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Un Mentor Positivo: Supporting Latine & Indigenous First-Generation Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT

Doctoral completion for first-generation Latine students in the United States is minimal. In 2021, 9% of the doctorates confirmed belonged to those identified as Latine, and 41.3% of that population identified as a first-generation college student. This phenomenological study used content analysis to understand the experiences of 15 doctoral students of color at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This paper draws from that larger study highlighting the voices of four first-generation Latine and Indigenous doctoral students. Findings share experiences specific to the population and the importance of having a faculty mentor of color who understands the multiple intersections of marginalized doctoral student identities and the support needed for a truly equitable academic experience for first-generation doctoral students of color at PWIs.

Keywords: Doctoral Student of Color**,** Faculty of Color, First-Generation Student, Latine, Indigenous, Mentor

INTRODUCTION

The system of Higher Education was built for the elite and designed for the privileged traditional student. The original system perpetuated white dominant thought and catered to white males ages eighteen to twenty, who had the time and money to spare (Vanwagoner, 2018). This original system design created barriers to access postsecondary education, particularly for students of color and individuals from low-income backgrounds and served to perpetuate the widening educational equity gap and systematic oppression for those who do not belong to said privileged groups.

The Higher Education Act of 1965 was this system's first attempt at educational equity by reducing barriers to postsecondary education via offering ways to subsidize the cost of education with funding resources to qualifying student populations. This act opened the door and offered access to higher education for various students, including low-income, non-traditional, and underrepresented students. However, providing resources to subsidize the cost of higher education is not enough, as there is still a significant disparity in outcomes in educational attainment between nontraditional and underserved students compared to traditional students (Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2007; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014).

Students who identify as first-generation (FGS) are considered both nontraditional and underserved. As a result, they are much more likely to carry multiple marginalized identities, including being low-income, adult learners, women, and a person of color (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Schuyler et al., 2021). This intersection of multiple marginalized identities impacts the population's experiences more significantly given the various socio and economic disadvantages over those with multiple privileged identities (Crenshaw, 1991). The experiences of intersectional erasure, including microaggressions and lack of academic navigational support result in first-generation students lacking mentorship and experiencing deficit-based models of thinking and programming in their education- missing out on access to academic opportunities like scholarships and internships (Dickson & Zafereo, 2021; Phu, 2020). This disparity in educational attainment is concerning for FGSOC and is demonstrated in minimal completion for first-generation Latine and Indigenous doctoral students in the United States. We use the gender-inclusive term Latine throughout our paper to equitably represent the majority of our participants rather than the more commonly used identifiers of Latino/a/x; however, some participants also identified as Indigenous, and we want to honor their identity and self-representation in this work by acknowledging both identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding first-generation students of color is scarce at the undergraduate level (Sarcedo, 2022; 2020; Tate et al., 2015; Wallace, 2022) and even less exists on the experiences of first-generation students of color at the doctoral level (Wallace, 2022); however, the literature that does exist separates first-generation doctoral students (FGDS) from first-generation doctoral students of color (FGDSoC) (Wallace, 2022). Failing to analyze FGDS using a racial lens is perplexing considering "issues of race and gender often amplify the challenges facing first-generation doctoral students' (Holley & Gardner, 2012, p. 8).

First-generation doctoral students of color struggle to find a sense of belonging because they cannot see others who look like them or see their culture represented on campus. As a result, FGDSoC end up experiencing isolation (Wallace, 2022; Wallace & Ford, 2021). The feelings of isolation are compounded by faculty devaluing or minimizing FGDSoC class contributions or refusing to acknowledge the student (Wallace, 2022; Wallace & Ford, 2021). This sense of isolation led to FGDSoC experiencing the phenomenon of "intellectual phoniness," coined as imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter syndrome or impostor phenomenon (IP) is a psychological experience among high-achieving individuals who disbelieve their intellect, skills, or successful accomplishments. Wallace and Ford (2021) note that "[t]hese students do not innately have imposter syndrome but experience this phenomenon as a response to an environment that does not support nor center their need" (p. 522).

It is no wonder that FGDSoC experience isolation and imposter phenomenon, as a prominent finding in the literature, is that FGDSoC experience racism (Jaeger & Haley, 2016; Wallace & Ford, 2021; Wallace, 2022), with women of color articulating the most extreme experiences (Gardner et al., 2011; Wallace, 2022). Microaggressions embedded in deficit-minded social constructs have been related to experiences of “othering” for FGDSoC. Specifically, Latine doctoral research students have described sentiments of cultural and identity-based imposter syndrome due to the alienation or isolation encountered from their experiences of underrepresentation and tokenism (Chakraverty, 2022). Narratives of doctoral students of color have echoed greater strain in relation to academic burnout, psychological distress, college self-efficacy, and academic engagement in their higher education institutions (Chakraverty, 2022; Phu, 2020). Students have noted negative experiences of unwelcoming faculty, blatant favoritism of white counterparts, and gatekeeping of research and related educational opportunities (Espino, 2014). These examples could be related to how FGDSoC experienced their training and transition.

While many of these students can persist by carefully navigating the system, many more are not so lucky. Ultimately, doctoral completion for first-generation students of color is on the decline (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Hoffer et al., 2003; Mitic, 2022) and this decline has implications beyond the individual

students which impacts educational equity for the majority at institutions of higher education around the United States.

The disparities in educational outcomes for FGDSoC contribute to the perpetuation of poverty in the population (Berg, 2010). With socio-economic and educational barriers in place, it remains nearly impossible for FGDSoC to see themselves as successful graduates in their field and thus able to rise out of their initial social class. The pressing issue of FGDSoC and educational equity has implications beyond the student and their socioeconomic class because it directly impacts academia and the institution they attend (fo, 2015). The lack of diversity at the doctoral level in the United States perpetuates the systemic issues of higher education, which is demonstrated when Pasztor and Wakeling (2018) suggest,

> (A) lack of diversity among the doctoral student body may have serious long-term consequences by leaving segments of society without a voice in scholarship or representation among future higher education faculty, thus reserving key positions in the society of the already privileged. (p. 983).

Understanding the experiences of FGDSoC is vital because doctoral confirmation for this group is on the decline (Patel, 2015). Data shows an 8.7% reduction in doctoral confirmation between 2000 and 2019 for those identified as first-generation college students (Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2021). In 2021, only 9% of the doctorates confirmed belonged to those who identify as Latine, which 41.3% of that population identified as a first-generation college student and 0.3% of the doctorates confirmed in 2021 belonged to Indigenous graduates. Twenty-five point nine percent (25.9%) of that population identified as a first-generation college student (Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2022).

The complexity of multiplied marginalized identities is represented even in the frame of this publication to present new findings and breakthroughs related to Latine/Hispanic participation in higher education. The Survey of Earned Doctorates does not separate Hispanic and Latine but utilizes it as a pan-ethnic term and offers the optional demographic choice of Indigenous/Non-Hispanic or Latine. Martínez and Gonzalez (2020) explain that “Policymakers, the public, and members of these groups often use these terms synonymously, however, each possesses a unique history and describes different ancestral origins' (p. 366). The term “Hispanic” refers to those from Spanish-speaking countries, including Latin America, but the term, “Latino” omits those of Spanish origin outside of the Western Hemisphere. Colonization and the perpetuation of internalized oppression in the United States have caused many to value European and Spanish aspects of their identity while excluding Indigenous elements (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2020). How participants in this study and of these subgroups identify is important, and because they have roots embedded in the Western Hemisphere and are Indigenous to the land, the term Latine alone would not reflect this participant group.

Theoretical Framework

The lens used to explore the experiences of FGDSoC is an anti-deficit achievement framework developed by Shaun R. Harper (2012) to better understand how students of color successfully persist through the STEM pipeline. Harper's theoretical framework considered three points along the educational journey and explored factors related to student achievement (Harper, 2012). This study uses this anti-deficit achievement framework to counter the multitude of negative narratives surrounding students with multiple marginalized identities (Harper, 2010; Sarcedo, 2022) and explore anti-oppressive methodologies often used with the population (Sarcedo, 2020).

Furthermore, this framework disrupts deficit-based thinking that blames students of color for their lack of success, removing the responsibility from the system centered on whiteness (Reyes & Duran, 2021, p. 9). This framework is operationalized by inverting deficit-based questions. For example, instead of questioning the lack of mentoring that prevented the student from having a successful experience, the anti-deficit framework questions asked the student to describe mentor qualities that supported a successful experience and what contributed to a successful environment. Thus, utilizing an anti-deficit framework serves to reframe the lens through which students are often viewed and explore how aspects of their identity are strengths. Lastly, this framework contributes to advancing a positive narrative surrounding the target population looking toward solutions that build upon one's strengths and talents not accumulated through formal education but through lived experiences and life challenges (Rendón et al., 2014; Reyes & Duran, 2021).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research study aims to understand the experiences of four current students and one alumnus Latine/Hispanic and Indigenous first-generation doctoral students at a predominantly white institution in a Western state. This study draws upon a larger qualitative team-based project conducted in 2022 titled "Elucidating Doctoral Students of Color Experiences." The larger project collected the experiences of 15 Doctoral Students of Color (DSoC), while considering another layer of marginalized identity, this study highlights the experiences of three Latine and one Indigenous doctoral student who identify as first-generation by investigating the previously collected narratives of DSoC in their School of Education, and isolating the participants who identify as Latine, Indigenous, and first-generation to explore their experiences. Our research questions included:

1) Who do FGDSoC identify as their academic mentors?
2) What mentor qualities and additional academic supports do FGDSoC look for in a successful program?

Data Sources

Recruitment of participants occurred through email and snowball sampling to recruit from a wider network and obtain additional referred participants (Kumar, 2019, p. 309). Thus, the original participants were recruited by emailing students within the school and emailing the affinity group DSoC and inviting them to participate.

All participants were invited to a 45-minute interview, which was conducted over Zoom and researchers utilized semi-structured interview questions based on student status including current students and alumni. An example of a difference in wording includes tenses, for example, a current student was asked where they were in their doctoral journey. In contrast, an alum was asked when they graduated with their doctorate.

Each interview was audibly recorded via Otter, transcribed by the researcher conducting the interview, and placed on a secure and encrypted university drive. The de-identified transcriptions were uploaded into Atlas.ti, and participants who identified as Latine and Indigenous were isolated from other participants. Data was coded and analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), including eight specific codes: Faculty Mentor, Faculty/Person of Color, Mentor Qualities, Faculty Building Relationships, Imposter Syndrome, Mentor Longevity, limitations, and No mentor.

Participants

Diego is a first-generation low-income Mexican American and first-generation college male student, who grew up in a small rural town with nothing but oil fields, a refinery, the railroad, and the State Penitentiary. If it were not for the Railroad's need for cheap labor to maintain the train tracks through Wyoming and Utah, his ancestors would not have moved their large Mexican American families from the mountains of New Mexico to the flat lands of southern Wyoming. Both of his grandfathers migrated from northern New Mexico to take jobs as section workers on the Union Pacific Railroad. Because he stuttered and was also a low-income Mexican American, it was assumed that he was not intelligent and could not learn the same as other children, so he was placed in the Learning Resource Center track at his elementary school. He is not ashamed of growing up a low-income Mexican American, whose parents were high school dropouts. He is glad that he grew up on the south side, the brown side because if he had not gone through that experience, he would not be the person that he is today.

Blanca identifies as a Latina female and a first-generation college student who grew up in rural Colorado. Her family came to Colorado to work in agriculture from all parts of New Mexico and Brownville, Texas. Blanca shares how the erasure of her family's native language was a form of protection from

discrimination when she was growing up. She shared her struggles of feeling not enough or too much of one thing.

Esperanza was born and raised in Houston, Texas. She is a first-generation college student who identifies as Mexican American or Latine as a larger umbrella term. She shares how she rejects the term Hispanic, as it reminds her of a racial slur she often heard growing up. Esperanza shares that her family has always been on the same land that they currently reside on, it was the border that moved on them. She shares her struggle with Imposter Syndrome, as it has been a constant reality whether in personal, professional, or academic life. She shared the importance of having a Latina mentor and Latine colleagues in academia who encouraged her to keep pushing herself to grow, learn, break glass ceilings, and to remember the responsibility that she must mentor others who come after her.

Javier is Indigenous and a first-generation college student. He shares that he was born in Guatemala. English was not his first language, and he grew up with his grandparents. His grandfather is Maya Pokomchi, and his grandmother is mixed. He moved to California for a few years, then Colorado until 2022 and he now resides in Quakertown, PA. Javier shares the reason as to why he identifies as Indigenous and moves away from the Latino/a/x/e terminology based on how this term erases the Indigenous identity. He offered the following quote from Kurly Tlapoyawa, an archaeologist, author, filmmaker, and ethnohistorian. He is the founder of the Chimalli Institute. He states, "No matter how you slice it, terms like ‘Latin,’ ‘Latino,’ ‘Latina,’ and ‘Latinx’ represent a racist-colonialist mindset that actively erases people of Indigenous and African origin. Why should we continue to promote a term that privileges whiteness at the expense of Brown and Black people?"

RESULTS

Participants described the need to see faculty that looked like them, as this created the initial connection. Participants further described how faculty of color communicated with them and worked to build connections as a vital piece of their experience. Participants discussed at length how faculty spoke to them encouragingly, intentionally creating connections with them, and providing out-of-classroom opportunities that allowed them to feel seen and developed their professional and academic skills beyond the classroom. As a result, participants felt validated, which created a successful student experience. This is demonstrated by the verbatim quotes below.

Esperanza shared, “The initial connection is really physical, as a woman of color, she (referring to her Latine mentor) was always really transparent with what that experience has looked like and the obstacles and barriers that have come up, how to navigate those and get her voice to the table.”

Javier expressed in reference to faculty of color, “She would look for opportunities for me to present my work. Eventually, I was able to be a Teacher

Assistant and then teach my own course. This was good guidance to understand how Academia works".

Blanca articulated, “When I was in (professional) meetings or statewide events, I would see the faculty (of color) there. They would message me on zoom, that’s where everything was at that time, and they would say hi and check in with me. They may not have been my mentors, but they would show me that they remember who I am and that I mattered, even with a simple hello.”

Diego expressed, referring to a faculty of color, “She was someone I could go to and talk with a lot, she served as the chair of my committee.”

DISCUSSION

This research study utilized an anti-deficit achievement framework to explore the experiences of FGDSoC. In addition, this study sought to illuminate who the population identifies as academic mentors and what mentor qualities, and additional academic supports students look for in a successful program. To explore the under-researched topic, data was extrapolated from a more extensive mixed-methods study. Our findings, along with the literature, suggest that Latine and Indigenous FGDSoC identify one positive academic mentor by finding faculty who look like them and are from their ethnic and cultural background.

Faculty mentor qualities include positive communication and connection to other opportunities vital to a successful student experience. Participants shared that how faculty spoke and interacted with them helped to validate their experiences which made them feel seen and increased their self-efficacy. In conclusion, participant responses indicated that faculty of color provided positive faculty communication, connections, and opportunities as vital to their educational attainment.

IMPLICATIONS

Nationally, the incremental number of doctoral confirmations for FGDSoC has large implications for institutional equity and their students. Enhancing diversity and understanding of broad experiences and backgrounds in all programs helps to create a culture where students of color believe they are more than a representation. Most research surrounding the population is focused on undergraduates, what the population lacks, and how aspects of their identity hinder the student (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Harper, 2012).

While research has yet to focus explicitly on the experiences of Latine and Indigenous doctoral students, voices from our First-Generation Latine and Indigenous students echoed, although challenging to locate, the vital and positive impact of access to one faculty mentor of color.

Findings were derived from an anti-deficit framework which counters the multitude of deficit-based narratives and disrupts deficit-based thinking that blames students of color for their lack of success, removing the responsibility from

the system centered on whiteness (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Harper, 2012, Reyes & Duran, 2021). These findings are essential, as competing cultural perspectives between PWIs and FGDSoC often give rise to disproportionate levels of social, economic, and cultural hardships this group of students faces.

As institutions continue to serve a growing number of diverse students, it is imperative for institutions to increase the number of opportunities FGDSoC has to interact with others from their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. First, these opportunities must come in the form of faculty of color; thus, ensuring to increase the number of faculty of color when hiring as well as prioritizing their retention. Second, offer navigation support in their academic environment, for example, by creating an affinity group, "Doctoral Students of Color" (DSoC).

When FGDSoC have access to FMoC throughout various phases of their academic journey, representation is improved and centralized around a culture of highly valued academic relationships. FMoC has been shown to disrupt oppressive forms of thinking and challenge traditional forms of teaching by embracing cultural identity, indigenous language, and familial relationships as counter-narratives to traditionally Euro-centric models of success within the education system. They take the time to build strong and trusting relationships with faculty members and students. This is important for policy and practice because they are willing to share their knowledge and experience and then use this information to inform evidence-based decisions for systemic improvement in the classroom and throughout the university.

Because of their guidance, shared expertise, and insights, mentees acquire new skills and knowledge that are particularly valuable to their career development and educational experiences. Subsequent research would benefit from analyzing these opportunities - including access to new research opportunities, professional networks and learning experiences, and some honest, sound advice that helps FGDSoC advance in their chosen field. FMoC encourage mentees in matters both personal and professional which has helped many overcome self-doubt and even imposter syndrome. Because the way FMoC care is so evident, their students and mentees move through the academic process with a sense of empowerment that prepares them for the next steps and beyond.

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