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Adelyn Garcia

Clark University, adgarcia@clarku.edu

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Being and Belonging: The Othering of Latinx Students in Higher Education



CLARK UNIVERSITY

Adelyn García '22 – (Sponsor: Professor Esteban Cardemil)

Background

Abstract: College students are a heavily popularized group in the realm of academic research due to the various changes and experiences that young adults undergo during this time of their life. However, the experiences of Latinx students differ from their white-majority colleagues and face unique struggles when navigating their identities and a sense of belonging on campus. In the present study, 5 participants engaged in a 30-50 minute interview that encouraged them to reflect on the ways they are involved on campus, their connections to home, and their overall experiences being Latinx in a white-majority university. This qualitative method explores the ways these students may or may not feel connected to the campus community as a Latinx individual, and the implications this has on their sense of belonging and identity navigation. Findings show minority identity incorporation to be surface-level, and exclusive to specific groups in spite of the heterogeneity of the Latinx demographic, thus prompting higher feelings of isolation in those who may not fit into a singular group- consequently self-conceptualized as “other”. Suggestions on what universities can do to reduce the othering of Latinx students are discussed.

Why this age-group?

Emerging adulthood: A span of time from the late teens to mid 20s wherein young adults face distinct growths and developments in identity and life status that pave the way for adulthood, often confronted with major life changes (Arnett, 2007 & 2014). College becomes an environment for identity formation and gateway to adulthood: supplemented communities, strengthened sense of independence, extracurricular activities.

Why this population?

Being “Minoritized”: Consumerist diversity becomes performative and assumes a focus on profitability instead of community wellness. Spaces of identity reflection become disingenuous and shallow and exacerbate the “otherness” of minority students who may use this space (Scaritt, 2019). Their transition into college becomes more of a process of assimilation than self-exploration- a privilege the majority is provided upon enrollment

College: Campus climate incorporates peer and administrative interaction, communal student involvement, and overall socialization, but perceptions differ between White students and students of color. For example, extracurricular groups may prove to be beneficial to White students, but students of color may consider them hostile due to the “Whiteness” of the space (Huesman et. al, 2014).

Latinx Experiences: There are systemic barriers that the Latinx community may face (socioeconomic status, lack of resources in high school) in higher education (Ayala, 2012; Kurlaender, 2006; & Becerra 2010), but are surface level, as other marginalized individuals suffer these discrepancies as well.

Studies aimed at the Latinx experience in college have found familial responsibility to be a prominent motivator for institutional involvement, for example (*familismo*) (Ovink, 2014).

Key words: Latinx; college students; identity; othering; belonging

Demographic Information	N
	5
National Origin	
United States	3
El Salvador	1
Puerto Rico	1
Gender Identity	
Male	4
Female	1
University	
Clark University	3
University of Connecticut	1
Southern Connecticut State University	1
Year	
Freshman	1
Sophomore	3
Senior	1
Major*	
Geography	1
Psychology	1
Environmental Science	1
Political Science	1
International Studies	1
Economics	1
Philosophy	1

Note: Some participants are double majors.

Fig 1: Participant Demographics

Methods

Participants: 5 participants were recruited for this qualitative study and completed the interview process. To qualify, participants had to identify as Latinx, as well as be enrolled in a university. Supplementary identity labels, such as sexuality and additional races were provided by the participants during the interview.

Procedure: Recruitment texts were posted on social media and sent in email to cultural groups around New England. The 30-50 minute interviews were conducted in person and on Zoom. They began with the verbal completion of a demographic questionnaire about their identity and status as a college student. The remaining time consisted of a semi-structured interview pertaining to general experiences as a Latinx student, community involvement, identity incorporation into college setting, challenges they face in a White-dominated space, their sense of belonging and/or otherness because of this, and concluded with ways they believed schools could improve in these areas.

Results

In spite of the differing Latinx backgrounds, participants all shared a feeling of otherness on campus, whether the environment was academic or social in nature. Connections to their Latinx identities in college as well as their methods of locating a sense of belonging on campus diverged and intersected amidst their responses. These results are divided into three key sections: **a) their Latinx identities on campus; b) attempts at belonging; c) the impact of these experiences and implications they have on the success or failure of diversity inclusion in college.**

A) Latinx Identities on Campus

“*Día de los Difuntos* in Ecuador (...) is the most meaningful. I tried to make an altar in my room- I had to do it in my dorm room; I really didn't want that energy there, but it kind of had to be, so I had pictures and flowers and skulls.”
-Juan, sophomore

”Yeah, I would say I never suppress [my identity] because I still speak Spanish, I still like to listen to Spanish music, and I'm not trying to fit in so I will speak Spanish. But I feel like there is a lack of space for us to fit in especially because Clark is very small. It is kind of frustrating that... you really have to search hard to find your people to fit in.”
-Raúl, sophomore

B) Attempts at Belonging

“It forced me to question myself, almost to a degree of uncertainty, like... am I still Hispanic enough? Am I black enough? Because I don't want to adhere to any cultural stereotypes. Some people can't tell what I am, some people are curious, it was just a time of confusion that had come back. It was almost like it placed me back in childhood. I had to try to educate them and be friendly and be almost like an ambassador for my people which growing up you're always taught kind of anyway- to be an ambassador of your own people anyway.”

C) Implications / Suggestions

“So far [classes] have been quite diverse, and they also shared their stories. and when they were telling them, I could definitely relate to them, so I wouldn't feel very odd to share mine, and it wouldn't feel like “oh they don't really understand”. Maybe a couple here and there, but it wouldn't be completely odd to share my stories.”
-Yennifer, sophomore

“They can do events for Latin American students who grew up in the United States, how it is to be Latino, and international students how it is to be Latino. Very open spaces, open panels, ... and at the same time they can also create Latin American rights coalition which is to preserve the rights of the students.”
-Gianni, freshman

