

**Latino College Students: Cultural Socialization and Mental Health Benefits from Seeking  
Food at the Campus Food Pantry**

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## Introduction

A recent evaluation of CSUSM's Cougar Pantry showed that Latinos were statistically more likely than other racial groups to report mental health benefits from using the pantry (Professor, 2021). This finding is important to unpack because it can provide insights into Latino mental health and the ways that the pantry helps Latinos, specifically, and other students, generally. Overall, better understanding of the ways that campus resources such as the Cougar Pantry can support student mental health and thus, academic success, is important to ongoing efforts to improve services for students. Thus, in this paper, I seek to understand the relationship between securing food at the pantry, mental health, and being Latino.

In thinking about the relationship between mental health and seeking food at the pantry, the first place one might look would be that the benefit to mental health reported by Latinos can be explained by their lower, on average, socio-economic status. Indeed, studies show 1 in 4 of Latino households are classified as food insecure, compared to 1 in 10 of white households (Portnoy, 2016). CSUSM data from Fall 2019 indicates that Latino students are more likely to report receiving Pell Grants (59%) compared to white students (31%). Despite these economic differences, the regression model predicting the relationship between mental health benefits and being Latino also controlled for food and housing insecurity. In this model, *race*, not economic indicators (represented by food and housing insecurity) explained the difference, suggesting it is something about Latino culture, not simply their lower economic status that explains why food from the pantry improves their mental health. Thus, I ask, what is it about Latino culture that means Latinos report greater mental health benefits when using the pantry?

To answer this question, I will be exploring the literature on the connection between food and culture for Latinos, the importance for Latinos of belonging in college, and mental health among Latino college students. I will first explore the literature on the ways Latinos

use food as a bridge to cultural development and build ethnic identity to reinforce cultural values and norms. How can food possibly reinforce cultural norms and how does it support Latinos? Next, I will look at the challenges Latino college students face and how a sense of belonging in school counteracts these challenges. How might the Cougar Pantry support Latino college students to develop a sense of belonging in college and what does this mean for their mental health? Then, I examine how mental health is viewed and pursued by Latino college students. How can their mental health be supported by the pantry? Lastly, I propose future research questions to help us better understand the connections between Latino culture, food, mental health, and supportive student services in higher education.

### **Food and Culture**

The importance of food in Latino culture goes beyond survival; as is the case for many people, food is deeply involved in the development of creating and reinforcing Latino cultural norms and values. For Latinos, food is one of many paths to culture socialization. Culture is reinforced by passing on knowledge of traditional food preparation and consumption (Ayon et al., 2018). For example, parents often teach their children how to make traditional dishes such as tortillas as it reminds them of their own upbringing and lessons taught by their elders (Ayon et al., 2018; Roche et al., 2015). Besides enjoyment from creating and consuming traditional foods, food also serve as an inheritance of cultural values and fosters nostalgia as recipes are shared, reminding immigrant parents of their homeland and connecting their kids to their heritage (Sawyer, Duran & Wallace, 2019). Furthermore, sharing cultural foods creates a space and time for bonding among families, thus, building meaningful connections within families, which is a bridge to teaching cultural values in the Latino communities (Ayon et al., 2018). Food is a tool of creating cultural unity among families for Latinos. Accessing food – which is so laden with cultural value for Latinos – at the Cougar Pantry can provide Latinos with a sense of cultural remembrance. This can potentially boost mental health because food and food rituals are so

closely tied to ethnic identity. Research shows that strong cultural pride and ethnic identity serve a protective function for Latinos, protecting against discrimination (Ayon et al., 2018).

Consuming a meal together is another important aspect of cultural socialization, one that creates family unity as a social ritual is shared. Eating together, or “commensality” defined by Martinez, (2016) as “the social experience of sharing meals with others” (p. 8), creates strong cultural ties. In Latin American, families are made up of commensal units and most of the time live in groups of more than just one person; thus, Latinos are more likely to engage socially with others around food (Martinez, 2016, 8), whether in the everyday or to celebrate birthdays or holidays (Ayon et al., 2018). During meals, families engage in conversation. This social engagement is a strong cultural tradition that many parents want to pass on (Fuster et al., 2019). Furthermore, Latino families eating together symbolizes respect for the effort and time required to secure funds for the food purchase and preparation and respect for the hard work and sacrifices they made to eat a meal together (Martinez, 2016). Food builds bonds among Latinos as they spend quality time with family and community members. Latino students, hence, receive mental health benefits as they access food at the pantry which can enhance their connection of family and other community members as they will share, prepare, and consume the food together. Latinos' increased connection with their culture will help reinforce community, reduce social isolation, and increase a sense of belonging and social connectedness.

The Latino community defines “eating well” differently than health experts do. “Comiendo bien,” or eating well, for Latinos is the practice of maintaining physical and emotional well-being (Martinez, 2016). Two important aspects of comiendo bien include eating as a family unit and eating traditional foods. The practice is thought of as preventative; the better you eat, the less you will need a doctor (Martinez, 2016). Also, comiendo bien dictates a preference for eating at home with family because eating fast food is considered

unhealthy and devalues the role of the family (Martinez, 2016). A platotote or an abundant dish is considered a healthy and traditional dish and a variety of proteins, vegetables, fruits are used to cook cultural foods (Martinez, 2016; Sawyer, Duran & Wallace, 2019). The first step to *comiendo bien* is accessing food at the pantry as it is strongly connected to staying close to cultural traditions. Traditional ways of cooking and eating may promote mental health benefits because they help support ethnic identity and a connection to culture. The pantry fulfills cultural practices as it provides a variety of food options that completes the platotote.

The importance of food to culture is demonstrated throughout literature. Different cultural rituals such as eating together, building community, passing traditions, and eating well highlight how food is a vital component to cultural socialization. By examining food and its relationship to cultural socialization, it can reveal how Latinos receive benefits from using the pantry and some of the benefits include development of cultural identity, support from the university, and mental health benefits.

### **Sense of Belonging in College**

Exploring the challenges Latino students face in higher education is important because a sense of belonging has a strong effect on success in college. Here, in addition to considering the challenges to belonging Latinos face, I look at how development of sense of belonging is closely tied to cultural values important to Latinos like building community and bonding with other students. Then I discuss how campus resources, such as the pantry, can help students feel like they belong on campus. For Latino students, this is achieved through seeking food which connects them back to their cultural values as they build community.

A major challenge for Latinos in college is facing rejection at school. For example, students reported being rejected through exclusion in study groups and being forced to work alone (Yosso et al., 2009). Rejection by peers constrains the building of relationships and

networks (Yosso et al., 2009). Yosso et al.'s work (2009) showed that each rejection pushed Latinos to feel excluded in college which translated to less access to academic support and school involvement. Latino students shared that they felt disconnected from white professors as they were uncomfortable talking with them or setting up meetings for academic assistance even though these professors make themselves available to other non-Latino students. Additionally, many colleges had little to no faculty of color (Yosso et al., 2009). Research also shows that Latino students experience both interpersonal and institutional microaggressions, such as verbal and nonverbal racial slurs from peers (Yosso et al., 2009). Latinos report feeling like outsiders in college (Cavazos et al., 2010). Rejection from peers and the campus at large can negatively affect their sense of belonging and mental health.

Economic hardships can also prevent a sense of belonging in education. For starters, many schoolteachers and administrators have noted that many Latino students had the skills and potential to succeed in college, but had to financially support their families, making retention and educational success difficult (Clark et al., 2013; Barajas and Pierce, 2001). Reduction of work hours or quitting jobs for school means loss of income and financial support for their families (Cavazos et al., 2010). Latinos are expected to support their families and the lack of support undercuts cultural values of giving back and supporting family. The pantry cultivates a sense of belonging as it helps Latino students secure food, which is beneficial for their families and allows them to meet cultural expectations of family assistance. This reality can help Latino students to feel more engaged and thus, as if they belong, in college as the pantry assists them in meeting this cultural value.

Latinos can face a number of challenges which make them feel they do not belong in college. One way that Latinos respond to the rejection is by building community with others who share their values. This community represents cultural wealth; students nurture deeper

connection to their cultural values in college (Yosso et al., 2009). Latino students also found support from their own peers and families which helped them navigate college life as they were connected to their own roots (Cavazos et al., 2010). They also found it helpful to foster their skills and connection by giving back to their own communities by pursuing degrees that would serve their communities (Yosso et al., 2009). Connecting to their community strengthens cultural values which helps Latino students overcome challenges and feel more at home in college. They respond to rejection by reinforcing their cultural identities and learning how to give back.

Being connected to their own communities and building bonds in college allows students to thrive. To do this, students network with other peers via study group, take part in undergraduate research, join programs that would help with career development such as the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, and build community by joining Latino-based student organizations like MEChA (Perez & Saenz, 2017). Joining Latino-based student organizations builds bonds with other Latinos, facilitates networking, and helps students feel like they have a family in college which mirrors their cultural values. Research shows that having mentorship programs based on Latino needs creates welcoming environments for Latino in higher education (Clark et al., 2013). In another study that compared Latinos and Latinas experiences in college highlighted that more than two thirds of Latinas enrolled in mentorship programs to help other Latinas navigate college (Barajas and Pierce, 2001). The mentorship of other Latinas did not only give time to build community but also to give back as they shared their knowledge about colleges and enhanced a support system among the mentors and mentees. Mentorship also brought empowerment, pushed students to be advocates of social change, and helped them build ethnic identity (Barajas and Pierce, 2001). Thus, building community is key to belonging in higher education for Latinos. As discussed in the sections above, the pantry supports connection to culture and to community in ways that can support belonging and

ultimately, mental health. Additionally, the pantry is a pathway to more opportunities of social connection as the coordinator is Latina, many of the staff are Latino/a, and the Executive Director of ASI (Associated Students, Inc) who oversees the pantry is also Latina. Latinos working at the pantry makes it more welcoming; and the management know how to best serve Latinos based on their own lived experiences. Receiving food at the pantry also allows for more opportunities to bond with family and community members via food rituals.

When the evaluation of the Cougar Pantry was conducted, the pantry was located near the student centers like the Latinx, LGBTQA Pride, Women and Gender Equity and Cross-Cultural Centers. Its location allowed for more students to develop a sense of belonging as they would network and build community with other students. A number of students reported in interviews for the evaluation that it helped him connect with others as this student did,

"...like all my coworkers...(I) use it (the pantry), and all of my friends that are using it, we kind of get, have that same type of like, 'Oh, what's at the Pantry?' Or that excitement about it. And so, in that regard, I've been able to connect with people about the Pantry, and it's been something, like demystifying this whole idea of 'Crap, we don't have food.'" (Latino, Male).

In summary, some of the challenges that hinder a sense of belonging for Latino students include microaggressions and feeling rejected within the campus community. We know that community is important in Latino culture and fostering community can help Latino students feel like they belong in ways that buffer rejection and feeling invisible. Receiving food helps Latinos connect socially, in multiple ways, a mental health benefit that can push them through college. Food culturally and instrumentally builds and bonds community among Latinos. The pantry is one way that a sense of belonging can be nurtured as the resources it provides helps students connect to their cultural values, foster community, support their families, and feel seen and



supported by the University. It is important to understand that the pantry is not just fulfilling basic needs but also supporting the cultural values that build a sense of belonging. Like practicing one's cultural values in general, a stronger sense of belonging can support mental health. Mental health benefits that the pantry provides are a connection with cultural identity, social connectedness, and helping students to feel like they belong in and seen by their university. To help me better understand these connections, I will turn to an examination of mental health among Latino college students.

### **Mental health**

“I think it's definitely helped my mental health as far as I'm a planner, and so very much so with budgeting, that's always on my mind. And so the fact that there's less stress about like food and groceries has definitely helped me breathe a little bit, and has helped me focus on other aspects of my life instead of like where I'm getting money for all this stuff. Or where are we getting money so I can eat?” (Latino male).

This student interviewed for the evaluation talked about how using the pantry helped his mental health because it helped him to meet his basic needs and to budget. Many students across racial groups experienced mental health support from having more resources, but using the pantry goes further for Latino students by helping them connect to their cultural values - another avenue for supporting mental health. In this section, I examine the overall state of mental health among Latino students, barriers they face in seeking mental health treatment, and how they view mental health. Lastly, I will consider how the pantry provides mental health benefits.

Overall, compared to other racial groups, the mental health status of Latino college students shows no significant differences in terms of depression, anxiety, or other mental health disorders (Del Pilar, 2009). However, Latinos do report significantly greater histories of past

depression or higher rates of treatment for depression compared to other non-Latino groups (Del Pilar, 2009). When diagnosed with depression, about 17 percent reported not taking any medication compared to 3 percent of those from non-Latino groups (Del Pilar, 2009). Additionally, Latinos were more likely to report stopping medication on their own against medical advice (10 %), compared to non-Latino groups (3 %) (Del Pilar, 2009). Latinos not seeking treatment or taking medication can be due to parental disapproval and misunderstanding of mental health issues because they feel blamed for bad parenting (Kam et al. 2023). Cultural expectations push Latinos to present as resilient and hardworking; the symptoms of mental health can go against these expectations. Mental health issues can be read as “being crazy” (Kam et al. 2023; Choi, Kim, Gruber, 2019). Furthermore, structural issues such as cost, discrimination from and disconnection with mental health providers, and concerns about immigration status further discourage Latino college students from seeking treatment (Kam et al., 2023). Students also fear that seeking treatment will expose them and/or their families putting them at risk, potentially leading to hospitalization and/or ineffective solutions (Kam et al., 2023). Although Latino college students do not report on having worse mental health issues when compared to other groups, they did show greater histories of depression and were less likely to seek treatment due to structural and cultural values of mental health.

One method to alleviate mental health issues among Latinos is connection to family. Acculturative stress and depressive symptoms are significant with students who have low family support but not for Latinos who have high family support (Corona et al., 2016). Family support and other cultural values serve as buffer against discrimination, depression, and anxiety symptoms as they can have an adverse effect on mental health and well-being (Ayon et al. 2018; Corona et al., 2016). Connection to family is a cultural value that helps Latinos feel supported thus helping them with their well-being and mental health (Del Pilar, 2009). Going to college can

be difficult for Latinos as they spend less time with family and either live on campus or commute, resulting in less time available to bond with others and declines in the quality of meaningful relationships (Suwinyattichaipron and Johnson, 2022). In Latino culture, family is heavily emphasized and valued; thus, family connection is one way to help with mental health issues.

Because Latinos tend to avoid mental health treatment and value families and cultural connection, seeking food at the pantry is perhaps more likely to help them with mental health issues than other racial groups. Latinos perhaps receive greater mental health benefit from the pantry because they have fewer opportunities to address mental health issues elsewhere. Other racial groups are more likely to be getting treatment, as needed. As explained in the sections of **Food and Culture** and **Sense of Belonging**, getting food at the pantry targets specific cultural values such as building community, food rituals, and bonding with and supporting family which boosts ethnic identity and thus, mental health (Ayon et al. 2016). The finding that the pantry provides mental health benefits can translate into finding new ways to help Latinos or other groups improve their mental health when they do not feel welcome or comfortable seeking professional mental health services.

## **Conclusion**

In Latino culture, one way that cultural socialization is developed is through food rituals. Food serves to nurture Latinos' cultural values, including building community, connection to heritage, and commensality. Food offers time to connect with family and community, in order to learn more about culture and reinforce cultural values. Access to food thus helps to build a strong ethnic identity which further protects against discrimination, depression, and anxiety (Ayon et al., 2018). Latinos face many challenges in college, such as feelings of rejection and other

microaggressions, which can be overcome by building community and using resources that foster a sense of belonging. Understanding how a sense of belonging in college is strongly connected to building community which affirms cultural values can help universities and their campus resources, such as the pantry, enhance student experiences. Additionally, overall, Latinos are less likely to use professional mental health services due to cultural and structural barriers, and thus, can receive boosts to their mental health in other forms, such as using the pantry. A sense of belonging and connection to food can help students connect to their cultural values; the pantry does both. Research shows that aligning with one's cultural values can improve mental health. Food from the pantry is a pathway to greater connection to family, community and other cultural values; enhanced community and connection to culture foster a sense of belonging. Each of these aspects improves mental health, providing a map to explain why being Latino statistically predicts the self-report of mental health benefits from using the pantry.

Understanding the mechanisms beneath the reasons Latinos reported mental health benefits from using the pantry can provide the University with information that help them to better support students. This is an important example of the way supporting cultural values and belonging foster well-being and ultimately, academic success, retention, and graduation rates. The pantry can benefit from developing more ways to make the pantry more culturally welcoming for Latinos to increase their reach and influence. Also, the pantry can use this data to explore how they can better support other non-Latino students. Are there ways other groups can be culturally affirmed through such services? The University can also use a cultural approach with other campus resources to help Latino students to increase their sense of belonging and mental health. Understanding these connections also provides insight into ways we can support Latino college students' mental health, even if they are hesitant to use mental health services and

shows other ways that mental health can be supported. Overall, understanding these connections provides hope towards continuing to increase student success at CSUSM.

My research sought to explain one finding related to food pantries in colleges. After looking deep into the literature, there are still more topics to research related to the pantry, Latinos, and mental health. I plan to explore more in-depth the connections and themes I found; food and cultural socialization, benefits of development and connection to culture, mental health benefits, sense of belonging and cultural values, and the pantry's contribution to supporting Latino students. This summer or next fall I plan to conduct focus groups geared towards understanding more completely the relationship between the pantry and the support it provides, the ways it reinforces cultural values, and support for mental health for Latino students. I hope to further unpack why Latinos were statistically more likely than other racial groups to report mental health benefits from using the pantry through the focus groups. Some questions I will ask include how do mental health benefits translate into college success for Latino students? How do Latinos view using the pantry? Are students aware of the ways their culture is enhanced from using the pantry? My hope is this knowledge will support Latino well-being, academic success, families, retention, and graduation rates.

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