible and they pick the ones that have more knowledge, not the ones that know students or the ones that want to do more for students. I believe that [the CC] picks their teachers based on maybe their character more. I believe, if you look at the character of these teachers and you look at the character of others... This is the best school that I like.

He preferred the instructors at CCs, whom he perceived to “want to do more for students” and “know students.” To this student, the willingness to help and know students meant that the instructors at CCs cared more for their students.

Latino men felt that peers played an important role in feeling a sense of belonging due to the presence of shared goals and a willingness to offer support when needed. Students reported their most positive experiences with college peers in correlation with shared educational goals of those around them. One student expressed that “there was definitely a lot of people who had the same goals that I did.” He found this sharing of common goals to be a “cool” experience, because “in high school, it’s really var[ied] as to who you are in classes with.” Being able to establish a peer group with a common purpose for being

in classes was a very positive addition to this student’s experience. Another student described his experiences similarly, saying that “the classmates are just, you share the same goals, and people, you know, they just want to have a career.”

Unlike in prior educational experiences, Latino men felt that they could connect with similar peers on their CC campuses and build relationships. Students found respect from their CC peers to be an important factor in feeling welcome on campus. One student reported that “everyone here has treated me, or respected me, for my ability and for what I can do, versus [what] my skin looks like.” Another student contrasted his experience in the CC setting with previous educational contexts, revealing that “there’s no hostility” and even “I just noticed that everyone here was nice. There wasn’t any bullying or cliques. There was nothing like that, no gangs.” In contrast to their high school experiences, Latino men felt respected in the CC environment, thus easing their transition.

These relationships encouraged a sense of shared support between students. Latino men felt that their CC peers were “willing to help out other students who they see need help.” Furthermore, Latino men highlighted the role that peers had in connecting them to their environment and encouraging educational success:

I think friends play a big role. It’s the way of getting encouraged and talking to each other and encouraging each other, especially when you’re having problems, like, work, with one

of your classes; they might have taken that class and you know, help you out...you might be able to study together, and it's more of a comfort zone, not trying to meet somebody new and try to develop a rapport with them and to study with them, you know, you can develop good study habits with your friends and everything and be able to socialize at the same time, and just have that comfort of getting through school together. Finishing school together. That's the best thing.

Latino men utilized peer connections to overcome challenges, support positive study habits, and encourage college persistence.

Latino Men Experience Internal Validation from Professors and Academic Advisors

Internal validation refers to the way in which institutional agents, such as professors and academic advisors, created validating experiences for CC Latino men. Validation can be thought of as the recognition or affirmation by Latino men that their experiences or their feelings are valid or worthwhile (Harris & Wood, 2013, 2014; Rendón, 1994). Latino men felt that their professors and academic advisors were both confirming and supporting of their place at the institution and enabled them to be successful.

The participants revealed that professors and academic advisors often had higher expectations of Latino men than they did for themselves and pushed them to achieve greater levels of success.

Professors balanced high expectations of Latino men with validating words of encouragement. One student described that for him, "Professors have demanded more for me than what I demanded for myself." Latino men postulated that these institutional agents were invested in their success and sought to "bring out the best" in their students:

...[A] lot of advisors, and you find out that they really care, and with me it seemed like they could see right through me. I don't know if they can do this with everybody, but it's pretty cool that they can see where I'm at and they have their ways of getting me to try and bring out the best in me.

While students recognized the presence of high expectations, they also highlighted how professors and academic advisors validated their educational experiences and encouraged future successes:

My first semester I was fortunate to have [my professor], and after that class was over on my last day, I turned in my test and I get this little notecard saying, "I really enjoyed having you in class"...for the first time in my life someone had actually pushed me to achieve harder in school...that was the first time anyone has ever been, "Hey you can really do good in school and I think you're a great student. I think you should pursue doing the best you can."

For the men in the study, CC professors and academic advisors provided the first positive, validating experiences that

many of them had experienced in their educational journeys:

Having a professor that believed in me was the first time I ever got any sort of encouragement in terms of school. Back when I was in high school, if I got straight A's, I didn't have anyone to go celebrate with. But now here I get my acceptance letter from these schools and then I can go to my old professors just to tell them that I did do it.

Prior to their time at the CC, Latino men experienced few positive experiences with institutional agents. However, at the CC, professors were seen as individuals who encouraged Latino men and shared in the joys of their accomplishments during their educational journeys.

Latino men felt a sense of validation from professors and academic advisors who shared backgrounds similar to theirs and who actively sought to build relationships with them. The students within this study felt a strong connection to their professors who they felt "grew up in the same neighborhood, and they have the same problems...the same background and culture." From these connections, professors and advisors built relationships with their students which went beyond class time:

I've been able to create pretty much a relationship with all my professors. Every single one. And they all remember me... they all remember me, so I could pass one of the previous instructors right now and they'll come and call me out by name, and we'll say hi to each other and we'll chat for a bit.

Academic advisors played an important role in validating the academic experiences of Latino men. They recognized the potential within these men, affirmed their ability to succeed, and served as role models for success. One student noted that his academic advisor would say,

"You know, you can do this. You know, you're not the only one. Look at me." You know, you have a role model, you know, you have somebody to look up to...that's what keeps me moving....I guess just having a role model in college, you know, that would help a lot. [This person was] an advisor that, you know, will always support you in every kind of situation that you have.

These validating experiences demonstrated to Latino men their place within the CC environment and influenced the ways in which Latino men felt connected to their environments. These institutional agents took an active role in setting high expectations and providing support for their students in order to encourage a higher level of academic and personal success. Professors and academic advisors also took a proactive approach to relationship-building in order to encourage Latino men to feel connected to their CC experience.

Latino Men Hesitate to Use Campus Resources and Fear the Transfer Transition Process

Within this study, Latino men had access to a variety of campus resources, but they did not feel a sense of self-efficacy towards accessing those resources.

Often, the Latino men in this study felt that solutions to their obstacles must come from themselves and that they were individually responsible for fixing their own problems. One student explained,

[O]ne of the things about Latino males I've noticed also is you don't look much around your surroundings... I don't look out... I don't seek clubs that are going to help me because I know it's on me... It's just, this is what I have to do. Nobody else is going to do it for me, and nobody else is really there... everybody's got their own problems... and this is what I have to fix.

While this student admitted that there were "clubs" and other resources on campus that might be beneficial to him, he did not feel it was his place to go to others to solve his own, personal problems. Several students lamented about how long it took them to seek out campus resources, sometimes taking several semesters: "I think for me, I had to swallow my pride and go ask for help. It wasn't until my second semester in college that I decided to go get tutoring."

Latino men attributed their hesitation to use campus resources to traditional gender and cultural norms. As men, they felt a sense of pride which prevented them from accessing resources:

I think it also comes from a sense of pride. You know, you're always taught to be a man, and you're proud and if you fall, if you stumble, then that's your own fault. You don't bring anybody down with you. You don't ask for help because it's your

doing. You shouldn't have to ask anybody for help, and so it's just that sense of pride that carries over—that in the end, makes you fail...because with that, if you're failing, you don't come back up because you don't want anybody to help, and sometimes you can't come back up without help. So it's that sense of pride that just holds...that brings you down.

To access campus resources was like admitting failure in their minds:

I feel like something that plagues the male mind is the fear of failure...you don't want to let your family down, and I guess in that sense, you don't wanna be the one that brings everybody down, that failure. So that fear of failure, like I said, it does...it really does plague the male mind.

For Latino men, in particular, accessing campus resources represented a complicated relationship between education and culture. As one student stated, "There's some sort of pride in our culture that keeps us from asking for help." Within these cultures, Latino men often felt the need to prove themselves capable. Another student acknowledged that Latino men are often "not necessarily the most willing to accept help openly and confess that they don't have the specific skills."

Latino men who did use campus resources were fearful of the upcoming transfer process and how they might find the same types of support. Student perceptions of available resources contributed to their desire to stay at CCs instead of transferring to four-year institutions. As one student said, "It's hard to

leave here because it's a real good vibe. You get tutors [and] professors to help you out a lot." Latino men feared that larger institutions would not have similar resources. The same student went on to say, "The people that are here study and they'll help you study as well so it's kind of hard to want to leave. And then when you leave you have to find somebody else in other colleges." Because Latino men found it difficult to reach out and seek external sources of support, needing to restart the process at a larger institution could prove even more daunting.

Discussion

This research study builds upon the collective knowledge that CC scholars have regarding the educational experiences of Latino men, particularly in terms of our understanding of the complex ways in which environment influences the CC experience. However, this study has shown that CC environments may present a nexus of complications given prior negative educational experiences of Latino men and their feelings of hesitancy to seek out help and campus resources. Once Latino men enroll in college, they may continue to feel nervousness or fear about seeking out resources due to their simultaneous socialization as both men and students of color. The study suggests that faculty, academic advisors, and peers play an important role in validating Latino men and making them feel like a part of the campus community. This finding supports previous general findings that have highlighted the importance

of campus institutional agents as validating forces (Rendón, 1994). And, it is similarly positioned to reinforce the idea of faculty members as individuals who express authentic care and invest in the success of Latino men at CCs (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

The study contrasts with previous literature that positions men of color at CCs as more detached from faculty interaction or as perceiving instructors as unfriendly or uncaring (Harris & Wood, 2013). This study also contrasts with previous research that has highlighted the gender and cultural conflicts, such as status achievement, dominance, self-reliance, and avoidance of femininity, often present in peer interactions (Sáenz et al., 2015). The men in this study instead emphasized CC peers as supportive influences in their environments. Previous studies on men of color have emphasized the importance of accessing and feeling a sense of self-efficacy regarding campus resources (Harris & Wood, 2013). This study highlighted how Latino men are aware of and have the ability to access campus resources but, in many cases, delay seeking resources or do not seek them at all. This finding reflects complications due to gender and cultural norms, similar to previous work on the topic, which focuses on issues of machismo for Latino men (Sáenz et al., 2013). Finally, this study found that Latino men come to fear the transfer process because of its implications for help-seeking behaviors. While previous scholars have addressed masculinity and cultural complications within the CC environment, this work offers a new perspective, which illuminates further

challenges that Latino men may perceive regarding their success with the transfer process.

Limitations

Although the number of participants allowed the research team to explore the perspectives of many men, these standpoints may not represent all Latino men who attend CCs. Depending on a variety of individual and institutional factors, the environmental experiences of Latino men in CCs may differ. In addition, Latino men, although grouped together, are not a homogenous group but instead represent a broad spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives. And, while focus groups achieved a wider understanding of experiences and highlighted group meaning-making, this method may have restricted the expression of some men who felt uncomfortable sharing personal information within a group setting.

Implications for Future Research

Future research could benefit from additional investigation of the varying contexts and experiences of Latino men in CCs. Scholars and practitioners could benefit from exploring how various institutional environments (e.g., Hispanic-Serving Institutions) influence the college-going experiences of Latino men. More research is also needed to understand the role that masculinity and cultural norms play not only within the CC environment, but also in the process of transferring to a four-year institution.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study demonstrated the importance of professors, academic advisors, and peers in shaping sense of belonging and validation for Latino men within the college campus environment. Institutions have a responsibility to address inequities and to work toward ensuring that Latino men have positive educational experiences within their college environments. Institutional agents can foster a greater sense of belonging and connectedness by more deeply understanding the gender, cultural, and societal barriers that have historically marginalized Latino men in higher education and can work to promote the retention of these students through the completion of their academic goals (e.g., completion of an associate's degree and/or transfer to a four-year institution).

To do so, faculty and staff may be encouraged to intentionally reach out to Latino men more often and seek to build relationships. This connection may begin with student success seminars and/or learning communities that help students build their knowledge of college resources in their first year. Or, it may mean creating linked course sequences in which students take multiple courses with their peers in order to build a sense of community among students and faculty members. Institutions might also consider creating a more integral role for academic advisors or enhancing the way in which these individuals are trained to understand the nuanced experiences of Latino men. Within the CC experience, students might also have regular,

scheduled check-ins with faculty members, academic advisors, or peer mentors to ensure that students are connecting to their campuses.

Within this study, Latino men also articulated the importance of connecting with peers who shared similar goals and provided encouragement for them to be successful in college. CCs may seek to create environments which connect Latino men with other students who share similar career goals and interests or encourage students to engage in collaborative learning projects. These environments might come in the form of specialized first-year experience courses or career-oriented peer-mentoring programs. Because Latino men also articulated the importance of respect as a key component of their interactions with peers and developing a feeling of belonging, institutions may want to consider the ways in which they train faculty members and staff to facilitate and set expectations for peer-to-peer interactions and learning environments. Creating spaces which encourage civil, respectful engagement may enhance the ways in which Latino men, among other students, feel comfortable interacting with their environment.

Finally, this study demonstrated the need to address how CC environments provide access to resources and facilitate the transfer process. To address issues with help-seeking and fears of the transfer process, CCs might institute embedded campus resources and clear expectations for successful transfer. In all ways possible, it would benefit students if campus resources were integrated into pre-existing coursework

and transition experiences in order to familiarize them with the resources and normalize their use among all students. To address the needs of Latino men, and all students seeking to transfer, institutions might move toward the creation of transfer academic advisor positions and might create individualized strategic transfer plans for students. By doing so, CCs can frame these steps as merely part of the transfer experience, rather than as a means of seeking help in the process. Furthermore, these findings point to the need for four-year institutions to collaborate with CCs to ease the fears of Latino men by demystifying the transfer process and demonstrating an ethic of care, even before their arrival on the four-year institution's campus. To demystify the transfer process, four-year institutions might consider making transfer admissions policies, practices, and resources accessible and clear to broad audiences. In addition, four-year institutions might express an ethic of care through collaborating with CCs to create seamless transfer experiences. These experiences might include targeted transfer programming, co-enrollment options (students are admitted to the CC and four-year institution concurrently), or undergraduate research opportunities at the four-year institution.

Conclusion

As an important entry point for Latino men in higher education, CCs have a responsibility to create environments that are responsive to the needs of these students. Our approach to

investigating Latino men and their CC environments focuses attention on the surroundings and conditions that these students experience and provides a solid foundation for understanding the kinds of environments that facilitate success for these men and those that do not. This study allows for a nuanced understanding of how Latino men understand and interact with their CC environment. Because Latino men have both locally and nationally become an important part of the completion agenda discussion, improving educational environments for this group of students has the potential to incite significant change. This study not only creates a point of departure for future research studies exploring the socio-ecological domains of their experience but also serves to inform future policy and practice.

CC stakeholders have increasingly focused on efforts to improve the campus environment for men of color (Harris & Harper, 2008; Sáenz et al., 2013). Drawing on socio-ecological understandings, this article sought to understand how Latino men at CCs made sense of their campus environments and how those experiences influenced the college-going process. Using the extant literature on Latino men, environments, and CCs, this paper advances an argument for improving campus environments in order to enhance the educational success of Latino men. With a more thorough understanding of how Latino men interact with their CC campus environments, higher education stakeholders will be better equipped to attract these students to their campuses and retain them.

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