

Latina/o college student organization involvement and its effect on members twenty years after college attendance

Ricardo Montelongo, Ph.D.
Sam Houston State University

Editor's note: The research in this paper was conducted with a TACUSPA research grant.

ABSTRACT

Former members of one large umbrella-type Latina/o student organization at a four-year public, flagship university located in Texas were interviewed approximately twenty years after their college attendance. The participants were involved in the organization between the years 1988 and 1992. The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to learn more about the possible long-term effect of Latina/o student organizations. The study found that former members still worked to promote the organization's goals of cultural advocacy, awareness, and pride twenty years after their college involvement. Recommendations are provided for further investigations on ethnic student organization involvement and its long-term effects.

Introduction

Latina/o student organizations at predominantly White institutions (PWI's) have increased in number and have become extremely diverse in regards to their activities and purposes (Delgado-Romero, Hernandez, & Montero, 2004; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Reyes, 2015; Rodriguez, 1995; Trevino, 1992). Latina/o student organizations on campuses nationwide provide more than social outlets for students (Davis, 1997; Moscoso, 1995; Reyes, 2015). These groups have become campus entities whose functions have expanded to advance goals for academic support, career development, and Greek life, just to name a few. Despite the diversity apparent among the types of Latina/o student organizations and their activities, the roots of these groups are firmly planted in social change, commitment to the Latina/o community, and common goals to be student resources for social and emotional comfort and adjustment at PWI's (Davis, 1997; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Montelongo et al., 2015; Moscoso, 1995; Trevino, 1992). The origins and functions of Latina/o student groups reflect both cultural and socio-historical factors unique to the Latina/o experience in the United States.

For Latina/o students attending PWI's during the 1980's and 1990's, balancing participation within the college campus culture and the Latina/o culture paralleled African American students facing similar challenges. Despite the increased efforts from colleges to address multiculturalism during that time, African American students often described a campus

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

climate that had “little willingness to incorporate African American [and other racial and ethnic] values, interests, or history into the core of campus culture” (Feagin & Sikes, 1995, p. 91). Feelings of worth and belonging were stated to be replaced by feelings of alienation and isolation. For many students of color attending college, their presence on campus was akin to that of being “guests in someone else’s house” (Turner, 1994, p. 355). An unwelcoming campus environment was also apparent for Latina/o students at PWI’s in the Southwest during this time (Trevino, 1992, Rodriguez, 1995). The presence of ethnic student organizations helped to create supportive niches to transform college environments into ones that welcomed Latina/o students (Turner, 1994). These types of college student organizations were resources where support could be found.

Since then, research on Latina/o involvement with ethnic student organizations have highlighted important outcomes provided to students such as a successful transition to campus and navigation of the campus climate (see, for example, Cabrera & Hurtado, 2015; Saenz, Ponjuan, & Lopez Figueroa, 2016). As research in this area increased, so did the interest in the educational outcomes the groups provided to students (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2014). However, a gap exists with understanding the long-lasting educational and personal outcomes associated with participation in Latina/o student organizations. The primary purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how former members of one Latina/o college student organization described their college involvement between 1988 and 1992 while attending a four-year public PWI in Texas and subsequent effects this past involvement had on the personal and professional development well beyond graduation. A qualitative phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study in that it sought to examine college involvement in relation to the social oppression structures apparent at PWI’s in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. By using open-ended interviewing, information collected could assist in understanding strategies and actions that worked to overcome oppressive environments. Knowing this information could further empower and motivate individuals currently facing similar challenges in the same environment (Creswell, 2014). By learning from past experiences of these former members, the study aimed to describe culturally relevant factors found in Latina/o college student involvement (Creswell, 2014). The research question for the study focused on the participant's past college involvement: How did former members of one Latino college student organization describe the effect of Latina/o student organization involvement twenty years after their college attendance?

Review of Literature

This section emphasizes research in collegiate level extracurricular involvement with a specific focus on college student organizations. Studies investigating characteristics associated with participation in student organizations are summarized to provide an idea of how much membership influenced the overall college experience. This review of literature begins with a discussion of effects associated with college student organizations in general. Specific research on the effects ethnic college student organizations will then be addressed, followed by an overview of Latina/o student organizations.

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

Effects Associated with College Student Organizations

Involvement in college extracurricular activities provide students with a variety of opportunities, to become better acquainted with the campus student life. College campus environments that held a multitude of student life components providing many opportunities for student organization participation influenced subsequent involvement in such activities, especially if students entered college with prior extracurricular involvement (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2015; Montelongo, 2003). Participation in college student organizations was shown to have an influence on affective outcomes such as cultivating a student's sense of satisfaction with the college experience (Abrahamowicz, 1988; Branand, Mashek, Wray-Lake, 2015; Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Williams & Winston, Jr., 1985) and in increasing participation and involvement within campus and community (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2014; Schuh & Laverty, 1983; Williams & Winston, Jr., 1985). College student organization participation was also an influential component in a student's total extracurricular experience as shown by the enhancement of intellectual development that came from allowing students to become aware of and involved with the educational environment (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Webber, Krylow & Zhang, 2013). Students were able to assess campus resources to achieve their educational goals (Abrahamowicz, 1988; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Smith & Griffin, 1993; Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006). Research findings on student experiences with college student organizations were frequently generalized to all college students (Stage & Anaya, 1996). However, research samples comprised mostly of middle-class whites provided the "norms" for these experiences where "diverse persons and diverse experiences often appear[ed] other than 'normal'" (Stage & Anaya, 1996, p. 49). Trevino (1992) stated that it was "particularly problematic [when researchers] use predominantly and traditionally white student organizations such as fraternities, sororities, student government, religious groups, choir groups, and intramural groups" as the focus for their studies (p.24). When this occurred, researchers failed to consider the contributions of ethnic college student organizations present on many campuses (Stage & Anaya, 1996). Failure to include such organizations could be related to the fact that ethnic college student organizations in higher education are relatively recent opportunities for student involvement in college life, especially in the timeframe of this study (Johnson, 1997; Rooney, 1985).

Effects Associated with Ethnic Student Organizations

The emergence of ethnic student organizations on campus in the 1980's and early 1990's reflected the changing demographics of the college student population in the United States. Ethnic student organizations became supportive outlets that dealt with difficult college experiences frequently associated with PWI's. Studies have described the influence these groups had on college students.

Studies exploring student involvement in ethnic student organizations suggested that these groups influenced college adjustment (Fuertes, Cothran, & Sedlacek, 1991; Moran, Yengo, &

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

Algier, 1994; Webber, Krylow & Zhang, 2013), peer support levels (Fiske, 1988; Person & Christensen, 1996); community, cultural and ethnic awareness (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2014; Davis, 1997; Mitchell & Dell, 1992) and membership in other campus organizations (Rooney, 1985; Webber, Krylow & Zhang, 2013). It also appeared that those students who participated in ethnic student organizations tended to have very good feelings toward their campus and seemed to be involved with other campus-sponsored groups (Rooney, 1985; Webber, Krylow & Zhang, 2013).

Latina/o Student Organizations

Latina/o student organizations were defined for this study as any student or administratively sponsored groups established for representing Latina/o interests and culture in a particular area (Montelongo, 2003). While Fajardo (2015) wrote that these college student organizations made their presence known on campus as early as the late-1800's, it wasn't until recently that these groups have been examined for their effects on the educational experiences and outcomes for Latina/o college students (Montelongo et al., 2015). Thus, the higher education literature in this area continues to grow (Montelongo, 2003, Montelongo et al., 2015, Munoz, 1989).

In higher education literature, interest exists on predictors of future college involvement for entering first-year students. Trevino (1992) found that Chicana/os with previous high school extracurricular activity was more likely to join minority college student organizations. In addition, Chicana/o students who consider themselves activists tended to participate in these organizations (Trevino, 1992). For Latina/os, participation in "campaigns, protests, and service efforts" to improve community conditions usually occurred through involvement in "community-based organizations" (e.g., churches, schools, non-profit organizations, national advocacy groups) (Davis, 1997, p. 230). These organizations "play[ed] a particularly crucial role in Hispanic leadership development" in that from this involvement, an active citizenry was nourished, and future leaders were groomed (Davis, 1997, p. 230).

Higher education literature also placed focus on involvement activities once Latina/os were in the college environment. Involvement in culturally related college activities such as that found in Latina/o student organizations were found to provide and maintain links to communities familiar to Latina/o college students (Fajardo, 2015; Hernandez, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Montelongo et al., 2015). These affiliations were characterized by community service, political activism, and advocacy for a variety of social concerns (Davis, 1997; Delgado-Romero, Hernandez, & Montero, 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Montelongo and his associates reviewed the most recent higher education literature addressing Latina/o student involvement and found three outcome areas that were frequently addressed: cultural identity, leadership, and academic development (Montelongo et al., 2015). The three outcome areas gave more specific involvement impacts for students such as Latino/a identity merging with first-generation college student awareness, the importance of creating strong and lasting peer relationships, referred to as "la familia", and using organizations as an initial tool for help-seeking behaviors, both academically and personally.

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

The literature Latina/o student involvement impact beyond graduation is an area that has yet to be fully explored. A recent study by Bowman, Park, and Denson (2015) provided specific information on civic outcomes six years after graduation resulting from involvement in ethnic student organizations. While their study offers one of the few investigations on long-term effects of ethnic student organization involvement, their selection of six years after graduation does provide an expansive window into long-term outcomes. An argument could be made that individuals after six years are still sorting through career, educational, and personal decisions. This study explores the question of long-term effects by extending the time after graduation into a period where it is assumed that most of these goals have already been completed. By doing this, the study hopes to increase the interest in higher education research to investigate the long-term effect of Latina/o student organizations and how members used their involvement to further help Latina/o communities and future college students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement was used in the study to explain the developmental changes occurring within students once they became involved with their college environment. Because "students learn by being involved", there is a direct correlation between involvement and student development (Astin, 1993, p. 36). Student involvement was defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1993, p. 297). Viewing involvement as a behavior performed by individuals is important: "it is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves" (Astin, 1993, p. 298). A student who is highly involved in college is one who "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Involvement is a term signifying an active student. Descriptors such as "participate in" and "taken part of" usually are associated with the type of behaviors that characterize student involvement. Astin (1993) stated that involvement entails the investment of physical and psychological energy in both highly generalized and specific educational experiences. The investment of energy is represented, specifically, by participation in Latina/o, college student organizations and generally by their experiences with college life at PWI's.

LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton (1993) provide an alternate explanation of biculturalism that considered not only an individual's ability to understand two different cultures, but also the ability to alter behavior to fit a particular social context. These researchers suggest that the relationship between a person's native culture and the culture in which he or she is living is more "bi-directional and orthogonal" rather than unidirectional (p. 399). What this means is that rather than choosing one culture over the other, individuals develop and maintain positive attitudes toward the native culture and attain competence in the second culture. The strength of this alternation model allowed the researcher to investigate both affective and cognitive coping strategies individuals used in handling the stress apparent when acquiring competence in the dominant culture during and after their attendance at a PWI. As stated by

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

LaFromboise et al. (1993), “the primary emphasis of the model is on the reciprocal relationship between a person and his or her environment” (p. 408).

The process of becoming bicultural is complex in that skill acquisition and capacity to socialize in two environments are needed for it to be effective. By understanding the model of bicultural competence developed by LaFromboise et al. (1993), the study was able to understand the psychological experiences of diverse individuals, as well as become aware of the context of that development. This model is used to understand the impact of Latina/o student adjustment within the two cultures (racial/ethnic and college). From this, student affairs research can break away from the idea that conformity is the norm for students to adjust and find acceptance on the college campus.

Researcher Positionality

My own personal involvement in Latina/o student organizations is important to disclose for this study. I am what Trevino (1992) describes as a “Born again Chicano” (p. 131). My involvement with a Latina/o college student organization allowed me to overtly express my culture through celebrations, programming, leadership, and activism. My involvement provided an outlet to explore my ethnic identity and to express my cultural heritage at the PWI which I attended as an undergraduate. Despite my active involvement, I felt animosity toward my college environment as a student. I come to this study holding this idea and view with regards to college student involvement. While I recognized the intersectionality between cultures, one of these being a Chicano, certain aspects of my college environment did not respect or understand the difficulties involved with living within multiple spheres of reality—my “borderland” (Anzaldúa, 1998). My experiences with Latina/o student organizations have provided strategies to understand my current strengths and abilities as I maneuver the faculty culture in another college environment.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods allowed participants to provide critical narratives of their college experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Using this methodology is appropriate when the researcher wants to inquire about the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). Using a social constructivist lens for this study allowed research participants to develop their meanings of Latina/o college student organization experiences. These varied descriptions provided a complex understanding of the research question. The research study’s goal was to use these accounts of student involvement to understand how interactions during and after college were shaped by “historical and cultural norms that operate[d] in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8).

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

Participant Selection

Participants for this study were purposefully selected for their wide range of collegiate involvement and their capacity to provide in-depth reflections that would help in understanding the research question (Creswell, 2014). Convenience sampling procedures were used to select participants who were members of one large umbrella-type Latina/o student organization at a 4-year public flagship university located in Texas between the years 1988-1992. The Latina/o student organization in this study was established at the PWI in the mid-1970's. The organization is still currently present on campus and has evolved to be the most visible group to provide Latina/o issues to students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community. Study participants attended a predominantly White, research intensive campus with student enrollment at the time between 39,000 to 41,000 students with a Latina/o student population approximately 6%.

Ten individuals who were members of the Latina/o student organization between 1988 and 1992 at the PWI were interviewed for the study. The extent of organization involvement varied for each of these former members. The length of undergraduate membership in the organization for interviewees ranged from two to four years. Five participants described their participation as general membership, while five stated serving as executive officers in the group as undergraduates. All participants stated that they were involved in other organizations and activities outside of the Latina/o student organization, both in ethnic and non-ethnic clubs and activities.

Five participants identified as female, four male, and one preferred not to answer. Participants were asked to describe their national, ethnic, or racial identity. Eight participants wrote "Hispanic" in the space provided for this item. Participants were asked to mark their preferred identifier for Latina/o cultural background. Out of the four choices provided – "Mexican-American," "Puerto Rican," "Cuban," "Other Hispanic or Latino (specify)" – all but one marked "Mexican-American" ("Chicana" was the only other written identifier). The age range of participants was between 46 and 50 years old, with an average age of 46.9 years. Six participants identified as being a first-generation undergraduate student when they attended the university. A summary of this information can be found in Table 1.

Study participants all received bachelor degrees with half of the sample going further in their educational careers. Three received master's degrees and two earned professional degrees. Interestingly, half of the sample established careers in public service as school administrators, educators, or community law. All participants are currently working in the state of Texas. Of those working in education, their employment locations are in southern regions of the state with large Latina/o student populations, with two participants working in higher education institutions having Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) designations. A summary of the education levels and careers of the participants can be found in Table 2.

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

Table 1					
<i>Participant Gender, Cultural Background, Age and First-Generation College Student Status</i>					
Participant Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Ethnic/Racial Identity	Latina/o Background	Age	College Generational Status
Consuelo	Female	Hispanic	Mex-Am	46	Second
David	Male	Latino	Mex-Am	46	First
Henry	Male	Mex-Am	Mex-Am	47	First
Jessie	Male	Hispanic	Mex-Am	47	First
Johnny	N/A	Hispanic	Mex-Am	50	First
Lobo	Male	Hispanic	Mex-Am	46	Second
Maggie	Female	Hispanic	Chicana	46	First
Monica	Female	Hispanic	Mex-Am	49	Second
Rae	Female	Hispanic	Mex-Am	46	Second
Sofia	Female	Hispanic	Mex-Am	46	First

Table 2		
<i>Participant Highest Level of Education & Current Professional Position</i>		
Name	Education	Current Professional Position
Consuelo	Professional	Chief Academic Officer, Large Urban School District in South Texas
David	Masters	Director, Title V Grants, Community College in South Texas (HSI)
Henry	Masters	Principal, Middle School in South Texas
Jessie	Professional	Lawyer
Johnny	Bachelors	Administrative, Law Office
Lobo	Bachelors	I.T. Database Analyst
Maggie	Bachelors	Front Office Administrator, Physician Office
Monica	Masters	University Lecturer, 4-Year Public University in South Texas (HSI)
Rae	Bachelors	Operations Manager
Sofia	Bachelors	Health Care, Physician Practice Administrator

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

Data Collection

Data was collected through multiple sources of information, such as interviews, small group discussions, documents and other artifacts to provide a detailed picture of the cohort. Themes were developed from the data analysis. The study employed culturally sensitive research methods as identified by Tillman (2002). Qualitative methods such as interviews were described as a research approach that was culturally sensitive to capture a “holistic contextualized picture” of Latina/o involvement in the study and knowledge was constructed based on how participants experienced and interacted with the Latina/o student organization (Tillman, 2002, p. 269).

Face-to-face individual and group interviews were conducted for data collection. One group interview with four of the participants was conducted for the study. In addition to the interviews, the researcher was invited to observe a weekend reunion event of former members of the Latina/o student organization attended by five of the study participants. During this reunion event, the researcher was observer-participant and was welcomed to ask general questions of the study participants and take field notes of conversations and activities (Creswell, 2014). After the interviews and observation, a focus group was conducted to further understand views offered by all interviewees. Six of the participants participated in the focus group as part of data collection. Participant interviews used an IRB-approved structured interview protocol consisting of sixteen open-ended questions divided into two components: the first asking for recollections about student involvement as a college student, the second asking for reflections on involvement influences on current personal and career roles. Observations of the reunion event allowed firsthand experiences with participants where the researcher was privy to additional topics discussed by the former members of the Latina/o student organization. The topics were connected to past interest areas and leadership activities addressed by the organization. A focus group was conducted to increase the validity of emerging themes and reliability of information collected from study participants.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for the study. All participants for the study had an opportunity to review transcripts. The researcher completed a general analysis of data by creating initial coding categories based on available literature on Latina/o student involvement and outcomes. The initial coding was then analyzed to create emergent themes resulting from relationships found within all text contained within the specific codes (Creswell, 2014). The emergent themes were formed from an additional review of transcripts. Open coding further categorized the interviews into several prominent themes describing perceived effects resulting from involvement in the Latina/o student organization. These final categories used in vivo terminology involvement in the words of the participants (Creswell, 2014). All data was then entered and further organized using QDA Miner software where central categories and dominant codes were determined from interview statements (Creswell, 2014).

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

After all interactions with participation, the researcher used a reflexivity journal to document thoughts and possible biases to improve the validity of data. Since the researcher had previous experiences with a Latina/o college student organization, notes described how participant accounts of involvement compared to the researcher's understanding of being a member of such a group. These reflections provided a reference in future data interpretation. Performing such a task helped in understanding how the interpretation of data could be influenced by the background and culture of the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

Limitations

The study is limited in its generalizability to the experiences of other former members of Latina/o student organizations from other institutions. This study used a sample whose experiences occurred within the environment of a large, four-year, public flagship Texas university with PWI characteristics. Descriptions of long-term effects of other former Latina/o student organization members coming from different institutional types and other regions of the country may provide different contexts in which their involvement occurred. The study also focused on the recollections of a select group of former members who had a fairly high level of involvement with the Latina/o student organization. All study participants had two or more years of active membership in the group. Emergent findings may not generalize to Latina/o students who have little or no involvement with Latina/o student organizations or campus student life. Thus, careful consideration is advised in stating the findings as reflective of all Latina/o college students who attended college during the timeframe of the study.

Findings

Involvement Effects

Using the theoretical lenses of student involvement developed by Astin (1993) and bicultural competence as explained by LaFromboise et al. (1993), this study revealed possible long-term effects of college student involvement on former members of a Latina/o student organization approximately twenty years after their college attendance. Interviews described their thoughts on how their undergraduate involvement in the organization effected they're current personal and career accomplishments, leadership roles, and community involvement. From their accounts, four major themes regarding the long-term Latina/o student organization involvement effects emerged after analyses: Responsibility, Confidence, La familia and reconnection, and Cultural advocacy: Who I am. The themes not only reflect emergent findings regarding long-term effects associated with Latina/o student organizations specifically, but those also found from other ethnic college student organizations.

Responsibility. Former members reflected on their past involvement in the Latina/o student organization and one key effect mentioned twenty years after their participation was how they gained a sense of responsibility. This responsibility was described as not just being held accountable for individual actions such as passing classes and eventually graduating, but also being held accountable for continuing to promote the main purposes of the Latina/o student

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

organization – cultural awareness and educational support – once they became alumni of the group and community members. The idea of being responsible for promoting these goals within the larger community suggested that the Latina/o student organization shaped citizens who were keen in the importance of giving back to the community, especially to Latina/os. Henry confirmed this idea of responsibility as a takeaway from college involvement:

We were responsible for impacting our community. I always felt that that's part of who I am. I think it goes back to the awareness of giving back to the community that was a large part of [the Latina/o student organization] in college. Education takes lots of time, but knowing how to give back is important. I got that from the group. It's part of how I see leadership.

Henry's view on leadership mentioned the idea of giving back. The view resulted from his participation in community service projects during college and the interactions it provided with the Latina/o community when he was learning more about his own Latino identity. From observations gained through this involvement, he learned that achieving educational goals should also include consideration on how these achievements could help Latina/o communities.

Consuelo continued this line of thought of achieving educational success beyond self-serving purposes. She reflected how when she was an undergraduate, she was one of few Latina/os attending college and compared that to current educational needs for the community:

In [the Latina/o student organization], it gave us the responsibility of really understanding the awareness of why we did the work we did and how it creates responsibility. At that time I believe we were only 7% of Hispanics actually in college. So, in a big way, we had to know our responsibility. It was not just about getting educated. It is about what are we doing for others and asking "how do we reach out to [the Latina/o community] and how do they see us?" We have a responsibility beyond just ourselves making it and graduating. We have an obligation to give back.

Consuelo saw this as especially important in her current role as a chief academic officer in a large urban school district. As a Latina, she wanted to make sure that her school district paid attention to educational outreach and support for its students, which has a large Latina/o student population.

Confidence. Although all the former members reached some level of success in their respective career paths, several mentioned still being on the receiving end of negative stereotypes, microaggressions, and lack of diversity in their workplace. When faced with these difficult situations, former members described how they used skills learned from their Latina/o student organization involvement to build confidence to face organizational challenges. Lobo described his experiences of being one of the few Latinos working in information technology in workplace settings he has been employed. He stated "I don't feel intimidated, I don't feel odd-even", but noticed how other Latina/o colleagues in the field

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

were intimidated by such situations. He provided an example of how he handled a recent promotion at his current work location:

[The Latina/o student organization] gave you the confidence not to be intimidated, not to, it's not about learning to be cocky. It's confidence. It's just confidence, the confidence to say "Hey, I'm going to do my best and I'm not going to allow myself to be looked down upon because I'm in the minority, period."...I never felt intimidated...and I never felt like I was ever beneath anybody else. I thought the organizations I was involved in, especially the Latino organization, really helped me integrate.

For Lobo, he reflected on how the Latina/o student organization helped him deal with being one of few people of color in a corporate setting. The sense of confidence gained from the Latina/o student organization also effected former member's views of their professional capabilities. Descriptions of going beyond their one's expectations and having a strong "can do" attitude was mentioned from the former members. Monica, who is a non-tenured track lecturer at a four-year public Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas, described her recent experience of being nominated to be her department's first-ever representative on the university's faculty senate. Monica described how he handled this nomination:

My department was just accepted into faculty senate, and I'm the first, my colleagues elected me, and I'm the first representative. I'm utilizing a lot of the leadership communication and networking skills that I learned as a student. I feel that my undergraduate experience gave me the confidence and the skills and to know how to do it.

Monica used the skills gained from Latina/o student organization involvement to serve in this first-ever role for her department. These skills allowed her to feel confident in transitioning into a campus governing unit typically held by tenured and tenure-track faculty members.

David also communicated thoughts about how his Latina/o organization involvement provided him a "can do" attitude to face life's challenges. David also works at a Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas. As the director of Title V grants, he often has to think of strategies to tackle educational challenges facing Latina/o students attending his two-year college:

When I transitioned into the real world of being a grown-up, I noticed a lot of similar injustices or lack of acknowledgment [facing Latina/os] in my career and my world. I felt that you know what, if I can do what I did as an undergrad in [the Latina/o student organization], why can't I do it now? That helped me like "why not, why can't I do it now?" attitude.

In thinking about his current work, David recalled how he used his undergraduate experience to find solutions for challenges faced by current students on his campus. His current mentality of "I did it then, I can do it now" has roots found in his Latina/o student

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

organization involvement. He can address and improve educational and societal conditions for Latina/o students using this perspective and personal experience of once being the recipient of such support.

La familia and reconnection. One of the most lasting effects described by former members were the strong bonds developed amongst other members. In the interviews, former members described these bonds as more than reliable friendships; they were relationships akin to la familia - family. These familial ties were similarly highlighted by Montelongo et al. (2015) in their synopsis of outcomes associated with Latina/o student organizations. La familia provided a sense of belonging and support in college environments where Latina/os had difficulty adjusting academically, socially, and emotionally (Montelongo et al., 2015). The present study showed the importance of establishing la familia and how former members carried these ties well after their college attendance.

Maggie's recollections of la familia were interesting in that her decision distance herself from these ties after college provided some sense of guilt. In college, she was very active in the Latina/o student organization, and after college graduation, she did not interact with her friends frequently. Currently, Maggie is the mother of a special needs child. By devoting the time necessary to care for her child, she felt the effect of leaving la familia coming from former members:

I mean, I intentionally separated myself from [the Latina/o student organization] after I left college and my attention went directly to the kids, especially in being special needs. I isolated myself from everything and the family I found in [the Latina/o student organization], trying to grasp this new unknown world [of caring for a special needs child] that I still don't fully understand. I feel horrible that I don't do anything like I used to do in [the Latina/o student organization].

Despite her thoughts, Maggie stated she still had the support of other former members. While interactions with other former members were at a lesser frequency, she mentioned that "the love, the nurturing, and the encouragement" from la familia was still received and that it "was just so encouraging and just motivated me."

David furthered the idea of la familia as an important outcome to the newest generation of Latina/o college students. David mentioned that when discussing college attendance to others:

I always encourage family members or friend's kids that are going to a college that I know to have Latino college student organizations to be part of them. I always encourage them because you never know who you will meet and develop great friendships in ten or fifteen years from now. That's how you build networks. Mostly, having great friendships that you can connect to like later on in life.

David's interview cautioned about students who isolated themselves within the college environment. For him, the Latina/o student organization offered him the experience of

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

meeting new people which provided la familia to assist in his eventual career advancement in higher education.

Former members discussed the importance of social media and technology in strengthening la familia. While face to face contact is infrequent for most of the former members, several mentioned how social media, especially Facebook, assisted in reconnecting former members. Lobo described how social media not only kept him in touch with his friends from the Latina/o student organization, it also helped him develop new friendships using the common bond of being former members of the group:

The friendships, the camaraderie I mean, you made lifelong friends. Some people I only knew for a short time or met briefly yet we still kept in contact. Social media has allowed me to reconnect. It has allowed us to reconnect over time.

Reconnecting and staying in touch has become much easier due to social media. Former members mentioned the importance of staying connected via their Facebook pages.

The theme of reconnection was on full display during a reunion event in which the researcher was invited to participate as an observer. As described by the former members to the researcher, every year several individuals from the Latina/o student organization hold an informal reunion usually once during the fall season, usually during a home football game, and another during the summer. The former members in the study labeled these meet-ups as “reconnection weekends” since they provide the primary purpose of keeping la familia connections strong and in place.

The reconnection weekend observed by the researcher occurred during late in the summer in San Antonio, Texas. The reunion was held at a sports bar, and five former members participating in this study attended. Notes from the reconnection weekend observed by the researcher highlighted discussions on community service, Latina/o community concerns, and leadership. Former members had a round robin-type discussion on what each had been doing in the areas of community service. After a few minutes, the discussion revolved around Latina/o concerns occurring at the respective hometowns of attendees. Later in the evening, a very passionate discussion occurred on the topic of leadership versus conformity and how Latina/os can recognize the differences between both.

While the idea of these “reconnection weekends” was to stay in touch, the perceived purpose noted by the researcher was to “reconnect” participants to the goals and purposes held by their former Latina/o student organization. The Latina/o student organization was such a pivotal part of their college experience; the former members used these events to keep fresh those ideas they learned from their involvement in their current professional and personal roles as citizens. Those ideas appeared to be community action and Latina/o advocacy.

Cultural advocacy: Who I am. Former members described how Latina/o student organization involvement affected personal identity during college. This influence on Latina/o identity development shaped how they see themselves now as Latina/o adults with

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

careers, family, and other responsibilities. Similar to themes of responsibility and confidence, former members described being certain of who they were in this moment of their lives, especially with cultural identity. In reflecting on current professional and personal accomplishments, former members blended their responses with cultural lessons gained from past involvement in the Latina/o student organization. Johnny discussed how cultural activities from the Latina/o student organization influenced his role as a parent, described as one of his best accomplishments:

On a personal note, I am [accomplished at being] father, raising my children with an awareness of race relations and social issues and helping them understand that what they are going to learn in the public school system in Texas is going to be grossly inadequate in regards to Hispanic culture and history. By being in the organization...I learned a lot through conferences and programs that we sponsored. I suddenly realized that our specific culture...needed a voice and needed to become active. So, by being in the organization...I found that forum which to this day helps me instill awareness.

Johnny's involvement, while he was in college, strengthened his identity as a Latino, which continues onward in promoting cultural pride for his family. His Latina/o student organization involvement helped him be secure in his cultural knowledge and lets his children know that their education also needed to include social justice issues and history.

Former members asserted their encouragement for others to also participate in ethnic student organizations. Rae described how she volunteers to assist Spanish-speaking families with completing college applications. In providing this service, she made it a point to also tell applicants also to get involved in campus life and when they do, to consider participation in ethnic student organizations:

Any of the kids I work with to help them into universities, I've been doing that for six years, I've been helping kids go through the process of filling out applications and translating for parents who are non-English speakers. Anytime I can encourage them to get involved with an ethnic-based organization; I do that. I very strongly encourage these kids to get involved, and if they go to [the university used for the study], I tell them to get involved with the organization I joined.

Rae provided her knowledge to promote higher education to others in her community. Her experiences with the Latina/o student organization also allowed her to promote campus involvement in ethnic student organizations to help with the college transition.

Monica also used her Latina/o student organization involvement to support a campus program that aids Latina/o communities. While the program does a valuable service, Monica found out that even within her campus community, her colleagues did not fully support or assist in its efforts:

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

Currently, as the lecturer of the institution I am at, I'm mentoring a migrant program, and I'm doing some programming for them that no one has stepped up or done. The director told me I was one of the few faculty members who even volunteered to help. I find that astounding because mentoring is so important which is something we did extensively in [the Latina/o student organization] back when I was a student.

Monica uses one of the important functions of the Latina/o student organization as part of her work ethic. She advocates for more mentoring which is surprisingly lacking in a community that is present on her current Hispanic-serving institution.

Henry summed up the thoughts of several former members on how the Latina/o student organization impacted Latina/o identity. Thinking back on what being a Latino college was like more than twenty years ago, Henry stated that quite simply that the Latina/o student organization allowed him to be proud of his Latino background. In his reflection, he saw his college involvement as an important starting point towards understanding who he was as a Latino:

I think a great thing that came out for us is being proud of who we are. Back in the Eighties, we started to find out who we were. [The Latina/o student organization] made me proud of who I was. Back then, there was not a lot of in-depth discussion in high school or college on how to be proud of who you were. [The Latina/o student organization] gave us start to find out who we were as Latinos. I'm grateful for that. Being involved in [the Latina/o student organization] help me learn who I am.

Henry mentioned using some of his experiences in assisting his middle school students in their identity development by promoting ethnic pride and offering support for cultural awareness within his community surrounding his campus.

Discussion

This exploratory study discovered that involvement in a Latina/o student organization planted seeds for future community activism, career and educational advancement, supportive networks, and cultural pride. In addition, the lifelong friends that were made – la familia – provided a strong network of support for former members as they faced the continued challenges of being an adult after college. The Latina/o student organization created a legacy of former members who remained true to the goals and purposes of the group. In their lives as alumni of the PWI, they still work to improve educational conditions for current Latina/o students, support each other through constant reconnection, and provide cultural advocacy for their families and surrounding communities.

Recommendations for Practice

Several implications and recommendations for student affairs professionals looking for ways to improve the college experience for Latina/o students attending large public PWI's can be derived from this future study. Although this study is focused on the effects of Latina/o

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

student organization involvement twenty years after college attendance, it could provide a glimpse into a broader area of college student involvement research that is still currently lacking in the higher education literature. Investigations should consider looking beyond immediate student outcomes from campus life and start looking at how our campus life environments create alumni who are active in the community. By paying attention to career and personal milestones, more knowledge is gained on how college involvement assists in the attainment of these goals.

This study describes how Latina/o student organizations create a sense of la familia for former members and how these friendships continue long after college attendance. Further investigations on Latina/o student organizations and their socialization process for members need to be completed so that higher education administrators understand the relationships that exist among members. The family-like ties that develop among members are important in once they graduate. In this study, these ties keep former members accountable in their efforts to give back to the Latina/o community.

With regards to institutional support of Latina/o student organizations, this study explains the important legacy of Latina/o involvement – awareness of Latina/o concerns and involvement with the Latina/o and broader community. Since their establishment on college campuses, ethnic student organizations have faced perceptions of segregating from the overall campus community. Former members in this study disagreed for the most part on this perception. Using the study findings will provide some evidence that Latina/o student organization members often become more connected to their PWI because of involvement, during and after college.

Latina/o student organization former members are key resources in building what Montelongo (2003) describes as a “cultural bridge” between current students and the campus environment, cultural identity, and other communities surrounding campus (Montelongo, 2003). Latina/o student organizations play a key part in providing this bridge to students. Like the reconnection weekend that is described in this study, institutions need to understand how important it is to provide a welcome back event for former members. Such an event can help reconnect former members to the goals and purposes of the Latina/o student organization, while at the same time letting former members share their strategies to overcome challenges to current members.

Conclusion

In looking at their overall college experience, former members of the Latina/o student organization are individuals who have a deep history with campus life at their PWI. They are able to describe involvement in numerous college student organizations. However, the Latina/o student organization has the most effect on their college experience. LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton’s (1993) concept of bicultural competence help explain how former members develop their Latina/o cultural identity and attain competence in the navigating and connecting to the college environment. After college, it also helps in understanding how

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

these former members transition into life after college. Based on their accounts, the Latina/o student organization mediated this navigation.

Higher education administrators and researchers need to understand culturally relevant factors stemming from student involvement patterns. Ethnic student organizations have effects on Latina/o students. Thus, future Latina/o success is nurtured during the college years by the support of ethnic student organizations. Discovering specific outcomes several years after college attendance provides an interesting perspective to how student affairs professionals produce engage citizens and future leaders in society.

References

- Abrahamowicz, D. (1988). College involvement, perceptions, and satisfaction: A study of membership in student organizations. *Journal of College Student Development*, 29(3), 233-238.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1998). Borderlands. In R. Delgado and J. Stefancic (Eds.) *The Latino/a condition: A critical reader* (pp. 627-630). New York: New York University Press.
- Astin A.W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297-307.
- Astin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four-critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Baxter Magolda, M.B. (1992). Cocurricular influences on college students' intellectual development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 33(3), 203-213.
- Bowman, N. A., Park, J. J., & Denson, N. (2015). Student involvement in ethnic student organizations: Examining civic outcomes 6 years after graduation. *Research in Higher Education*, 56(2), 127-145. DOI: 10.1007/s11162-014-9353-8
- Branand, B., Mashek, D., Wray-Lake, L., & Coffey, J. K. (2015). Inclusion of college community in the self: A longitudinal study of the role of self-expansion in students' satisfaction. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(8), 829-844. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0080>
- Cabrera, N.L. & Hurtado, S. (2015). The ivory tower is still White: Chicana/o-Latina/o college students' views on racism, ethnic organizations, and campus racial segregation (p. 145-167). In R.E.Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K-12 to college and beyond*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Cooper, D.L., Healy, M.A., & Simpson, J. (1994). Student development through involvement: Specific changes over time. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35(2), 98-102.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th Ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Davis, M. (1997). Latino leadership development: Beginning on campus. *National Civic Review*, 86, 227-233.
- Delgado-Romero, E. A., Hernandez, C., & Montero, H. (2004). Mapping the development of Hispanic/Latino/a student organizations: A model at the University of Florida. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 3(3), 237-253.
- Fajardo, O. (2015). A brief history of international Latin American student fraternities: A movement that lasted 86 years (1889-1975). *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 14(1). DOI: 10.1177/1538192714548928
- Feagin, J.R. & Sikes, M.P. (1995). How Black students cope with racism on White campuses. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 8, 91-97.
- Fiske, E.B. (1988). The undergraduate Hispanic experience: A case of juggling two cultures. *Change*, 20(3), 46-50.
- Fuertes, J.N., Cothran, M. & Sedlacek, W.E. (1993). A model for increasing Hispanic student involvement on U.S. campuses. *The College Student Affairs Journal*, 11(2), 11-15.

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

- Guardia, J. R., & Evans, N. J. (2008). Factors influencing the ethnic identity development of Latino fraternity members at a Hispanic serving institution. *Journal of College Student Development, 49*(3), 163-181.
- Hernandez, J.C. (2002). A qualitative exploration of the first-year experience of Latino college students. *NASPA Journal, 40*, 69-84.
- Hurtado, S. & Carter, D.F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education, 70*, 324-345.
- Johnson, S. (1997). Ethnic/cultural centers on predominantly White campuses: Are they necessary? In K.Lomotey (ed.) *Sailing against the wind: African Americans and women in education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- LaFromboise, T., Coleman, H.L.K., & Gerton, J. (1993). Psychological impact of biculturalism: Evidence and theory. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*(3), 395-412.
- Mitchell, S.L. & Dell, D.M. (1992). The relationship between Black students' racial identity attitude and participation in campus organizations. *Journal of College Student Development, 33*(1), 39-43.
- Montelongo, R. (2003). *Chicana/o and Puerto Rican Experiences with Latina/o and minority college student organizations at predominantly White institutions and the potential effects of these organizations on educational outcomes*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Montelongo, R., Alatorre, H., Palencia, J., Plaza, R, Sanchez, D. & Santa Ramirez, S. (2015). Latina/o students and involvement: Outcomes associated with Latina/o student organizations. In D. Mitchell, E. Danielle, J. Gipson, & K. Soria (Eds.) *Student involvement and academic outcomes: Implications for diverse college student populations*. New York, NY: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.
- Moran, J.J., Yengo, L., & Algier, A. (1994). Participation in minority oriented cocurricular organizations. *Journal of College Student Development, 35*(2), 143.
- Moscoso, E. (1995). Culture comforts: Hispanic organizations help students build a home away from home. *Hispanic, 8*(2), 50-51.
- Munoz, Jr., C. (1989). *Youth, identity, and power: The Chicano movement*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Padilla-Díaz, M. (2015). Phenomenology in educational qualitative research: Philosophy as science or philosophical science. *Educational Excellence, 1*(2), 101-110.
- Person, D.R. & Christensen, M.C. (1996). Understanding Black student culture and Black student retention. *NASPA Journal, 34*(1), 47-56.
- Reyes, D. V. (2015). Inhabiting Latino politics: How colleges shape students' political styles. *Sociology of Education, 88*(4), 302-319. DOI: 10.1177/0038040715602753
- Rodriguez, R. (1995). Hermandades on campus: Elite Latino secret societies and fraternities of the past give way to today's "Brotherhoods" and "Sisterhoods". *Black Issues in Higher Education, 12*(21), 26-29.
- Rooney, G.D. (1985). Minority student's involvement in minority student organizations: An exploratory study. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 26*(5), 450-456.
- Saenz, V. B., Ponjuan, L., & Figueroa, J. L. (Eds.). (2016). *Ensuring the success of Latino males in higher education: A national imperative*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)

- Schuh, J.H. & Laverty, M. (1983). The perceived long-term influence of holding a significant student leadership position. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 24(1), 28-32.
- Smith, J.S. & Griffin, B.L. (1993). The relationship between involvement in extracurricular activities and the psychosocial development of university students. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 13(1), 79-84.
- Stage, G. Anaya, J. Bean, D. Hossler, and G. Kuh (Eds.) *College students: The evolving nature of research* (pp. 12-22). Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster/ASHE.
- Tillman, L.C. (2006): Researching and writing from an African-American perspective: reflective notes on three research studies, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 19(3), 265-287.
- Torres, V., Reiser, A., LePeau, L., Davis, L., & Ruder, J. (2006). A model of first-generation Latino/a college students' approach to seeking academic information. *NACADA Journal*, 26(2), 65-70.
- Trevino, J. (1992). *Participation in ethnic/racial student organizations*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of California, Los Angeles.
- Turner, C. S. (1994). Guests in someone else's house: Students of color. *The Review of Higher Education*, 17(4), 355-370.
- Webber, K. L., Krylow, R. B., & Zhang, Q. (2013). Does involvement really matter? Indicators of college student success and satisfaction. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(6), 591-611. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0090>
- Williams, M. and Winston, Jr., R.B. (1985). Participation in organized student activities and work: Differences in developmental task achievement of traditional aged college students. *NASPA Journal*, 22(3), 52-59.

Student Affairs On Campus

The Journal for the Texas Association of College & University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA)