



## **Madison Hispanic Caucus (MHC): Impact and Retention of Hispanic Faculty and Staff**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Knowing by first-hand experience how difficult it can be to be a minority on campus, we, as the authors, focus on the impact of having a Hispanic caucus for faculty and staff in a predominantly white institution. This study explores the impact of the caucus on its members, both professionally and personally. It also examines how caucus' membership helps build a comunidad on and off campus. Our findings indicate that the caucus positively impacts its members and allows them to build a comunidad, networks, and collaborations. We concluded that affinity groups are vital for underrepresented populations. Therefore, higher education institutions should prioritize allocating resources and creating safe and inclusive spaces specifically for Hispanic faculty and staff.*

**Keywords:** Affinity groups, Comunidad, Diversity, Higher education institutions, Hispanic faculty and staff, Peer networks, Sense of belonging

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## INTRODUCTION

Hispanic faculty and staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) have increased over the last several years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2022), full-time Hispanic faculty in the fall of 2021 were 5.5% compared to 2.6% in the fall of 1992 (Kirshstein et al., 1997). Even though there is an increase in Hispanic faculty, the U.S. still needs help diversifying the workforce in HEIs. This lack of diversity affects the recruitment and retention of faculty and staff of color, making the need for affinity groups more prevalent for this population.

The change in demographics in the U.S. shows that the Hispanic population grew by about 80%. Regarding Hispanics in HEIs, the representation of diverse faculty and staff is disproportionate to the diversity of the student demographics (Espinosa et al., 2019; Heilig et al., 2019). Similar to the increase of Hispanic faculty, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (2023) predicts that “Hispanic enrollment in higher education is expected to exceed 4.0 million students by 2026” (par. 1). Given the increase of Hispanic enrollment in HEIs, it is crucial that efforts to diversify the teaching workforce to reflect the change in demographics are set in motion (Cushner, 2015). A diverse teaching body will help meet the needs of students better. There are several benefits for students of color to have diverse faculty and staff. Some benefits include student success, higher completion rates, having role models and strong mentors in different career paths, creating a more inclusive campus climate, and adults who share familiar cultural experiences (Bitar et al., 2022; Goldhaber et al., 2015; Heilig et al., 2019; Neal et al., 2015). Furthermore, Bitar et al. (2022) and Heilig et al. (2019) add that diverse interactions and environments are needed to promote understanding and respect for everyone and to prepare students to navigate a more interconnected and multicultural world. Dias (2017) also highlights the critical role that student and faculty relationships have on student success and comments on the need for schools to create avenues for cultivating these relationships.

However, diversity in HEIs tends to focus more on students, neglecting the importance of diversifying faculty and staff. According to Espinosa et al. (2019), faculty, staff, and leadership diversity in HEIs is crucial because they can be more productive and innovative. In addition, Espinosa et al. explain that having a diverse body of faculty and staff attracts more diverse students and offers different methods for research and instruction. In addition, diverse faculty “add perspective, experience, knowledge, and methodology” (Heilig et al., 2019, p. 7), which can help HEIs become more attractive to students. A way to help diversify and retain faculty and staff in HEIs is by providing safe and inclusive spaces, such as affinity groups, where members can create a sense of belonging and *comunidad*.

Due to the lack of research on the impact of affinity groups specifically for Hispanics in HEIs, this study assesses the impact of having a Hispanic caucus for faculty and staff in a predominantly white institution (PWI). To fill in the gaps of the literature, more research focusing on the positive impact of faculty and staff affinity groups is needed. Topics such as faculty and staff well-being, sharing of resources within the institution, advancing diversity inclusion initiatives, and creating space for advocacy should be further explored to expand the knowledge base and add to the field. In an effort to contribute to the literature, our research sheds light on the impact of the MHC at James Madison University on its members professionally and personally. In addition, our study emphasizes the benefits and impact of providing caucus members with a safe, supportive, and inclusive space.

### **History of the MHC**

The MHC at James Madison University, a predominantly white institution, was established in 2016. The caucus started as an internal diversity grant in which faculty who identified as Hispanic could join. The caucus aims to promote the efforts of campus programs, departments, and organizations that work for and on behalf of the Hispanic community on and off campus. In addition, the MHC's goal is to mentor Hispanic students on campus. Lastly, the caucus's purpose is to enhance the quality of cultural engagement for all alums, faculty, staff, and students of James Madison University by representing the Hispanic faculty population.

The MHC is now in its third Chair term, and two of the authors served on the second term starting in the academic year 2020-2021 as co-chairs for three years. During their term, they expanded membership to include not only faculty but also staff who identified as Hispanic. This change was crucial to promoting inclusiveness within the MHC, given that underrepresented groups tend to hold staff positions in HEIs, mainly in service and maintenance roles (Espinosa et al., 2019). The co-chairs also established a 3-year rotation for the Chair and created an executive board of at least three members.

The caucus currently has 40 members representing different colleges, offices, and roles in the university. The admission process into the MHC is relatively easy. It consists of an informal meeting (usually a cafecito or a lunch) between a potential member and the leadership team to build relationships. During the conversation, the co-chairs discuss their interests, goals, and time commitment to being in the caucus. If candidates decide to join, a form is sent to them in which they can upload their picture to be published on the website, a short bio, and opt in or out of being added to the list as a potential mentor for students. Once candidates submit the form, they

are officially in the caucus and presented to la comunidad via email and in one of the general meetings or gatherings.

The MHC usually hosts a main event for its members and students in the fall semester during Hispanic Heritage Month. This event includes a guest speaker, food, music, and a space for networking and socializing. In addition, one social event is created during each of the semesters. These get-togethers are planned at a local Hispanic-owned restaurant to provide a space to create a sense of belonging and comunidad. These events are an opportunity to socialize outside of the university and build relationships while supporting our local community. At the end of each academic year, members' accomplishments are recognized at the last social event and through email and posted to the caucus' website.

Overall, the MHC recognizes the importance of creating awareness about the diversity within the faculty, staff, and students' experiences. Therefore, it dedicates time and resources to help shift cultures on campus. The caucus strives to create a supportive space for the university's Hispanic comunidad as they navigate their professional and personal journey at James Madison University and the surrounding community.

## **Our Story**

Author 1 is originally from Colombia and came to the U.S. as an exchange student in high school. After graduating, she continued her undergraduate and graduate studies as an international student in Virginia.

Author 2 is originally from Mexico and was raised in the border city of Tijuana. Author 2 went back and forth between Tijuana and California during her undergraduate and graduate studies. They both identify as Latina women.

Author 3 is originally from Taiwan but grew up in the Dominican Republic. He came to the U.S. as an international student for his undergraduate and graduate studies and then began his higher education career.

The authors were interested in this study because of their experience as direct beneficiaries of the positive impact that the MHC has had on them professionally and personally. Even though the authors have different backgrounds and interests, all joined the caucus to find a comunidad and a sense of belonging in a PWI. Their professional growth and personal relationships stem from their connection through the MHC. The authors have known each other since 2014; they first met through friends and colleagues, and although they worked in the same institution at the time, they only established a professional or personal relationship once they joined the caucus in 2016. As members, they collaborated in organizing some events, and through this, they started to connect not only on a professional level but on a

personal level as well. In the fall of 2020, two of the authors became co-chairs of the MHC, and this successful collaboration for the next three years strengthened their relationship and continues to evolve after their leadership role has ended.

Professionally, they rely on each other for scholarly and service work at the university. They also turn to each other for guidance and direction for project ideas and tenure and promotion guidelines. Their engagement at the MHC allowed them to find similar research interests that have resulted in research collaborations. These collaborations are now extending to other caucus members as well. Recently, Author 1 completed her doctoral studies and became an assistant professor with a tenure track position. Author 2 submitted her tenure dossier and was promoted to associate professor with tenure. Author 3 recently had a significant career shift and a promotion within the institution. During these transitions, the authors supported each other through these journeys, providing encouragement, support, and celebrating after every successful accomplishment.

On a personal level, they established a strong friendship with each other and among their families as well. Their children have become very close friends and enjoy playdates. Their families often gather to celebrate birthdays, holidays, and achievements. They have built a community outside of campus that they can rely on and truly feel supported. Through this and many other experiences, it became evident that their professional and personal lives are deeply rooted in la comunidad, which allows for a deeper relationship and connection.

As a result of these positive experiences in the MHC and the lack of diversity in higher education due to recruitment and retention challenges, this study examines the impact of affinity groups in HEIs. The literature review below covers the importance of faculty diversity and Hispanic representation in HEIs. It also provides the impact of overall affinity groups and peer mentoring networks to build social capital.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Faculty and staff of color in HEIs have much to contribute to students and the institution. However, their social, cultural, and linguistic capital are often overlooked and undervalued (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). These faculty and staff face challenges regarding recruitment and retention because they encounter discrimination, tokenism, exclusion, and a lack of sense of belonging (Settles et al., 2022). Pour-Khorshid (2018) adds that the education system and society in the U.S. are still inherently racist, and faculty and staff of color continuously face discrimination, isolation, and a “constant struggle to find a balance between personal and professional identities” (Comer et al., 2018, p. 162). For faculty and staff of color, working in a PWI can be

challenging to navigate, find support, and find others with similar cultures and backgrounds. These barriers could lead these populations to leave the institution (Settles et al., 2022). Therefore, being part of an affinity group has many benefits professionally and personally and can help alleviate some of these struggles.

Hurtado et al. (1998) developed the campus racial climate framework to understand and describe the campus climate. The authors' purpose to create this framework was to help HEIs create safe spaces for diverse individuals in which learning and socializing could take place, enhancing their intellectual and social development. The framework consists of five dimensions which include: Historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, Compositional diversity, Organizational and structural dimension, Psychological dimension, and Behavioral dimension. For this study, the authors focus on the psychological dimension which considers people's views of inter-group relations, responses to diversity from institutions, perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict, and attitudes toward others from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999).

Researchers such as Heilig et al. (2019) agree that lacking a sense of belonging negatively impacts participation, recruitment, hiring, and retention of faculty and staff of color. Therefore, considering the impact of Hurtado et al.'s (1998, 1999) psychological dimension for Hispanic faculty and staff is essential. Furthermore, Heilig et al. (2019) add that facing discrimination in the workplace can take a physiological and mental toll on people of color, perpetuating the institutions' exclusion environment. Affinity groups can help counteract these negative feelings and provide a safe and inclusive environment where faculty and staff of color can create a comunidad and what Comer et al. (2018) called a chosen family.

### **Hispanics in Higher Education Institutions**

Overall, faculty diversity is a focus point for HEIs and more progress needs to be made in diversifying the workforce (Bitar et al., 2022; Settles et al., 2022). University faculty are still predominantly white (Bitar et al., 2022). This lack of representation is especially concerning since research shows that diverse faculty plays a pivotal role in helping universities cultivate new ways of thinking and acting. Their presence in higher education transforms institutions into genuinely anti-racist, culturally diverse academic environments that promote emotional well-being for administrators, faculty, and students (Vázquez-Montilla et al., 2012).

Diversifying the faculty benefits the university, the students, and the professoriate. Chattopadhyay (2022) states that institutions that actively promote diversity and inclusion tend to be more successful in aiding students, staff, and faculty from diverse backgrounds in achieving their academic and

career objectives. It also helps create a more inclusive campus. Therefore, HEIs must provide support for faculty of color and opportunities to grow and advance into leadership positions to make their campuses more welcoming (Bitar et al., 2022). When the campus community is diverse, it allows for different perspectives and enhances the quality of education students receive. Chattopadhyay (2022) emphasizes that increased diversity among university faculty and students can enhance students' educational outcomes.

In addition, researchers have argued that faculty diversity supports students of color at PWIs. This support is crucial because Black and Hispanic students see faculty of color as role models and seek their guidance and support, which contributes to student completion. These same students completing their degrees are future faculty candidates (Bitar et al., 2022). Maestas et al. (2007) suggest that in a highly diverse college environment, students who engage in diversity experiences and hold positive attitudes towards diversity issues are more likely to establish a stronger sense of connection. Moreover, faculty members from diverse racial backgrounds make distinctive contributions to undergraduate education by employing a broader range of pedagogical techniques and interacting more frequently with students than their white counterparts (Chattopadhyay, 2022).

Recruiting and retaining faculty and staff of color is vital as student demographics continue to change in higher education. More specifically, research indicates that although the enrollment of Hispanic students is increasing, Hispanic faculty and staff are still vastly underrepresented (Bitar et al., 2022; López et al., 2021). In the Bitar et al. (2022) executive summary, the authors explained that nearly 80% of public institutions in their study had failing grades regarding Hispanic faculty diversity. Vázquez-Montilla et al. (2012) argue that if HEIs intend to retain diverse faculty, it is essential to prioritize endeavors to eradicate exclusion, marginalization, and constraints on participation in decision-making processes.

Unfortunately, while higher education institutions appear to be addressing structural representation, they often neglect implementing strategies that foster empowerment and inclusion for diverse faculty. Change needs to happen to reap the benefits of a diverse workforce in HEIs. However, change is difficult and often starts at the top of an organization. According to Bitar et al. (2022), Hispanic presidents in U.S. colleges and universities have remained steady at 4% since 2001. Moreover, positions that help to advance a person's career, such as senior administrative positions, are also underrepresented by faculty of color. Bitar et al. add that the pathway to these positions at the top is often through the faculty track. Therefore, it is vital to have more faculty of color as candidates in top administrative roles, which allows them to make the necessary changes to diversify the institution.

If HEIs are serious about hiring diverse faculty and staff, these efforts must not be solely to meet a quota but also to empower the diverse workforce. Failing to give voice to the new diverse hires is a new context of discrimination, characterized by subtle and cumulative effects, constrained involvement in decision-making processes, and restricted access to the resources and support required for career advancement (Vázquez-Montilla et al., 2012). The authors explain that when it comes to diverse higher education faculty, it is crucial to move beyond the institutional focus on structural diversity and instead foster direct engagement with diverse peers. This approach enables the development of more intricate perspectives and relationships, reiterating the benefits and need for affinity groups that offer peer support in HEIs.

Mishra (2020) studied the positive impact of peer support and networks on students' retention and success. Even though the author focused on underrepresented students, this could also apply to Hispanic faculty and staff. In addition, López et al. (2021) highlight the importance and need for colleges and universities to collaborate in the creation of shared spaces between Latina staff, administrators, and faculty that “allow them to use their skills and personal experiences to contribute to the goals of the university, which often include student success and the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and staff” (p. 117). To attract and retain Hispanic faculty and staff in HEIs, they must provide a safe and inclusive space for their voices to be heard and create a sense of belonging and *comunidad*. These efforts will create an environment of support among those with similar cultural backgrounds.

### **Impact of Affinity Groups and Peer Mentoring Networks**

In HEIs, affinity groups are safe spaces where faculty and staff can foster *comunidad*, share their experiences, network, and support one another. These groups ensure all members feel valued, included, and empowered to succeed. When faculty and staff are part of an affinity group, this helps increase their social capital, which can help with retention. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). As a new hire, navigating a different system can be challenging for faculty, especially faculty of color. However, affinity groups can provide the social support needed to succeed in the institution. As human beings, we rely on our social networks to find support and access to different resources (Mishra, 2020). Mishra also explains that social networks are structures where relationships connect individuals. Therefore, social networks and support can



help build social capital and allow individuals to navigate spaces where the climate does not feel as safe and accepting.

Racial affinity spaces for educators of color are necessary “in order to support their personal, political, relational, and pedagogical growth, which has implications on their retention and leadership within the field” (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 318). Furthermore, Núñez et al. (2015) highlight the importance of creating peer mentoring spaces that foster the advancement of underrepresented faculty. These spaces provide a networking approach where resources are shared, and individuals can provide distinctive assets to contribute to one another’s development. Núñez et al. add that peer mentoring also facilitates a sense of belonging and legitimacy in the academy by creating more opportunities for those from marginalized groups to support one another. Ouyang and Chanani (2023) share an example of a successful affinity group, the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Physicians group created in the Department of Psychiatry at Georgetown University Hospital. Members of the affinity group shared that the most important activities were the establishment of a community and connection building. They also identified the impact on their learning, processing, and professional development. Some members recognized that the group created a safe space by having meetings outside of work and a space to discuss issues without fear of negative consequences.

Particularly for Hispanic women in higher education, research suggests that peer mentoring can provide asset-based professional relationships and career-centered support (López et al., 2021). Peer mentoring also provides opportunities for Latina faculty and staff to “envision themselves advancing in institutions and making meaningful contributions to mentoring spaces and the broader institution” (p. 105). Additionally, Montas-Hunter (2012) examines the self-efficacy of Hispanic women in leadership positions at HEIs in the U.S., indicating that having social models impacts leadership development. This allows individuals to see similar people in positions they strive for and thus helps them recognize capabilities to progress into leadership roles.

Affinity groups and peer mentoring networks are essential for diverse faculty and staff recruitment and retention. Faculty of color must see themselves represented in the institution’s demographics as valued and contributing members of the university community. For example, one recent hire and member of the MHC explained that one of the reasons they decided to join James Madison University was because of the caucus and the potential support network they could have within a PWI.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The authors' interest in this study stems from their involvement with the MHC. Throughout their experiences as members and co-chairs of the MHC, they can attest to the benefits the caucus has had on them professionally and personally. Therefore, they are interested in how this affinity group impacts other organization members.

This study aimed to understand and learn the benefits and impact of having the MHC for James Madison University's faculty and staff to help recruit, retain, and build a sense of belonging and *comunidad*. Due to the limited research on the impact of Hispanic affinity groups on faculty and staff, this study contributes to the field by explaining the benefits of affinity groups and providing different reasons HEIs should continue their efforts to diversify the workforce. One way to support these efforts is by investing resources in creating and maintaining affinity groups, specifically for Hispanic faculty.

The authors conducted this research through the lens of phenomenology and descriptive study designs. They used this theoretical framework better to understand MHC members' experiences in the caucus. According to Spencer (2017), this study design reflects people's experiences from their perspective, making phenomenology a good fit for this study. Moreover, the purpose of the descriptive study is to explain and interpret the current status of individuals (Mertler, 2020). The fitting of these two designs allowed the authors to gather participants' experience with the MHC, the impact of the caucus on their professional and personal lives, and whether the caucus helped them build a *comunidad* on and off campus.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Strategies**

To collect the necessary data, the authors utilized a mixed-methods approach. With IRB approval, a Qualtrics survey was sent via email to all members of the MHC to be completed within two weeks. The authors also sent a reminder to complete the survey five days before it closed. The survey was composed of quantitative and qualitative questions that measured how membership with the MHC impacted them professionally and personally. For this study, the authors defined impact as "the strong effect or influence that something has on a situation or person" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Using quantitative and qualitative survey questions helped the authors answer the research questions better. The survey was completely anonymous, and no identifiable information was collected. The authors received a total of 11 responses. The authors used the following research questions to guide the study:

RQ1: What impact has the MHC had on faculty and staff professionally?

RQ2: What impact has the MHC had on faculty and staff personally?

RQ3: How has joining the MHC helped faculty and staff build a comunidad on and off-campus?

To analyze the data, the authors employed descriptive statistics for the quantitative responses. For the qualitative responses, the authors used a thematic coding process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) to find themes in the data. They each coded the qualitative data separately and then came together to refine and synthesize the themes. The qualitative responses further expanded on the quantitative data.

## **Participants**

The MHC has 40 members representing several Hispanic countries. They also represent different positions across campus, varying in classification and rank. Of the 40 members, 11 (27.5%) responded to the survey. The participants' Hispanic heritage background was varied, representing various countries, including Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Caribbean. In addition, three participants associated themselves with the U.S. and Mexican culture (Chicano).

Regarding gender, four participants identified as female, four as male, one as non-binary/third gender, and two preferred not to say. Participants started their employment at James Madison University as early as 1998, and the most recent hire was in 2022. Most of the study participants were hired within the last seven years. Six participants joined the same year the caucus was created, and five joined between 2019 and 2022.

## **Limitations**

There were some limitations in this study. First, the small sample size and response rate, does not allow for the results to be generalized to a broader population. Second, the low response rate may introduce response bias and affect the reliability of the findings. Additionally, the study was conducted exclusively within a PWI, potentially limiting the applicability of the results to different institutional settings. For future research, it is crucial to address these limitations by employing larger samples, extending the research to multiple institutions, and implementing strategies to improve response rates.

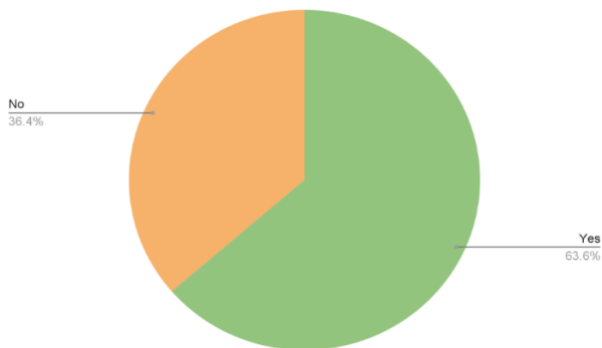
## **RESULTS**

Overall, the MHC positively impacts faculty and staff at James Madison University professionally and personally and helps to provide a sense of comunidad. When asked if joining the MHC impacted them professionally, 63.6% of participants responded "yes," as seen in Figure 1 below. The common theme around this question was that the caucus provides network and support. For example, one participant responded, "It allowed me

to connect with other faculty/staff that share similar attitudes and values that allow deeper connections and collaborations. It provided a network of resources that contributed to professional development.” This response explains how this member has built a professional network in and outside their department to grow professionally. Another participant wrote, “To have a community of colleagues that understand the difficulties of being at a PWI has helped me to be a better scholar and teacher. I feel like I have people to talk to about my work that understand the difficulties of being a Latina in the academy.” This response shows the support the caucus members experienced by being a part of this group and the sense of understanding that it is shared.

**Figure 1**

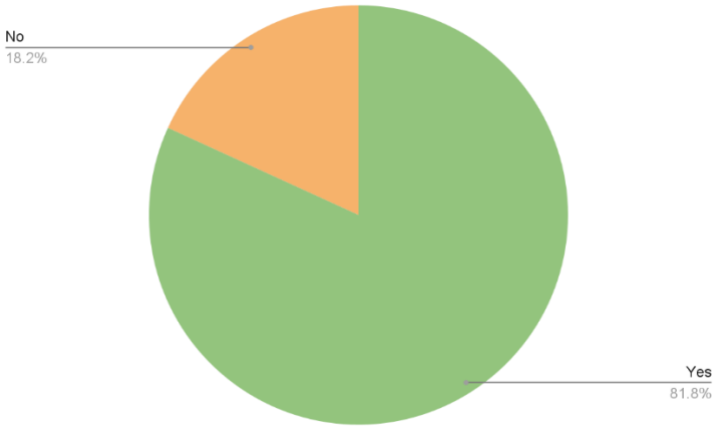
*Has joining MHC impacted you professionally?*



Participants were also surveyed if joining the MHC has impacted them personally; 81.8% responded “yes,” as shown in Figure 2 below. The common themes for this question were *comunidad*, sense of belonging, and encouragement. One participant wrote, “It provided a network of colleagues to connect socially and able to share information and support outside of the professional environment. It solidified and expanded my ‘tribu’.” This response relates to the *comunidad* and sense of belonging as this participant finds the caucus as their chosen family. Another participant wrote, “The MHC has consistently provided us with encouragement and support, including being there to celebrate our accomplishments and talk through when things come up short.” This response shows how the participant appreciates being uplifted by the group and celebrated for their achievements. Lastly, one participant wrote, “I feel like I have a support network that I can count on for child pickup, family concerns, and to socialize with.” This response helps the authors see the caucus’s impact on members and that it is not just for professional purposes. The caucus promotes friendship building, which helps build a *comunidad* and a sense of belonging on and off campus.

**Figure 2**

*Has joining MHC impacted you personally?*



The programming events most attended by the respondents were the banquets/receptions, social gatherings, general meetings, and the SOMOS Latinx Conference. Figure 3 below shows the breakdown of events attended by participants. Based on the qualitative responses, the events they found most impactful professionally were the general meetings, the conference, and the banquets/receptions. One participant shared that the general meetings and social gatherings “Allowed me to feel much more connected with James Madison University. Being inspired by colleagues has led to taking on leadership roles at James Madison University, especially in DEI.” Another participant expressed how the professional meetings and the conference “Provided spaces to connect with other faculty/staff who share similar interests and issues.” These events created spaces for caucus members to connect and interact with other Hispanic faculty and staff across campus.

Similarly, regarding the programming, participants found most impactful personally were the cafecitos with students, social gatherings, and banquets/receptions. According to one participant, cafecitos were impactful because “Connections with students allow us to influence and mentor ‘younger visions of ourselves’.” The opportunities to create connections between MHC members and Hispanic students are powerful and support the literature emphasizing the importance and benefits of having diverse faculty and staff in HEIs for students. Another member shared, “The social gatherings provided spaces to connect with the local community and also opportunities to meet others outside of the professional environment.” The different events provided spaces where the members could expand their social networks, social support, and social capital.

**Figure 3**

*Events attended by participants*

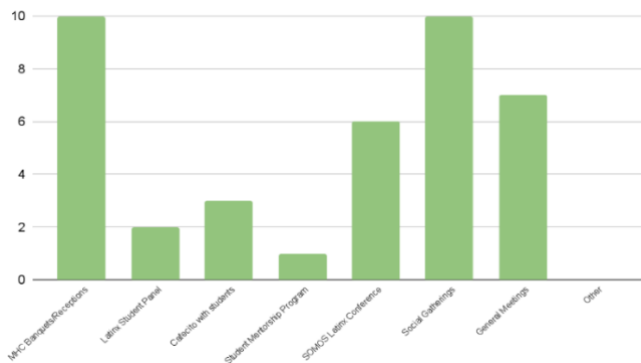
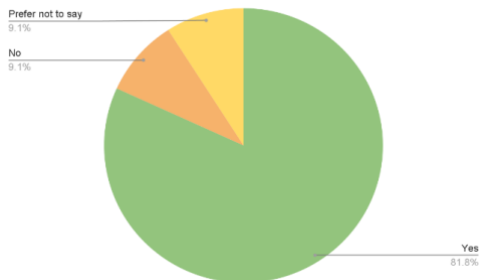


Figure 4 below shows participant responses regarding whether the MHC helped build a comunidad and a sense of belonging on and off-campus. Most participants agreed that the MHC has helped them build a comunidad and a sense of belonging. One participant said, “It is very easy to feel lost in a sea of white at James Madison University so having people who have some cultural commonalities has been a source of comfort.” Another one wrote that the MHC “Facilitates and provides opportunities for cultural exchange at James Madison University ... I have been extremely grateful for those opportunities, which have helped me build a sense of community with other members at James Madison University.” In addition, another participant felt that the MHC activities “Have helped me to stay in contact with colleagues in other departments that I would not interact with otherwise.” Lastly, another participant shared that they “Have a network of people that I trust and I feel safer at James Madison University because they are here.” All these responses show the different ways in which the MHC has helped members feel like they have a comunidad and that they belong in the community.

**Figure 4**

*Joining MHC helped build a comunidad and/or sense of belonging*



To better understand why members join an affinity group like the MHC, the authors asked participants to share aspects of the caucus that appealed to them. The central theme that surfaced was the opportunity to build a community in a space where there is a lack of Hispanic representation. One participant shared that one of the aspects of joining the caucus was that it is “The only way to have community for us and not lose our cultural identity.” Another wrote that they appreciate that it is “Informal and literally a ‘space’ for Hispanic faculty and staff.” Another member shared, “The main attraction was to gain a sense of community and do political and advocacy work of Latin American descent.” All these accounts show the authors the importance and benefits of having affinity groups like the MHC for Hispanic faculty and staff and provide a reason why creating, maintaining, and advancing such groups is necessary.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the above results, we can determine that affinity groups positively add to the campus community. They can diversify the faculty and staff body and help with recruitment and retention. As the literature explains, having a diverse workforce has several benefits for all stakeholders. This study explores the MHC’s impact on its members professionally and personally, and how the caucus helps build a comunidad and sense of belonging.

Given that Hispanic students will continue to enter HEIs, it is pivotal that universities allocate resources and invest in spaces that support the needs of Hispanic faculty and staff. The MHC provides opportunities for members to connect within the caucus and create scholarly collaborations across campus. In addition, the caucus allows members to build peer-mentoring networks in which they share best practices that help improve their job performance. It is essential to add that participation in events created by the caucus provides safe and inclusive spaces to build connections between MHC members and Hispanic students, allowing for mentorship opportunities.

This study also highlights the caucus’ impact on its members personally. According to the literature, affinity groups help minority faculty and staff create social networks for encouragement, guidance, and support. These are essential for Hispanic faculty and staff success in PWIs. Moreover, when Hispanic faculty and staff are part of an affinity group such as MHC, it helps to advance social capital and connections that help create a comunidad and strengthen their sense of belonging. When Hispanic faculty and staff interact in social events, such as those organized by the MHC, members can share experiences with others with similar backgrounds, build a network of trust, and create their chosen family. The different opportunities to create

connections are how caucus members feel they belong in a PWI like James Madison University and while building their comunidad at the same time.

Overall, the study supports the research on the importance of having affinity groups in HEIs for minorities. As the results show, members of the MHC joined the caucus to build a comunidad with individuals who share a similar cultural background and to have a safe space where concerns can be raised without fear of retaliation. The MHC is where Hispanic voices are united to establish representation, celebrate cultures, accomplishments, and foster professional and personal growth.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Due to the limited research on the impact of affinity groups, specifically for Hispanic faculty and staff in HEIs, this study contributes to the literature on this topic. The findings explain the benefits of such groups and the importance for HEIs to provide spaces and allocate resources for all minority groups to create a professional and personal community.

This study aligns with the research emphasizing the benefits of having affinity groups for minority faculty and staff. To answer the research questions, the study highlights how the MHC positively affects the members professionally and personally by providing safe and inclusive spaces in the campus community. Too often, these initiatives are solely under the offices of Diversity and Inclusion, which are underfunded and overwhelmed with more pressing matters. Faculty and staff are often neglected compared to students when competing priorities arise. To achieve this, senior leadership in HEIs needs to commit resources at all levels of the institution. This includes campus-wide support and dedicated spaces for Hispanic faculty and staff.

Another implication of this study is that most research on affinity groups focuses on students rather than minority faculty and staff. This study provides insight into why HEIs should provide affinity groups dedicated solely to Hispanic faculty and staff. These groups can help members feel supported and able to share their voices without fear of negative consequences. These spaces also create a sense of belonging and a comunidad on and off campus.

Even though a larger sample would be ideal because it would allow the authors to see results on a larger scale, this study shows how the MHC positively impacts Hispanic faculty and staff at James Madison University. An affinity group, like the MHC, can help a PWI like James Madison University with recruitment and retention efforts to diversify the campus.

Despite the study focusing only on faculty and staff, the research shows that having a more diverse climate would benefit all parties involved. As more Hispanic students are enrolling in HEIs, universities need to provide role models and mentors in which students can see themselves reflected.



Hispanic faculty and staff can also build relationships with Hispanic students and support them in their educational journey, which leads to student retention. The impact of the MHC on students could be a topic for future research.

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