



“At the End of the Day...the System Should Be Supporting”: Latina Undergraduates Share How Higher Education Professionals Can Support their Success

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ABSTRACT

In this study grounded in a LatCrit framework, 11 Latina undergraduates at a Predominantly White Institution in the Western U.S. share the systemic institutional barriers inhibiting their abilities to reach their goals and graduate from college. Through their testimonios, they revealed challenges navigating their higher education institution, including lack of validation, racism, and discrimination. They also share potential solutions to support them as they navigate higher education, including bolstering sense of belonging through affinity groups, validation from faculty & staff, and recognizing their labor to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. By listening to Latina undergraduates, higher education professionals can be encouraged to develop more equitable and culturally enhancing practices that support Latina undergraduates in navigating higher education and reaching their goals.

Keywords: Latina undergraduates, LatCrit, sense of belonging, student success, testimonio, validation

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, the enrollment of Latinas in higher education has grown and continues to do so (Espinosa et al., 2019). To navigate higher education, Latina undergraduates draw on their family and community support and their own resilience and persistence (Acevedo et al., 2021; Aragon, 2018; Kiyama, 2018; Liou et al., 2023). In addition to graduating from college, many Latinas aim to honor family sacrifices, serve as role models, and give back to their communities (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020; Corona et al., 2016; Storlie et al., 2016). However, at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Latina undergraduates encounter challenges, including racially hostile environments with microaggressions and dismissal of their cultural knowledge (Acevedo et al., 2021; Perez Huber et al., 2023; McCabe, 2009; Yosso et al., 2009), leading to feelings of non-acceptance, marginalization, isolation, stress, and depression (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Von Robertson et al., 2016; Thornhill et al., 2023).

To better understand the systemic barriers preventing Latina undergraduates at PWIs from achieving their goals, I asked 11 Latina undergraduates to share their *testimonios* detailing the challenges they faced at their institution that were inhibiting their abilities to thrive. Grounded in a LatCrit framework, I centered the voices of Latina undergraduates in this study and asked them to share how they believe their PWI can better support them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many Latinas aspire to attend college, yet only 18.5% have completed a bachelor's degree or higher (Espinosa et al., 2019). Several researchers have documented how Latina undergraduates still face unique challenges in college, including racially hostile campus environments and a misunderstanding of their cultural values, which create barriers to completing their college degrees (Carales & Nora, 2020; Garriott et al., 2019; Liou et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2022). At PWIs, Whiteness embeds itself in the institutional structures, creating an environment where Latinas do not feel safe, welcomed, or comfortable at their institution (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2022; Gusa, 2010; Perez Huber et al., 2023; Yosso et al., 2009).

Furthermore, Latinas experience interpersonal and institutional racial microaggressions, which question their academic abilities, demean their ethnic identities, and dismiss their cultural knowledge (Perez Huber et al., 2023; McCabe, 2009; Yosso et al., 2009). These experiences have an adverse impact on Latinas' sense of belonging, well-being, and academic success (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Carales & Nora, 2020; Thornhill et al., 2023). Thus, it is important to further investigate the experiences of Latinas at PWIs and what is hindering them from

thriving in these institutions, as well as the ways in which they believe their PWIs can better support them.

Latinas experience oppression at the intersection of their race, ethnicity, and gender in the college environment (Acevedo et al., 2021). Traditional Latina gender roles complicate the Latina undergraduate experience in higher education. The concept of *marianismo*, which emphasizes that Latinas are spiritually superior to men, humble, submissive to the demands of men, are to make sacrifices for their families, and are expected to embody the characteristics of the Virgin Mary, shapes Latina gender roles (Castillo et al., 2010). As such, during college, Latinas may experience dissonance created by their families' pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles and obtain an education (Torres et al., 2019). Additionally, Latinas are more likely than Latinos to mention gender as an issue of inequality in the U.S. (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020). For example, Latina undergraduates were more likely than their Latino counterparts to share how they anticipated many barriers and challenges to college, including a lack of resources, lack of peer and family support, and systemic barriers to completing higher education (McWhirter et al., 2013). As a result of their multiple marginalized identities, Latina undergraduates report being viewed as docile, hypersexualized, lacking goals, and not capable of academic success (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020; Kiyama, 2018; McCabe, 2009). These stereotypes are often held by their faculty and peers, who have low expectations for them (Acevedo et al., 2021; Deeb-Sossa et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Latina undergraduates explained how gendered racial microaggressions contributed to feeling unsafe, disrespected, isolated, and excluded (Garriott et al., 2019; Liou et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Furthermore, researchers found Latina undergraduates internalized stereotypes about themselves, contributing to self-doubt (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020).

Many higher education professionals continue to view Latinas from a deficit perspective (Ching, 2022; Liou et al., 2023). Ching (2022) found even faculty who did not outwardly discriminate against Latinas still believed they were academically underprepared for college. Furthermore, when Latinas enter college, they navigate two incongruent worlds: their Latine culture and community and their college (Thornhill et al., 2022; Triana et al., 2020). This collision is pronounced at PWIs, where there is an increased lack of understanding of Latine culture, values, and experiences (Torres et al., 2019). Latinas attending PWIs often feel forced to adopt White American norms and values, such as competition, independence, individualism, and worldliness, to succeed in college (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2015). Latine values, which emphasize *familismo*, the importance of and loyalty to family, and *comunidad*, which emphasizes collectivism, collide with White American values at PWIs (Castellanos & Gloria,

2007; Triana et al., 2020). Latinas adapting to a higher education environment that does not align with their values can cause distress (Castillo et al., 2015; Mayorga et al., 2018). While previous researchers have suggested infusing Latine values into curriculum and pedagogy, there needs to be more research to understand how faculty and staff are integrating these perspectives.

To cope with challenges at college, Latinas embrace their identities and see them as strengths, such as lessons learned from home, their cultural values, and being bilingual (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020). In particular, they draw from *familismo* by valuing the role their families have in their education, and they gain strength from their support (Matos, 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2013). Latinas are motivated to pursue higher education because of their parents' advice and stories of how they could not complete their own education (Aragon, 2018; Matos, 2015). Additionally, Latinas report being motivated to persist in college because they wanted to set an example for younger family members (Kiyama, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2013). Latinas also attributed their ability to cope with discrimination while attending PWIs to their commitment to *familismo* (Sanchez et al., 2018). Additionally, Latinas embrace communities at their higher education institutions that adopt aspects of *familismo*, honor and celebrate Latine culture, and provide access to resources and networks that assist with navigating college (Liou et al., 2023; Lopez et al., 2019; Matos, 2015).

Furthermore, Latinas take a planned and active approach to learning about resources to successfully navigate their college (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). They also seek out community with other Latinas. Liou et al. (2023) found Latinas supported one another in resisting racial and gender discrimination at their institution. When connecting with others with similar experiences, Latinas experience microaffirmations, which Perez Huber et al. (2021) defined as “the subtle verbal or non-verbal strategies People of Color engage that affirm each other’s dignity, integrity, and shared humanity (p. 5). Racial microaffirmations are a protective response to microaggressions that make Latinas feel heard and seen, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging (Perez Huber et al., 2021).

Researchers have highlighted the importance of affinity groups in supporting Latinas at PWIs (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Lopez et al., 2019; Lucero et al., 2017). These groups, which celebrate and value Latine cultural assets, enhance Latinas’ sense of belonging (Garcia, 2020; Lopez et al., 2019; Lucero et al., 2017). They also create safe spaces where Latinas can find support from peers with similar experiences (Cerezo et al., 2018; Garcia, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Despite their critical role, affinity groups and cultural centers are often underfunded, under-resourced, and understaffed (Linder, 2019). There is a need for further research to demonstrate the significant impact these programs have in

the lives of Latinas at PWIs so that they can be further supported by their administration.

Latina undergraduates also find belonging through relationships with faculty and staff who provide validation (Carales & Nora, 2020; Ching, 2022; Hurtado et al., 2015; Lucero et al., 2017). Validation, defined by Rendon (1994), involves the importance of culturally diverse students feeling supported and affirmed by college administrators, faculty, and staff. Faculty and staff have an important role in conveying that the college is welcoming and inclusive of Students of Color (Carales & Nora, 2020; Hurtado et al., 2015). These relationships can counter the negative racialized experiences of Latinas and empower them to continue college (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020). While not necessary to be Latina to provide validation, researchers note that Latine faculty, due to shared cultural understanding, have been particularly effective (Ching, 2022; Perez Huber et al., 2021). Further research must seek to understand how both Latine and non-Latine faculty create inclusive and welcoming environments for Latinas.

Moreover, Latinas are often put in the position to be activists because they feel like they must take on the responsibility to challenge racism and injustice at their PWI to survive (Linder, 2019). By challenging injustices, Latina undergraduates inspire, motivate, and empower their peers (Rendon et al., 2018). Latinas contribute to their higher education institutions by creating inclusive spaces for other historically marginalized students (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Unfortunately, their “educators and peers frequently expect students with minoritized identities to address oppression as part of their daily experience rather than seeing it as a form of activism, involvement, engagement, or leadership” (Linder, 2019, p. 19). Ramos and Sifuentez (2021) argued this activism should be seen as a form of success because it contributes to the retention and recruitment of students.

While there has been significant research on the challenges and barriers Latinas face in PWIs, there has been little research to ask Latinas what they would like to see implemented within their PWIs to better support them. However, Latina undergraduates have agency and a vision for their futures and are embracing their voices to demand higher education institutions change to better support them (Kiyama, 2018). This research seeks to fill this gap by asking Latinas their perspectives with the goal of putting responsibility on the institutions to make changes versus Latinas adapting to their PWIs (Rendón et al., 2018). The research questions guiding this study were: What institutional challenges have Latina undergraduates faced at their PWI to achieve their goals? What support do Latina undergraduates recommend their PWI provide them to help them reach their goals?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

LatCrit, derived from Critical Race Theory (CRT), operates under similar tenets (Valdes, 1996). In developing and applying a LatCrit framework to education, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) argued both CRT and Lat Crit acknowledge racism is endemic in U.S. society and that it intersects with other forms of oppression. Further, they argued that “class and racial oppression cannot account for oppression based on gender, language, or immigration status. It is at this intersection of race, class, gender, language, and immigration status that some answers to theoretical, conceptual, and methodological questions related to Chicana and Chicano student resistance might be found” (p. 313). As such, scholars developed LatCrit to account for the unique experiences of Latines in U.S. society. In research, LatCrit scholars account for the language, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality of Latines (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004). LatCrit researchers also examine the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression, which allows for the concerns of Latinas to be addressed (Hernández-Truyol, 1997; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

LatCrit scholars challenge dominant ideologies within U.S. society and the education system, including objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, and race neutrality (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Furthermore, LatCrit scholars recognize deficit frameworks and racially discriminatory practices and policies enacted in higher education to subordinate Latines. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) argued these ideologies exist to ensure dominant groups in the U.S. maintain their power and privilege. Through LatCrit, researchers can expose and dismantle these practices (Villalpando, 2004).

LatCrit scholars also emphasize the experiential knowledge of Latines as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). As such, Latine narratives, counterstories, and *testimonios* are essential for understanding their oppression (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit researchers center Latine experiential knowledge and view it “as an asset, a form of community memory, a source of empowerment and strength, and not as a deficit” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 46). Villalpando (2004) called on higher education professionals to utilize LatCrit to acknowledge Latines enter college with their own strengths and have their own agency.

By utilizing a LatCrit framework, higher education professionals can understand how higher education institutions perpetuate race-neutral programs and policies that benefit the dominant White student population while minimizing Latine experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2004).

LatCrit scholars argue for utilizing an interdisciplinary perspective to examine the historical and cultural context in which policies and practices are developed and how they are connected to race and racism (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004). By examining this context, LatCrit scholars “expose the ways in which so-called race-neutral institutional policies and practices perpetuate racial or ethnic subordination” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 42). As such, LatCrit scholars account for how Latinas have struggled in U.S. society and how that shapes their higher education experiences.

LatCrit scholars also strive towards social justice and ending all forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and oppression based on language and immigration status (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2004). Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) argued, “Critical race researchers acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower” (p. 313). With this understanding LatCrit scholars must continuously seek to create programming and policies that are socially just and empower Latinas.

In this research study, I centered Latina undergraduates attending Mountain University (MU), a PWI, to better understand their goals for higher education and how their institution supports them in reaching those goals. I utilized LatCrit to challenge the structure of MU, which is centered on Whiteness and consistently has grappled with racial and gender discrimination. Similar to other PWIs, Latinas at MU have experienced racial and gender discrimination and do not feel that MU is set up to support their goals (Perez Huber et al., 2023; McCabe, 2009)

RESEARCH METHOD

Testimonio, “a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else” (The Latina Feminist Group 2001, p. 13), gives voice to those who are often silenced. As a methodological tool, the one sharing their *testimonio* is the holder and creator of knowledge, while the researcher is an “outside activist and ally” who shares the story (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 365). In her research with undocumented Latina undergraduates, Perez Huber (2009) connected *testimonio* to LatCrit to reveal how their experiences had been shaped by racial, gendered, classed, and nativist oppression. Further, Perez Huber found by sharing their experiences her participants were able to find healing and empowerment. Similarly, the Latina undergraduates in this study shared their *testimonios* to reveal the challenges they faced reaching their higher education goals and were empowered to offer solutions for PWIs to consider. As the researcher, I was called to share these stories to incite change.

My Testimonio

I'm a Queer Latina with Mexican-American roots who has navigated PWIs as both a student and practitioner. I've often found myself in a state of *nepantla*, living between two worlds, that of the U.S. and Mexico, and that of a dominant heteronormative society as a Queer person (Anzaldúa, 1987). Encouraged to excel academically and attend highly selective institutions that were PWIs, I quickly realized these institutions were not designed for historically minoritized communities like those I am a part of. My cultural heritage, knowledge, and values often went unrecognized or framed from a deficit perspective. Through my resilience and support from faculty and peers, I navigated these PWIs and earned a Ph.D. Now, I aim to uplift Latina voices to create more equitable and inclusive higher education spaces.

Participants

This research occurred at MU, a private PWI in the Western U.S., during Fall 2021. Among 5,900 undergraduates, 70% were White, 13% were Latine, and 8% were Latina. Using criterion sampling, I selected 11 testimonialistas (Latina/Chicana/Hispanic women) for their ability to provide in-depth insights. The participants were current MU undergraduates, had completed at least one year of college at MU and were willing to discuss their goals. I recruited participants by contacting the Cultural Center and Latine student organizations. I also utilized snowball sampling to identify those with rich information within existing networks (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Of the participants, 90% were first-generation college students, some were low-income, and they represented diverse ethnic backgrounds and immigration patterns to the U.S. (See Table 1).

Data Collection

Testimonios require the researcher to establish trust/*confianza*, respect/*respeto*, and collaboration/*colaboracion* with their participants (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Furthermore, *testimonios* reveal life stories that many may not have shared before. Thus, I collected participant data through two individual *testimonios*, a group *testimonio*, and a vision board. During the first individual *testimonio*, I built rapport and *confianza*/trust. I asked open-ended questions about past educational experiences, goals for completing a college degree, and how their Latina identity has shaped their experiences and goals. The first individual *testimonio* sessions lasted between 48 to 86 minutes. In the second individual *testimonio*, I asked the *testimonialistas* to reflect on the support they have received from MU to achieve their self-defined goals. I also asked them to provide any recommendations they may have for MU to better support Latinas. The second individual *testimonio* lasted between 59 to 83 minutes.

Between individual *testimonios*, I had the *testimonialistas* create vision boards to express their ideologies of success and future goals, reflecting on how their experiences as Latinas shaped these aspirations. Before the group *testimonio*, they were asked to craft either physical or digital vision boards, using images, text, drawings, and other forms of expression to depict their academic, personal, and professional goals. All 11 *testimonialistas* completed a vision board and discussed them during the group *testimonio* or their second *testimonio*. A 79-minute in-person group *testimonio* was conducted with six *testimonialistas*, as five could not attend due to other commitments.

Data Analysis

As the witness to my participants' *testimonios*, I was responsible for transcribing, editing, and translating their lived experiences (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). The data analysis was guided by Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE), which enabled me to contemplate my own history and that of my Latina participants—a history shaped by social, political, and cultural conditions (Delgado Bernal, 1998). CFE also sheds light on the historical oppression faced by Chicanas due to their intersecting identities and promotes social justice and equity. Cultural intuition, a key element of CFE, encompasses the unique perspectives Chicana scholars bring to the research process, shaped by their memories, existing literature, professional experiences, and the research process (Delgado Bernal, 1998). By embracing CFE, my background influenced how I understood, interpreted, and made sense of the data (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

After completing the first individual *testimonios*, I edited the transcripts for clarity and followed the same process for the second individual *testimonios* and group *testimonio*. During the second individual *testimonio* session, I asked the *testimonialistas* to reflect on their experience in the first individual *testimonio* session and group session if they attended and shared themes that emerged in the group session with those that did not attend. Subsequently, I uploaded the transcripts and vision boards to NVivo 12 Pro Software for further analysis. In NVivo, I noted themes that emerged from the data and highlighted quotes that related to the emerging themes. Utilizing NVivo, I ran queries to learn the most common themes that emerged for each *testimonialista*. I then created a spreadsheet with tabs for each *testimonialista* highlighting the major themes that emerged from their *testimonios* and vision boards. Aligned with CFE, to establish trustworthiness I developed themes in *comunidad* with my participants by consulting them throughout the research (Perez Huber, 2009). My analysis aimed to identify common themes that conveyed the collective story of the *testimonialistas* (Delgado Bernal, 1998; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). To ensure accuracy, I shared the emerging themes and relevant quotes with each participant via email, seeking their

confirmation and feedback on how well they reflected their experiences. I incorporated participant input to refine the themes and made final selections. Furthermore, as this was part of my dissertation research, I had a qualitative methodologist and two experts in Critical Theories, including LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, review my study to ensure the methodology and framework were applied appropriately.

Limitations

I interpreted the findings of this study through my own lens, which may limit what is shared in this study. Another limitation of the study is the sample is specific to one private, 4-year PWI in the Western U.S. Participants in this study may have different views from students who attend other higher education institution types, including Hispanic Serving Institutions, community colleges, and public institutions, in various parts of the U.S. This study may have also recruited students with similar stories that are not representative of the entire Latina undergraduate population. Additionally, the group *testimonio* session occurred in person during the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting participation to six *testimonialistas*. I did have an option for the *testimonialistas* to join the group session via Zoom, but no one did. This limited the opportunity for additional data and themes to emerge. All the participants in the group session attended in person and followed COVID-19 protocols by wearing face coverings and observing social distancing.

FINDINGS

In this study, 11 Latina undergraduates shared in both their individual *testimonio sessions* and the group *testimonio* session how they have been supported by their higher education institution to achieve success and reach their self-defined goals. They also shared challenges they encountered at their institution that hindered their success. Within the group *testimonio* session, they affirmed the challenges they faced and provided resources of support to help them with navigating MU. The emerging themes were lack of representation and sense of belonging, racism, and discrimination, and the pressure to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. The *testimonialistas* also shared they received support from affinity groups and validation from faculty, staff, and peers. In the findings, I share a challenge indicated by the *testimonialistas* and a solution they provided in response to that challenge. This resulted in three overarching themes, including *Bolstering Sense of Belonging Through Affinity Groups, A Need for Validation, and Recognizing the Labor of Latina Undergraduates.*

Bolstering Sense of Belonging Through Affinity Programs

In this study, the *testimonialistas* revealed the impact of intersectional oppression based on their gender and racial identities. They described the challenges and culture shock they experienced transitioning to college. Finding a supportive community on campus that understood their unique experiences and goals was a struggle. This absence of social support and connectedness led the *testimonialistas* to feel like they didn't belong at MU. During her individual *testimonio*, Sarah shared more about how she struggled to find community at MU,

I was living in [a residence hall], and I was in this [living community] ...literally, everybody was white. And it was really hard for me to connect with them...I feel like they didn't really know what adversities were, so the very first quarter...we had to talk about adversities and a lot of them had such; I thought they were silly examples. I did not think they were being serious. So, it made me feel really left out, and it made me feel like I wasn't White enough to be here...I hadn't found my community, and as much as I tried to make it my community. I just couldn't...I didn't build connections with them at all. So, it was hard for me. And then, because I didn't have any connections. I feel I didn't have any support from students at [MU] or from the [MU] community.

Due to the lack of connection with her peers, Sarah felt like she did not belong at MU and did not have resources to support her in navigating MU. Sarah even questioned being at MU because of these experiences. As a STEM major, finding connections was particularly important to Sarah because of the lack of Latine faculty and students in STEM at MU. In an individual *testimonio*, Camila also spoke to the struggle of finding community in STEM at MU. She shared,

In terms of structures in the school, they're very cold. They're so used to being how they are, especially being in the sciences; I'm a STEM major, so I'm gonna call them out. Sometimes, they're just really not good at making connections because there's no component where people are forced to learn how to socialize. I think when you're in a lab or with robots all day, you lose that. And when they talk to someone that looks like me, they're not gonna be able to learn that, and they are probably not taking a sociology class. Very much it's been a struggle. But people in the College Access Office they're amazing. They should get more pay, something, for keeping people here.

When Sarah and Camila could not find support in the residence halls or their STEM classes, they felt out of place, and as though there was no one at MU they could connect with. Sarah and Camila also shared these struggles within the group *testimonio* session, which Ana, Jessica, and Luna agreed with. Nina, who was not a STEM major, shared her experience was different because she was about to quickly connect with mentors and affinity groups, including a First-Generation Program and a Leadership Program. Sarah, Camila, and the other *testimonialistas* shared that eventually, they found support at MU when they became involved in affinity programs, including the First-Generation Student Program and a STEM Support Program for historically marginalized students. In particular, Sarah found affinity programs allowed her to connect with other Latinas. She shared,

I met two Latina STEM majors, and I didn't know about [the STEM Support Program] yet; I went for the [First-Generation Student Program] orientation, but they were all together... And I remember they went around asking the mentors their majors. And two Latina undergraduates started talking about how they were Latinas in STEM. And they were doing the Biology major how I wanted to. And it was the first time that I saw somebody that looked like me in the STEM field.

Sarah highlighted the role affinity programs had in connecting her to Latinas pursuing STEM. Sarah desired more spaces on campus that affirmed her ethnic identity because these groups contributed to her academic goals and sense of belonging. Like Nina, Jessica, a History major, found affinity programs were crucial to her belonging at MU. She shared,

The College Access Office and the multicultural sororities, I think it's really platforms of representation here at MU that have supported me because it really does it make you feel less lonely. And it's not even that sensation. Because I feel when people say 'lonely'. It's like, 'Oh, well, then just make friends.' It's going beyond that loneliness. Because it really is nice to talk to other people who are going through the same. And talking to them. It gives you advice because they might have more insight because they're a third-year. And it goes beyond loneliness. It goes to, 'I can talk to you about what I'm feeling,' and I don't have to feel uncomfortable. I don't have to worry about making you feel uncomfortable because you're obviously going through the same thing.

Jessica underscores the value of affinity programs for Latina undergraduates, giving her a sense of belonging and support. In contrast, Sarah felt

disconnected from her residence hall peers due to differing life experiences, leading to feeling like she had a lack of support at MU. On the contrary, Jessica and, eventually, Sarah felt supported at MU because of their experiences within affinity programs where they met others with whom they could relate.

A Need for Validation

During both their individual *testimonios* and the group *testimonio*, the *testimonialistas* often mentioned how they experienced self-doubt and imposter syndrome at MU because of stereotypes held about Latinas. While the testimonialistas had earned their spot at MU through the admissions process, once they were there, they still doubted if they were worthy enough or smart enough to be there. In her individual *testimonio* session, Jessica shared,

I have to remind myself constantly, ‘I’m here because I put in the work to be here,’ but then, sometimes, I’m getting into these different stereotypes. It’s hard because it’s a double-edged sword, but I do constantly have to remind myself, ‘I’m here one because I do have privileges in ways that have got me here’ because working hard isn’t always going to get you to where you need to go. But yeah, seeing the disparities from MU to my high school. It’s hard because I feel for a lot of, I don’t know, like it’s the Latina, its first gen, or if it’s a mix of both or if it’s all of them intersecting, but it’s just you’re kind of made to feel you’re the one at fault for not having learned these things when you never had a background into them or you’re made to feel dumb in a ways because sometimes in classes I honestly don’t even know what is going on. This is not something that I’m used to, or it can be so confusing sometimes and there is internalized self-blame that occurs. Sometimes I’m like, ‘Dang, am I just dumb or something?’ but I’m like, ‘No, I just have not been exposed to this.’

The self-doubt that Jessica experienced came from internalizing beliefs others had about Latinas, first-generation college students, and people who came from under resourced high schools. Throughout her individual *testimonios*, Jessica mentioned how White teachers in her high school had questioned her capabilities and even discouraged her from attending MU. While no one at MU told her she did not belong, she still internalized stereotypes others held about her capabilities. During the group *testimonio*, Jessica shared with the other *testimonialistas* how she wished she had more people to “hype” her up than discourage her. The other *testimonialistas* agreed and wished for more affirmation and validation from faculty, staff, and administration at MU.

Some *testimonialistas* shared blatant instances of racism and discrimination at MU, particularly from faculty and administrators. They shared how there were faculty and staff who practiced microaggressions and doubted their capabilities. These faculty and staff became hindrances to the *testimonialistas* in achieving their goals and caused some participants to consider transferring to different institutions. In her individual *testimonio*, Ana shared a specific incident of racial discrimination with a White faculty member,

So, everyone is taking their test...I was just sitting down, minding my own business. And I guess my eyes wandered somewhere. I don't know what the professor was thinking; he gave me the nastiest look ever. And I'm like, 'the audacity for you to look at me that way, I am not doing anything wrong,' and I still scored pretty good on that test. It's disgusting when you think about it because you're like, there's no way that even the professor is looking at you like that.

Ana believed this incident was racially motivated and that White students in the class did not experience the same scrutiny. Latina undergraduates at MU endured harm, racism, and discrimination that their White peers did not. While Ana was determined to continue her education at MU, these experiences contributed to her feeling as though she did not belong at MU.

Alternatively, some *testimonialistas* shared how supportive faculty and staff contributed to their academic achievement and well-being. The *testimonialistas* shared how both Faculty and Staff of Color and White faculty and staff supported them. In her second year of college, Gabriela changed her major and felt unsure about it. Gabriela, who did not attend the group *testimonio* session, shared how a White professor helped her feel confident about this change and validated her experiences. She stated,

I remember the first meeting I had with him...I explained my background and explained my goals, and he was very invested, he was very supportive, he still is, that's even in like the struggles, generally speaking, in my undergrad of, I went from being a top student to having to file incompletes because I can't get my work in on time because I'm struggling mentally, but I don't want to admit to myself that I'm struggling mentally so trying to navigate everything. And he noted that, and I told him about it. And we had a Zoom meeting over winter break, and he was like, 'I'm rooting for you, you are a very impressive person, you just gotta do it,' and I'm like, 'I know, I'm trying.'

Gabriela received immediate validation and encouragement from her faculty member upon changing her major, fostering a sense of care and support at MU. Other *testimonialistas* also highlighted similar experiences where faculty provided them with resources and validation at MU and within their fields of study. While faculty played a vital role in supporting students, the *testimonialistas* also underscored the significance of staff. For instance, in her individual *testimonio*, Camila shared how Raymond, a Black admissions counselor at MU, assisted her with her decision to apply and attend MU. She shared,

I applied to MU, and then Raymond was in admissions. He's a big person within the College Access Office. Raymond was a big convincing factor. Just because, they're really good at like connecting you with just the greater part of the POC [People of Color] network at MU because Raymond was also from the area around MU and he's been through his own struggles. He can relate to us and so, it was an easy person to talk to. Camila emphasized the importance of finding someone who could relate to her as a Person of Color and connect her with other People of Color at MU, which influenced her decision to attend MU.

During the group *testimonio* session, the *testimonialistas* mentioned forming relationships with supportive staff members who shared their backgrounds. However, they also noted that these staff members were often overworked, undervalued, and underpaid despite their vital role in supporting historically marginalized students at MU. The *testimonialistas* believed these staff members deserved more recognition and support for their contributions.

The validation Camila and Gabriela received transformed their experiences at MU. The support prevented them from internalizing stereotypes and experiencing self-doubt. As evidenced by Ana and Jessica, this is not always the experience of Latina undergraduates.

Recognizing the Labor of Latina Undergraduates

While not a theme that emerged in the group *testimonio* session, in their individual *testimonio* sessions, several of the *testimonialistas* shared they felt pressured to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at MU. While they wanted to provide a supportive community to their peers through affinity groups and critical conversations about race, they did not feel it was fair to have this added pressure. In her individual *testimonio* sessions, Camila spoke about the burden she experienced in advocating for historically marginalized students at MU,

They [MU administration] leave a lot of the pressure to the students. I know for a fact that I as a student, if I'm trying to reach equality or equity, I shouldn't; the White student next to me isn't advocating, doesn't need to advocate for themselves as much as I do...because they are a part of the majority and...that's a lot of pressure on one person, on the group of people.

As a Latina, Camila felt pressure to advocate for racial justice and equity at MU. While she wanted MU to improve its DEI efforts, she did not think it should fall entirely on the students. She also shared how she attended an event demanding more support for Native American students and historically marginalized students at MU, where the MU administration was present. At this event, Camila shared more about her experiences as a Student of Color at MU. When discussing this event, she shared,

I think starting off with funding programs that help bring in their so-called diversity into MU. They're trying to increase those numbers, but you're not doing anything once the student is here to retain and support them. The fact that when I told the Chancellor these are important things for us and they're not investing in it. The fact that we got the Cultural Center is that it's as small as a room. It should be a whole building; that's what it is at a lot of institutions already.

Camila believed there is a need for additional funding and more concerted efforts on behalf of the administration to support programs that are retaining and supporting historically marginalized students. However, when she brought up these concerns, she felt the administration did not listen and did not act in a way that aligned with its espoused values.

In her individual *testimonio* sessions, Gabriela also noticed how MU was not taking action to support DEI on campus and left it in the hands of student organizations. As a leader of the Latine Student Group (LSG), she was part of organizing events to support historically marginalized students, and she noted the impact they had on providing a place where historically marginalized students felt they belonged and their concerns were addressed. She shared more about the experience at one of these events,

One of the questions was, 'Are you seen as a statistic?' and a lot of people, most of them, including myself, said 'yeah' or 'lean towards yes', which I know MU tries to be more culturally inclusive, but a point that was brought up at that event was that most of the diversity and inclusivity events that are put on are run by students, whether that be undergrad or graduate. So,

like the LSG, we're all undergrads. We're the ones that put on those events together so that the community can have a safe space. It's not MU administration doing it. It's the students have to take into their own hands to create that space for each other, which I think that's pretty cool, but at the same time, we shouldn't really have to do that.

While Gabriela appreciated the ability to create events for historically marginalized students at MU, she questioned why students had to be responsible for this. She also noted that if MU wants to be more culturally inclusive, they should also create spaces of belonging for historically marginalized students. Gabriela shared how she thought MU could support historically marginalized students and why she felt this was important. She stated,

They [MU] recognize their history, and they recognize a lot of things, but I think actually putting it into action would be more helpful. I don't like that they put the 'it's up to you' type of thing on the cultural groups, all of those institutional organizations. It's good in the sense that we can create that space and design it the way that we want to have it in the way that we want. But it would be nice to have some of that stress alleviated from us because even though we know more than the White man on what it's like to be a person of color. We don't have as many resources as them, and even if we do ask, it would be nice to have some of that stress alleviated from us when we ourselves are trying to really solidify who we are, in our cultural identity.

Gabriela called on the MU administration to take concrete steps to support historically marginalized students. Being a private institution with significant financial resources, she advocated for allocating more funding towards cultural groups and programming. She believed that this financial support would ease the burden on historically marginalized students who were trying to figure out their own cultural identity and how to navigate MU.

Similarly, Jessica, who was involved in a committee to implement DEI on campus, discussed the stress experienced by students to advocate for equity and create an inclusive environment. She shared,

I'm part of [the DEI committee]; a conversation that we've been having a lot is that for so long, [MU] has put advocacy in the hands of students; students are always the ones who are forced to be these changemakers. And kind of how a lot of students are getting burnt out by this point. A lot of students really want to do this work, but at the end of the day, it shouldn't

have to be students' work to do. Because the system should be supporting...I think the main thing is just resources and...just more staff support...it'd be nice to have multiple coordinators for these [cultural and access] programs. I feel a lot of the work typically gets put onto one person. And that can feel overwhelming...for them as well.

Jessica emphasized the need for MU to allocate greater resources and support for Students of Color to prevent them from bearing the sole responsibility of promoting DEI on campus. While Latina undergraduates remain committed to DEI efforts, there is a pressing need to alleviate the burden on students. Jessica called for the MU administration to hire more staff and provide financial support to prevent burnout among students, staff, and faculty engaged in DEI efforts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, Latina undergraduates at MU shared their *testimonios* reflecting on the support they received to reach their self-defined goals. By grounding this study in LatCrit, Latina voices were brought to the center from the margins to better understand their experiences with racial, ethnic, and gender oppression (Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Villalpando, 2004). Higher education institutions purport to provide equal opportunities that allow all students to achieve success. However, through this study, I found there are still many challenges Latina undergraduates face in pursuit of their self-defined goals, including a lack of sense of belonging, blatant racism and discrimination, and the pressure to enhance DEI. While several previous studies have also found that Latinas experience discrimination and inequitable campus environments (Garriott et al., 2019; Liou et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2022), fewer researchers have asked Latinas to provide recommendations to their PWIs to better support them. To fill this gap in the research, the *testimonialistas* shared their solutions to improve MU for Latinas in addition to the barriers they experienced at MU.

Through LatCrit, researchers reveal how higher education policies and structures are created to benefit the dominant White student population while marginalizing Latinas' experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2004). Similar to the findings of previous researchers, the *testimonialistas* were exposed to racially hostile campus climates that did not acknowledge their assets (Acevedo et al., 2021; Kiyama, 208; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Quantitative researchers have found that Latina students are subjected to racism and discrimination, which leads to increased stress, exhaustion, and depression (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Thornhill et al., 2023). The findings of this study provide greater insight into why Latinas may experience stress, exhaustion, and depression as the *testimonialistas* shared the hostile racial climate at MU, and the

inaction by MU administrators to support them was detrimental to their college experiences. Furthermore, the *testimonialistas* shared they were often taxed with creating spaces that promoted DEI –forcing them into a student activist role. Building on research by Linder et al. (2019), which focused on minoritized students more broadly, this research demonstrated that Latina undergraduates, in particular, feel forced into activist roles and as thought their PWI should not solely leave this responsibility to them. These responsibilities are costly to Students of Color because they isolate them from their peers, lead to decreased academic performance, and cause physical and emotional exhaustion (Linder et al., 2019). The barriers shared by the *testimonialistas* created an inequitable higher education experience for them, as White students at MU did not face these same barriers.

Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) used a LatCrit framework to show how higher education institutions can both empower and oppress historically marginalized students. Similar to previous research, the *testimonialistas* shared student support programs (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Lopez et al., 2019; Lucero et al., 2017), and validation from faculty and staff empowered them to reach their goals (Acevedo et al., 2021; Rendón, 1994). Affinity groups and cultural centers provided a community, sense of belonging and were often the reason why they remained at MU. Even though the research well documents the benefits of cultural centers and affinity programs, the *testimonialistas* noted these programs were under-resourced, placing a heavy burden on them by hindering them from finding supportive communities or thrusting them into roles where they create spaces for themselves and their peers. Thus, this research further illuminates the need for cultural centers and affinity groups for Latinas to not only exist but also be appropriately staffed and funded. Similar to previous research, the *testimonialistas* were able to find a sense of belonging at MU through relationships with both Latine and non-Latine faculty and staff who provide validation (Carales & Nora, 2020; Ching, 2022; Lucero et al., 2017). This research further demonstrated the importance of faculty and staff building relationships with Latina students and seeking to understand their cultural backgrounds. Additionally, through their examples, the *testimonialistas* demonstrated how validation is beneficial from the admissions process through graduation.

IMPLICATIONS

The goal of LatCrit researchers is to strive towards social justice and end all forms of oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2004). To do this, higher education researchers and practitioners must continually seek ways to create more socially just structures, policies, and programs. While previous research has documented the impact of affinity groups (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Lopez et al., 2019; Lucero et al., 2017) and validation (Acevedo et al., 2021; Rendón et al.,

2018), higher education research and practitioners should listen to the insights from the *testimonialistas* to further support affinity groups, enact validation and to enhance DEI, especially during a time when these efforts are under scrutiny.

As highlighted by the *testimonialistas* and previous research (Cerezo et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2019; Lucero et al., 2017), affinity groups and cultural centers are critical to supporting Latina undergraduates, yet they are often underfunded, under-resourced, and understaffed. As such, I recommend higher education institutions continue to create and support organizations that affirm Latine culture and ethnic identity and provide resources, including funding and staff, to them as they contribute to Latina undergraduates achieving their goals.

Previous research stresses the importance of supportive faculty and staff in meeting students' academic and emotional needs (Lucero et al., 2017; Rendón et al., 2018). The *testimonialistas* also highlighted the crucial role of supportive faculty and staff in their academic success. Therefore, I recommended providing training and support for faculty and staff to practice validation. Implementing validation can help Latina undergraduates heal from self-doubt and lack of support in higher education (Acevedo et al., 2021). I recommend integrating validation into all phases of students' interactions with the institution, starting with admissions and orientation (Rendón et al., 2018). Some *testimonialistas* shared how positive experiences with admissions counselors led to scholarships, early support program connections, and a feeling of support at MU.

Furthermore, I found Latina undergraduates often become activists to enhance DEI on their campuses. To support them, higher education professionals should provide resources and funding to programming that supports Latina undergraduates' DEI efforts. Higher education professionals can offer workshops on navigating the institution and how to implement change (Linder, 2019). Faculty can also assign projects and provide academic credit for their activism, which “contributes to better self-care for these students because their engagement becomes cocurricular, rather than extra-curricular, and it allows them to see themselves and their work as legitimate and important” (Linder, 2019, p. 24). Additionally, compensation for these efforts is essential, as it often competes with academics and paid work.

I initiated this research on Latina undergraduates due to their rapid growth in higher education (Espinosa et al., 2019). It's crucial to hear their voices and amplify their experiences, bringing them from the margins to the center. By doing so, higher education professionals can work toward creating more equitable and just college experiences for Latina undergraduates. I recommend more studies adopt LatCrit to prioritize Latina voices, as their narratives can inspire change within higher education institutions. Future studies should also continue to share the stories and experiences of Latina undergraduates from all backgrounds,

including those who identify as LGBTQ, immigrants, and first-generation college students, and in all institutions, including Hispanic-Serving Institutions and community colleges.

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