



Thank You for Being a Comadre: Recommendations from Latina Senior Faculty on Supporting Junior Faculty

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ABSTRACT

The importance of mentorship amongst Latinas in higher education is well documented in the literature, however less common are contextualized recommendations for how to do it. This narrative inquiry depicts how two senior faculty members utilized their experiential knowledge and positions of privilege to support a Latina junior faculty member as she led a faculty search. Utilizing comadrisimo critical framework authors will share how they navigated their way through the highly political occurrence of a faculty job search and give recommendations for how to support junior faculty and how to seek support from senior faculty.

Keywords: Comadrisimo, Latina faculty, mentorship

INTRODUCTION

Few, if any, would argue the pivotal role that the search committee plays in how new faculty gain access to institutions of higher education. While extensive research has examined the faculty search process as it relates to organizational and personal values (See Posselt et al., 2020; Villarreal, 2022), diversity and equity practices (See Cavanaugh & Green, 2020; Frasier & Hunt, 2011; Lara, 2019; Turner, 2002), perceived “fit” of new hires (See Liera & Ching, 2020; White-Lewis, 2020) and implicit bias in the selection of candidates (See Liera & Hernandez, 2021; O’Meara et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2008), few studies offer a narrative account of search committee members on the “interplays of power where power is felt” (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 31). While structural power dynamics emphasize the communication and decision making akin to the organizational/hierarchical structure, sociocultural power dynamics situate identity politics as contextual that can either “foster or limit [individual or group] agency” (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 32). Throughout a faculty search, agency can be stifled if not employed from a collective approach.

Marshall’s et al. (2020) notion of micropolitics transcends into the hiring of new faculty as the process is situated in both context (e.g., faculty search process) and identity (e.g., composition and rank of search committee members). Arguably, the only thing more rife with power than the *actual* search power in academia are the members of the search committee. Further, sociocultural power complexities can be intensified when search committee members are at various ranks and tenure/non-tenured positions. In fall 2021, Latinas comprised 3% of full-time faculty with only 2% in tenure-track or tenured positions (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Even at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), there is a lack of Latinx faculty hires (Banda et al., 2017; Gutierrez et al., 2021). Despite the lack of Latina faculty representation, it is important to note that Latina faculty in the academy do exist—no matter how scarce in numbers. Our narrative account does not seek to protest our underrepresentation in the academy, but how as Latinas we employ forms of capital to navigate the structural dynamics found in the faculty search committee process. As such, we offer a rare glimpse into how we—three Latina faculty employed *comadrisimo*, “a feminist reciprocal relationship” (Ribero & Arellano, 2019, p. 336) bounded by trust and shared by women, to navigate and mitigate the micropolitics embedded in both the structural and sociocultural power dynamics throughout the *entirety* of a faculty search process.

Research Questions

To better situate our study, we offer the following research questions:

1. How did three Latina faculty use *comadrisimo* to help navigate a faculty search process?
2. What role did *comadrisimo* play in the decision-making process of three Latina faculty during a faculty search process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Without a doubt, as women of color, Latinas operate with multiple marginalities (Turner, 2002) who “are expected to enter the academy and adapt [our]selves to the majority culture and norms that dominate [our] institutional workplaces” (Laden & Hagedorn, 2000, p. 64). As Latina faculty, our experiences reflect feelings of exclusion (Turner et al., 2008), isolation (Stanley, 2006), “presumed incompetence” (Harris & González, 2014), and tokenism (Lopez & Johnson, 2014; Medina & Luna, 2000). The need for our worth and value to be reinforced is a necessary counterspace for Latina faculty, often found in groups that we seek, and we create (Solórzano, 1998). Gonzales et al. (2013) argue the critical need to encourage, support and validate the efforts of Latina faculty. As a collective group, Latinas can become their own peer support to navigate the academy (Harris & González, 2014). Bennett et al. (2011) found that “peer support seemed to be the most important aspect of perceived support for faculty [of color] members” (p. 57). Bennett et al.’s (2011) findings emphasize the important role of senior faculty in informal mentoring. For Latina junior faculty, a senior faculty understands the political landscape as well as connects them to faculty “who can articulate the value of Black and Latino faculty members’ presence, research agenda, and service” (p. 57). Moreover, the study found that participants more often questioned “the commitment of the department and institutional leadership to their overall success” (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 57). As Latinas there is a need to capitalize on collective experiences to navigate the academy. In many instances, Latina faculty must know how to accumulate and deploy allies. Arguably, Latina faculty need to learn the hidden curriculum embedded at institutions (Ek et al., 2010).

To better understand the hidden curriculum, women, specifically Latina faculty have sought peer mentorship to navigate academia (Ek, Quijada Cerecer, Alanís, & Rodríguez, 2010; Núñez & Murakami-Ramallo, 2012). Mentorship provides Latinas with critical emotional support (Kram & Isabella, 1985) to collectively forge paths at our respective institutions. Yet, mentorship that is extended to Latinas is less intentional and prominent in

practice (Tierney & Bensimon,1996). In addition to sharing resources, researchers posit that a network approach to mentorship capitalizes on the assets and contributions necessary for co-development and co-advancement of Latinas (See Quijada Cerecer, Ek, Alanís, & Murakami-Ramalho, 2011; Ek et al., 2010). For Latinas, the impact transcends to curating legitimacy (Gonzales, 2013) and belonging in the academy (Tuit, 2003)—constructs that validate faculty identity and capability at both the micro-and macro-levels of the institution. The latter can only happen when Latina faculty problematize and dismantle traditional hierarchies inherent in the oppressive structures found in academia (Núñez, Murakami, & Gonzales, 2015).

Latinas operate with multiple marginalities in academia, personal and cultural experiences which informs how we create knowledge about the world (Gonzales, Murakami, & Núñez, 2013). Given the dearth of Latina faculty, particularly across senior ranks (Oliva, Rodríguez, Alanís, & Quijada Cerecera, 2013), alternative peer mentoring networks that validate and emphasize the cultural identity of marginalized faculty have taken root in academia (Murakami & Núñez, 2014; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2011). The collective action of peers, more specifically the notion of *comadres* is found in academe. De Hoyos Comstock (2012) argues that “*Comadrisimo* encompasses some of the most complex and important relationships between women” (p. ix), often referred to as best friends, confidants—people who are often viewed as kinfolk who have a close, trusted connection. Scholz (2016) highlights the collective actions of Latinas are “communally connected” (p. 88). Similarly, Machaco-Casas, Ruiz, and Cantú (2013) emphasize the role of *consejos*, wisdom/advice, that Latinas who ‘have been there and done that’ (p. 5) to support the retention of junior Latina faculty in the academy. These *consejos* often come from *madrinas*, godmothers, who provide guidance as well as culturally relevant and professional context for tenure-track Latinas (Núñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2011). Arguably, the exchange of *consejos* from *madrinas* helps chisel new paths “without giving up who we are” (Machaco-Casas et al., 2013, p. 10)—to forge our own legitimacy in academia. We argue that part of our own legitimacy at our institution capitalizes on our organic and informal peer mentorship as *madrinas* and *comadres* who offered *consejos* as we collectively navigated a faculty search.

RESEARCH METHOD

Bennett et al. (2011) posits that “counterstories rival the narratives of the majority” (p. 50). From an intersectional feminist approach, our research methods employ counterstories as *comadres*, given it has the potential to “provide the richest theoretical insight into women’s discursive and material

resistance and self-representation” (Scholz, 2016, p. 89). Scholz argues power exists when Latinas share stories of injustice because recounting “women’s experiences with repression are understood within a broad relational system” (2016, p. 92). Adapted from the methodological framework of Ribero and Arellano (2019), we employed a discursive dialogical process whereby we—as *comadres*—used and shared our navigational capital throughout the entirety of a faculty search process. The first author, a tenure track junior faculty who was the chair of the search committee, led the dialogical nature and impetus of this research design. After multiple discussions, the first author provided a narrative account of the exchange of *consejos* that were helpful guideposts throughout the entirety of the search process. From this narrative account, the first author noted the themes that emerged from our interactions. While the narrative account is reflexive in nature, it is critical to note that we also engaged in thoughtful and critical dialogue to debrief the faculty search process once the position was in the negotiation phase. What follows is a list of the themes that emerged from our dialogical, discursive process to create our counterstories.

Context and Participants

The authors are tenure-track/tenured research faculty at the same four-year public institution in the Southwest United States. The university has a current student enrollment of approximately 10,000 students, of which 47.9% are Hispanic, which qualifies it for the federal designation of Hispanic Serving Institution. However, despite the HSI designation and being situated in a metropolitan city with a Hispanic population of 64.2%, the university is comprised of 8% (22/249) Latina/o/x tenure-track faculty. Also, the university holds a Carnegie Classification of R-2, a doctoral university with high research activity.

Author’s Positionality

Author 1 is a junior tenure-track faculty member, who identifies as a second-generation Mexican American woman. She is an assistant professor in an educator preparation program in the college of education and her teaching and scholarship focus on bilingual education, multicultural education and critical race and Latino/a/x critical theory. Her research is heavily shaped and influenced by her experiences as a student and teacher in inner-city schools that were low socioeconomic and highly diverse. Although her mother has a bachelor's degree, she is the first in her family to have a career in academia. She has over 10 years of experience in higher education, however this is her first faculty appointment.

Author 2 is a tenured faculty member, who identifies as a proud first-generation student and a Latina. She is an associate professor in the same college as Author 1 and Author 3 but in a different department. Her scholarship, teaching and scholarship focus on critical paradigms that emphasize an asset-based lens of marginalized populations in STEM, Latinas in engineering, and faculty diversity. She has 10 years of experience in higher education, with her initial two years as a research postdoc at an R1 institution; a doctoral university with very high research activity.

Author 3 is a tenured faculty member who identifies as Latina. Her positionality is rooted in fostering partnerships between individuals, school districts, communities, and agencies to elevate P-20 success, for all students while acknowledging and supporting the unique and acutely different needs of Latino/a/x students. As the Director of transformative alliances, she facilitates partnerships' understanding of the needs and unique characteristics and nuances of an HSI and leverages resources, thoughts, ideas, and relationships to develop and cultivate leaders who will engage in developing agency to meet and support those needs. She is committed to educational equity and views learning as interrelated and intersectional with social-emotional learning, cultural development, physical health, and wellness. She has 18 years of experience in higher education and has held four different administrative positions.

RESULTS

Breaking the Cycle: Utilization of Navigational Capital to Create a Mentorship Experience

The faculty search process was about much more than filling a vacant faculty tenure-track line, it was clear that senior faculty members saw this as an opportunity to act as *madrinas* and offer *consejos* to their *comadre*. As Latinas, they knew that the highly political and legal process of faculty searches required near-perfection from them based on their experience. In a reflection about the formation of the search committee, Author 1 stated the following:

I was named chair of the search committee despite never being offered the opportunity to serve on the committee of one of the four searches that have taken place since my arrival. Thus, I requested that Author 3 be offered the position as co-chair as she is a senior faculty member who I have a relationship with, as she has mentored me in the past, and she has experience in the content area; she agreed without hesitation, and we immediately got to work.

Author 3 was familiar with the process and understood the importance of building a supportive committee that was interested and invested in more than just hiring a new faculty member but supporting an existing one. There was no discussion about the lack of experience because Author 3 was familiar with disparity in opportunity for Latinas in academia, instead she proceeded with action. Further detailing the formation of the remainder of the committee Author 1 shared:

When meeting about the formation of the committee I recommended that we bring someone on from outside of the department who would not be afraid to ask hard questions as this search could include senior faculty applicants. Immediately, Author 3 stated that Author 2 would be a great addition. I believe that she did this because she knew that as a Latina scholar, she was familiar with the additional political aspect of the search, but also because she was likeminded in her approach of mentoring junior faculty.

In forming a committee that understood the micropolitics (Marshall et.al., 2020) of a search process, particularly as a Latina faculty member, Authors 2 & 3 intentionally curated a space of common trust and care; a sacred counterspace (Harris & González, 2014; Solórzano, 1998). It is common for Latinas to be solicited for work but not opportunity and so it was no surprise to the senior faculty that this was the case here. However, their reaction was not the common ‘pay your dues’ attitude of academia, but rather agreeing to add more to their already full plates to ensure that Author 1 was protected throughout the process. When making final recommendations for the candidate to be offered the position, the following was a conversation between Author 1 and Author 2:

Author 1: Ok so I'll go ahead and write up our final recommendation, what do you all think I need to include?

Author 2: I have a template I can send you. It was shared with me by Dr. X (Dr. X is a retired Professor in her department who is a man of color). It is very detailed, and he would always tell me that I needed to be sure to cross all the ‘t’s’ and dot all the ‘i’s’.

Author 1: Ok, I see. Thank you so much for this!... Oh wow, it's a couple of pages long!

Author 2: Yes, remember that these recommendation letters document how the committee adhered to all the universities processes and

document the recommendations and rationale of the committee to leadership all the way up the chain of command (i.e. Department Head, Dean, Provost etc.)

Author 1: Thank you so much I never thought to include this detail.

Author 2 embodied the ‘lift as we climb’ mentality, as she was willing to share what she has learned through mentorship. The understanding of how to make the countless processes and red tape work to protect you is not common knowledge, rather it is developed through the sharing of what Yosso (2005) refers to as navigational capital; “the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind” (p. 80). Meticulous documentation not only aids in providing transparency but also preserves the rationale of the committee recommendation during the search and negotiation process. In having the audacity to play the game, with precision, you can also protect your voice to ensure that there is never a misrepresentation of your opinions and intent; a *consejo* passed down through the *comadrismo* process that was naturally invoked during this search process (Machaco-Casas, et al., 2013). This lesson in building internal confidence using established policies was further supported by the outward support that Authors 2 & 3 engaged in.

Say it Aloud: Outward Votes of Confidence

There is a level of credibility that comes with senior rank and tenure in academia, and thus it is imperative that senior faculty members are aware of the impact of their voice. However, as Latinas this power dynamic is illustrated differently as Harris & González (2014) describe the common perception of “presumed incompetence” that unjustly plagues them. As tenured faculty, Authors 2 & 3 were keenly aware that they spoke from a position of status and decided to utilize their privilege to influence the perception other faculty members had of the search committee; specifically, the junior faculty member, with limited experience, who was co-chair of the search committee. Author 1 reflects on ways that the senior faculty members centered her as the content expert throughout the search process:

It is the sad truth of academia that many times junior faculty have little to no voice and thus we are accustomed to being bypassed during decision making processes. However, this was not the case with this search. In the beginning of the search, Author 3 supported my suggestions for additional committee members as well as the specifics of the job call.

There are numerous parties of interest involved when hiring a new faculty member (i.e. program faculty, department chairs, deans), and thus there are a multitude of opinions. However, Author 3 clearly did what was in her power to center Author 1 as the content expert of the search. She did not speak for her but rather made space and gave her the floor to speak. She set the example as the senior faculty member who was deferring to someone else and thus the model for what was expected. She reiterated this with expectation during various meetings as Author 1 described:

During the search process Author 3 always deferred to me when we (as a committee) were asked to give updates on the search during faculty meetings and meetings with leadership. She allowed me to be the point of contact with the human resources department as well as lead and organize numerous committee meetings. Occasionally, we had check-in meetings where Author 3 would offer her guidance and remind me 'They asked you to do this job, I'm going to make sure that you have the space to do it.'

By standing back and deferring to Author 1, Author 3 consistently reiterated her resolve that she was the content expert and the point of contact for the faculty search. The quiet support that Author 1 described she felt was then coupled with prominent outward support. In sharing their counternarrative Authors seek to provide insight to thoughts and feelings, such as these, that are often repressed under respectability politics. There is a tendency to defer to the senior faculty members, and in centering Author 1 in such a public way, Author 3 utilized her position to establish a new norm—to further establish legitimacy (Gonzales, 2013). When individuals in positions of influence and privilege decide to choose something different and establish a new norm transformative change within the institution is possible.

Que Descanses: Holding Space for Humanity

Academia rarely holds space for humanity, particularly for Latinas. Respectability politics often limit the range of emotion that are viewed as 'appropriate', and Latinas are painfully aware of this reality. Author 1 reflects on the way that the senior faculty members gave her a safe place and space to process her feelings:

I am always aware of the need to keep my feelings in check, I know who I am, and I know where I am, so I protect myself. But there were several times during this process that I felt comfortable sharing my lack of confidence in my abilities or frustration and even anger at the highly political nature of the process, and Authors 2 & 3 gave the safe

space to process these feelings. Whether it was a quick cry to release some frustration or processing my feeling overload, they let me know I could drop the game face, feel my feelings, and that when I was ready to get back to it, they would be standing behind me.

This response again speaks to the mutual comprehension of context, or *comadrisimo*, between all three Latina faculty members (DeHoyos Comstock, 2012). Authors 2 & 3 fostered a relationship of trust and understanding and thus Author 1 felt confident enough to be vulnerable with them. A safe space to acknowledge and process emotions is critically important for faculty members of color who are often asked to do the opposite; thus, it is incumbent on those in positions of power to create them (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Solórzano, 1998; Bennett et al., 2011).

There are various considerations when hiring a new faculty member, including collegiality. Author 1 was the co-chair on a search for the only other faculty member in her program and therefore, she was keenly aware of the importance of gaining an understanding of how the candidates viewed and demonstrated collegiality; and thankfully so were the senior faculty members of the committee. The following is a conversation between committee members about questions to include during the committee interview of the on-campus visit:

Author 2: I like to ask the question, 'How would your current colleagues describe you?' We want to make sure that we are hiring someone who has the qualifications necessary but also someone who is willing to work with you and support you; especially if we are hiring a senior faculty member.

Author 3: Yes, we need to make sure that the potential candidate is not only a good fit for the job and department but also a good fit for you.

The senior faculty members did not shift the focus of the search away from the hard facts of required and preferred qualifications, but rather they created importance for the humanistic component of the job. Given that the Author 1, co-chair of the search and the only other faculty member in the program, was a junior faculty member without tenure, this could have helped to mitigate any condescension towards her or disregard for the importance of working together. This was a 'battle worth fighting' and Author 2 demonstrated how to engage. The senior faculty members were aware of the potential negative attitudes and experiences that could arise during such a

politicized process, and instead of insisting that their comadre experience the same trauma that they did as a rite of passage, they acknowledged their privileged positions and used their own experiences and trauma to close ranks and protect her.

DISCUSSION

The faculty members in this study curated a space to engage in *comadrisimo* and *consejos* (Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2011; Solórzano, 1998) during a process that is both highly scrutinized and riddled with micropolitics (Marshall et al., 2020). Serving as a member on a search committee is commonly categorized as ‘service to the department’, and service typically accounts for the smallest percentage of faculty workload. Despite the return on time invested, in the context of ‘publish or perish’ academia, the senior faculty members agreed to serve on the committee as a form of care and “communal connected[ness]” (Scholz, 2016). In understanding the value of Latina faculty and the essential support system needed to be successful, Authors 2 and 3 understood the necessity of peer mentorship and engagement (Bennett et.al., 2011); which suggests they also knew what would have happened without it. As a Latina, maintaining your identity in higher education, an institution built on White supremacy, is an act of resistance that requires *consejos* from *madrinas*; authenticity and longevity in higher education are rarely synonymous but they can be (Machaco-Casas et al., 2013). Latinas are commonly referred to as resilient, but what would it be to imagine a space where resilience was not necessary and as Love (2023) states, “resist being called *resilient* yet again” (p. 287). If the communal spaces we crave and curate out of necessity (Solórzano, 1998) were not a surprise (as they were to Author 1), it would be commonplace and protected by administration.

IMPLICATIONS

It is incumbent on institutions of higher education to invest in Latino/a/x faculty by engaging in a reciprocal relationship with them. As they benefit from their research, insights, and cultural connections to students of color, institutions also must be willing to co-construct an understanding of the support they need. It should not rest solely on the shoulders of Latina faculty to carve out spaces to engage in *comadrisimo* and peer mentorship with other Latinas as a means of survival. Rather there needs to be an intentional effort, at the institutional level, to connect and/or provide opportunities for Latino/a/x scholars to coalesce. Prioritizing the importance of these sacred spaces allows for time to capitalize, integrate, and unapologetically use their

culture at the forefront of how they navigate the academy. With the growing emergence of the HSI designation, we offer the following considerations for institutions designated as such.

Composition Diversity and Servingness: Numbers and Humanity Matter

HSIs must acknowledge their responsibility of fostering navigational capital and addressing the fundamental and integral role of humanity and its significance within the success of all faculty, namely Latinas. One is *not* truly a Hispanic *Serving* Institution when percentages of faculty who identify as Hispanic are in single digits as compared to the percentages (majority of student population) of Brown and Black enrolled students; despite the designation awarded being based on student enrollment. How can students be adequately *served* if they do not see themselves in the faculty around them; or when they do see themselves in the faculty, they are unsuccessful? Moreover, administrators of color are at even lower percentages. There remains a staggering lack of diversity among department chairs and deans and more so amongst vice presidents, presidents and provosts who identify as Brown or Black, although nationally the number of Latino/a/x students continues to grow.

Many indicators can be attributed to the lack of composition diversity across most universities, not only HSIs. However, for the purpose of this study, we focused on one, which is the lack of formalized Latina mentoring and guidance. In other words, Latinas should be understood and their cultural backgrounds, their struggles, their roots, their language, and this culture should be valued to ensure and communicate investment in their professional success (Bennette et al., 2011). Higher education institutions must provide institutional support crafted from the knowledge of a co-constructed understanding of Latina faculty; what they need on their terms. In doing so, they will be more able to meet their needs and help ensure their long-term success. This support and those needs may vary greatly from the ideologies grounded in research based on white institutions, as the basis of support is the foundational understanding that the ways in which Latino/a/x faculty experience and navigate the academy is unique to their cultural lived experiences.

CONCLUSION

Those in higher education must be courageous enough to disrupt those ideologies to create a *new* framework for support that weighs heavily and representatively on the experiences and culture of Latino/a/x faculty. In doing so, we elevate the success of Latina faculty while simultaneously

elevating the success of our Latino/a/x students. Just as it is a priority for students to see themselves in the faculty that support them, junior faculty must also be afforded the opportunity to see themselves in successful senior faculty members. If leaders in higher education do not create a space to mentor, *a consejar* faculty of color so they can engage, interact, share ideas, share achievements as well as disappointments, they will continue to stifle the innate need to share and find common cultural comradery/ *comadrisimo* among their colleagues, something that has invariably been omni present for our white colleagues in higher education institutions. The idea is not to end or diminish the latter, but instead to create, enhance and create a more equitable position for the former.

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