

“I Don’t Belong Here”:

A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Latinx First-Generation College Students

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Introduction

Although the United States is thought to be a country of equal opportunities, the educational experiences of students of color portray unequal and discriminatory practices that exist in higher education. These inequalities are especially evident among first generation Latinx students. For example, despite improvement in the rates of college admissions of Latinx first-generation students, graduation rates for Latinx students have remained stagnant. Research shows that while Latinx students have high rates of enrollment, they are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their white counterparts (Azpeitia and Bacio, 2022). In comparison to their White peers, studies show that Latinx students experience higher levels of doubt and a lower sense of belonging (Means and Pyne, 2016). These negative experiences can lead to oppression within the education system and a negative impact on college success rates.

As a Latina first-generation college student, I am interested in exploring the experiences of other Latinx students in higher education. Using qualitative research methods, my findings will show how Latinx students are systemically disadvantaged in higher education causing them to question their sense of belonging on college campuses. My research focuses on external pressures which impact Latinx students' ability to succeed and achieve their academic goals. Finally, my research will highlight how Latinx students show resilience and resistance in oppressive institutions. I hope to bring awareness to the overt discrimination present in higher education against students of color in order to bring about change in the treatment of minority students.

Literature Review

Although the Latinx college student population has grown significantly in the last few years, college campuses have continued to promote ideologies of whiteness and white power

which leads to hostile and oppressive environments that negatively impact the college experience (Wright-Mair et al., 2023). A sense of belonging is defined as the “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus” (Means & Pyne, 2017). There are several factors that can influence a student’s sense of belonging such as academic and social experiences which can be positive or negative (Means & Pyne, 2017). A common negative academic experience is feeling underprepared, with students feeling as though they had to learn how to learn, and feeling uncomfortable when they are faced with struggles in class (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Imposter syndrome occurs when an individual “questions their worth and accomplishments, and debates whether they truly deserve to be in the spaces they occupy” (Wright-Mair et al., 2023). In simple terms, imposter syndrome occurs when students begin to doubt themselves and their accomplishments, this is usually due to the barriers they face in college. Latinx students have reported feeling like “guests in someone else’s home”, this points to Latinx students feeling uncomfortable, inferior, helpless, and pressured to perform (Wright-Mair et al., 2023).

Latinx representation among faculty is important to a student’s sense of belonging and success. Latinx faculty not only serve as mentors for students who don’t normally have figures to go to for support, but they also “send a message that people of color belong in academic spaces” (Vargas et al., 2019). Faculty of color bring comfort to college campuses as well as feelings of empowerment for students of color by encouraging academic success and helping students accomplish their goals (Vargas et al., 2019). Latinx students perform better academically when they have professors and faculty who have similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Vargas et al.,

2019). Despite the growing number of Latinx students in college as well as the advantages provided to these students by having Latinx faculty, Latinx faculty remain in short supply with 146 Latinx students for every 1 Latinx professor (Vargas et al., 2019).

Latinx students may face conflict between their family obligations and their academic responsibilities. When deciding where to attend college, family plays an important role for Latinx students as they must decide whether to go away and leave their family or stay close to home so that they can be near their family and readily available to assist (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Having to decide leaves Latinx students conflicted because choosing to remain close to home could have significant impacts on their academics but leaving could damage their relationship with their family (Vargas et al., 2019). Family obligations and academic responsibilities may be incompatible as family takes priority over academics, but many Latinx parents immigrated so that their children could have better opportunities, especially in their education; However, this leaves Latinx students conflicted because they want to repay their parents for their sacrifices leaving them stuck between helping their family directly or helping them in the long run by performing well in school (Vargas et al., 2019). These demands placed on Latinx students from their families have a significant impact on the students and their ability to accomplish their academic goals (Vargas et al., 2019).

Society often focuses on the barriers placed upon Latinx students, ignoring the different ways in which they resist against the inequalities they face and remain driven in accomplishing their goals. Minority students tend to create their own support groups made up of their friends or classmates who have similar backgrounds or experiences that they can rely on (Comeaux et al., 2020). By creating their own informal support groups, Latinx students are engaging in a form of resistance that is affirming their “sense of self and belonging long-term” in environments that

support them and their identity and experiences (Comeaux et al., 2020). Minority students show resilience when disrupting stereotypes and perceptions present in higher education that “people of color are intellectually inferior” by performing well and succeeding (Comeaux et al., 2020).

Methods

The data for this research was gathered through content analysis and interviews. I conducted three semi-structured interviews which allowed the interviewees to speak more openly and “express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg, 2002). The interviewees were all Latinx first-generation college students Mari, Isa, and Alex whose names have been changed for their privacy. All the interviews were conducted in-person, two were done in the homes of the interviewees and one done at a coffee shop. To prepare for the interviews, I created an interview guide listing the topics I wanted to discuss as well as a few open-ended questions to get the conversation started (Esterberg, 2002). Each of the interviewees are first-generation Latinx students whose parents have immigrated to the United States from Mexico. I actively focused on building rapport with my interviewees so that they were comfortable in discussing their experiences with me. I was able to build rapport with my interviewees as I am a Latina first-generation college student which allowed me to connect with their experiences and feelings.

Before conducting the interviews, I made sure to remind my interviewees that they could stop the interview at any point should they feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed. During the interviews and with the permission of my interviewees, I took thorough notes and used a tape recorder so that I would not lose any important information from the interview. Once the interviews were complete, I immediately listened to the recordings to type out notes while the information was still fresh. To analyze the data from the interviews, I used open coding by making notes in the margins pointing out important concepts and interactions. After thoroughly

reading through the data multiple times, I used focused coding to further develop sociological themes and concepts that I noticed during open coding.

I conducted a content analysis of social media posts made by Latinx first-generation college students to gain further information on the college experiences of Latinx first-generation students. The posts covered several obstacles faced by Latinx students such as struggles with belonging, racist preconceptions, and guilt. I found through the content analysis that despite the barriers Latinx first-generation students experience, they remain resilient and encouraging of success. This content analysis provided understanding of the methods Latinx students use to resist against institutional barriers and achieve their academic goals. I used scholarly literature to analyze this content and deepen my understanding of the treatment of Latinx first-generation students in higher education.

Using qualitative research methods, I was able to gain a greater understanding of the “subjective experiences” of members of marginalized groups (Esterberg, 2002). Using a critical social research approach allowed me to examine how oppressive conditions are created and maintained, as well as their impact on the lives of marginalized individuals (Esterberg, 2002). Engaging with Latinx first-generation college students allowed me to view the negative preconceptions and inequalities present in higher education which significantly impacts the academic success and belonging of Latinx students. Using critical social research, my goal is to share my findings with Latinx students so that they may “use them to fight oppression” (Esterberg, 2002).

The Impact of Oppressive Systems on Latinx Student's

Latinx first-generation college students face institutional barriers which may have a significant impact on their education. Colleges and universities often cater to the majority population which may lead to feelings of helplessness and inferiority in Latinx students as they try to navigate the system on their own. A lack of representation among faculty contributes to feelings of doubt which also may impact their success. Along with academic pressures, Latinx students face pressure from their family which, at times, conflicts with their academic goals. Despite the barriers Latinx students face, they remain resilient and driven.

The Impact of Imposter Syndrome on Belonging

Some Latinx first-generation college students experience imposter syndrome when navigating higher education. This can lead to struggles with finding a sense of belonging on college campuses. The following is from an interview with Mari:

“I did feel out of place sometimes. Like I said, in my more advanced classes it was easy to question myself and whether I belonged there. I questioned whether I was serious enough about this whole college thing to go through with it or if I was just kidding myself.”

Mari’s doubts about her place in college reflect a common experience among Latinx first-generation college students. In higher education, minority first-generation college students found that they were “learning how to learn at the college level all on their own.” (Means and Pyne, 2017). Mari discusses how her academic struggles made her feel like she wasn’t “serious enough” about college and placed doubt in her mind on her ability to learn in college. In another interview with Isa, she stated:

“I struggled a lot my first year of college trying to fit in, especially since I got into a competitive school. I was surrounded by so many really smart people that I started to ask myself what I was even doing here. I didn’t belong here, I didn’t know as much as these people did, I wasn’t like these people at all. I would feel so awkward in class or around

my suitemates because everyone was so smart and got good grades and I was out here barely scraping by. It was embarrassing, I hated it.”

Isa’s experience highlights the impact imposter syndrome has on some Latinx first-generation college students and their sense of belonging and ability. When comparing themselves to other students, first-generation minority students report feeling uncomfortable when they were struggling in their classes (Means and Pyne, 2017). Isa describes her academic experience as “embarrassing” which impacted her sense of belonging on campus and provoked negative feelings within her. Imposter syndrome leads to feelings of helplessness and inferiority, with some Latinx first-generation college students relating their experience as feeling like guests in someone’s home (Wright-Mair et al., 2023). The awkwardness that Isa feels reflects her own feelings of “not belonging” and feelings of inadequacy. Even after being accepted and enrolling in college, she still felt that she wasn’t smart enough in comparison to her peers, which left her questioning her place in college.

“Show us that all of our hard work and sacrifices will pay off”: Lack of Latinx Representation

Some Latinx first-generation college students experience feelings of doubt about themselves due to a lack of representation. This can hinder student success and belonging. The following excerpt is from Alex, regarding her view on Latinx representation among her college Professors:

“I wish too that there was more examples of students like us [Latinx first-generation college students] in faculty members. It would be nice to see more first-generation Hispanic professors who made it, you know. Show us that all of our hard work and our sacrifices will pay off.”

Alex’s experience portrays the impact faculty representation has on Latinx first-generation college students and their motivation to succeed. Despite the benefits of having

faculty of color as well as the increase of Latinx students, “Latinx faculty remain underrepresented on their campuses” (Vargas et al., 2019). Alex’s desire demonstrates the significance of faculty representation in motivating and uniting Latinx first-generation college students. Faculty representation is meaningful to students as they serve as role models who empower students to succeed, while also showing that minorities do belong in higher education (Vargas et al., 2019). Alex discusses how faculty members that were Latinx first-generation students “who made it” would be encouraging to see as it shows how her “hard work and sacrifices” would lead to success.

Family Obligations vs. Academic Responsibilities

Some Latinx first-generation college students struggle with balancing family obligations with their school and work lives. These struggles can lead to feelings of guilt and even negatively impact Latinx students’ education. In the following excerpt Alex discusses her struggles with balancing family and school:

“I know my parents are getting older so there is a lot of pressure and responsibility on me to care for them. That’s why I’m trying hard to get a college education but it’s hard you know, trying to- trying to split my responsibilities between my parents, work, and school. They need a lot of help and it’s hard because I’m working and going to school. I’m the person they fall back on when they face any type of problem. I always have to be tied to home because if I’m far I don’t think they would survive. That’s why I didn’t get a dorm because I knew, like what’s going to happen to my parents? I knew if I left my mom would have been depressed without me. I want an education but I need to take care of them but I need an education to take care of them but I also have a job so I could leave school, but I shouldn’t...It’s a lot really.”

Alex’s experience details the pressures some Latinx first-generation college students endure when trying to balance their family responsibilities with their education and other aspects of their life. Latinx students struggle when having to decide between moving away for school or staying close to home to be able to assist their family when necessary (Vasquez-Salgado et al.,

2014). Alex describes how she feels that she must be “tied to home” and worries that her parents “wouldn’t survive” without her support and assistance, as she is their primary caregiver. Hispanic families emphasize family responsibilities over academics which can lead to conflict for Latinx students as they grapple with helping their family directly or helping their family long-term by succeeding in college (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). The back-and-forth Alex details of “I want an education” and “but I need to take care of my parents” portrays her own feelings of guilt in trying to balance family and school. The demands placed on students from their families provide difficulties for them to accomplish their academic goals (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014). Even though she knows it will be better long-term, the guilt she feels to care for her parents pushes her to consider delaying or leaving school entirely.

Resistance and Resiliency Among Latinx Students

Despite the challenges that the Latinx first-generation students in my study have experienced, they remain dedicated in reaching their goals. Through the support of students with similar experiences and with hard work, Latinx students are resisting the institutional barriers placed on them. The following statement was made by Isa:

“I think finding a good support system while in college is important. For me I was lucky to find a few other first gen students and for once I felt like I was meant to be where I was. Knowing there were other people going through similar struggles as me was a relief. I didn’t feel as stupid or ashamed anymore because what I was going through was normal. I think it’s also important to remember that you are there for a reason. You didn’t get to where you are because of luck or an accident. You’re there because you worked hard and you earned it. Prove everyone wrong by succeeding.”

Isa describes how Latinx students portray resilience by striving to succeed despite the stereotypes and stigma that may surround them. Latinx students desire to perform well and succeed and fight against racist perceptions that students of color are academically inferior (Comeaux et al., 2020). Isa acknowledges that Latinx students experience doubt about their

position in higher education as “luck or accident”, but she encourages resistance to these ideas through success. Isa’s experience demonstrates the resilience of Latinx students as they find and create their own forms of support when their institutions don’t. Informal support groups are a form of resistance which provides Latinx students with a sense of belonging and self (Comeaux et al., 2020). Isa describes how finding other Latinx first-generation students with similar experiences was a “relief” as it validated her own struggles and allowed for her to find a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

This research offers insights into the array of challenges experienced by Latinx first-generation students on college campuses. An individual's college experience is significant in determining their success and continuation in higher education thus, insuring an inclusive and supportive environment is essential. By sharing the stories of Latinx students and centering their experiences, I hope to give voice to all students of color to bring change to the education system and close the opportunity gap. These unique insights create a sense of urgency in promoting safe and accepting learning communities that bring about belonging and success to all students. Centering the voices of Latinx first-generation college students brings attention to their resiliency in higher education and validates their experiences. This validation can have positive impacts on their sense of self and academic success. By challenging harmful stereotypes and policies which may limit first-generation college students, we can honor their resiliency and promote change and inclusivity for all students of color.

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