Adjustment of Undergraduate Latino Students at a Southeastern University Cultural Components of Academic and Social Integration

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Abstract:

College campuses in the southeast United States are striving to understand and serve their newly arriving Latino students to promote adjustment and academic success. The purpose of this article is to outline the cultural components of academic and social integration of Latino college students at one southeastern campus, based on descriptive survey results. Participant responses reflected relatively smooth academic integration but some complications in the social/cultural areas. Implications for student affairs professionals are discussed.

Resumen:

Campos universitarios en el sureste de los EUA están motivados a entender y servir sus estudiantes latinos recientemente llegados para promover ajuste y éxito académico. El propósito de este artículo es el de delinear los componentes culturales de la integración social y académica de estudiantes universitarios latinos en una universidad del sureste basados en resultados de una encuesta descriptiva. Las respuestas de los participantes reflejaron una integración académica relativamente plana pero con algunas complicaciones en las áreas socio-culturales. Se discuten implicaciones para profesionales de servicio a universitarios.

Keywords: *Latino college students; academic and social integration; culture and ethnicity; southeastern United States*

Article:

In the southeastern United States, the recent influx of Latino immigrants has affected all other racial and cultural groups and caused a redefinition of our multicultural reality (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The process of adapting to the new reality can be challenging on both sides of the equation, with both newcomers and existing members of the community experiencing change. *Acculturation* is a term that describes changes in customs, values, or worldviews that can occur when two different cultures are brought together (Phinney, 1990). *Ethnic identity*, which is related to acculturation, focuses on how individuals identify as a member of an ethnic group and value that group in the context of having other groups present. The present study focuses on the university setting, where these two processes can be important for understanding interpersonal interactions. The quality of the connection between a Latino student who is culturally distinct from the majority of his or her campus and the rest of the academic community has important implications for adjustment, integration, persistence, and success (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1987). That is to say, culture should be included as an important variable in any investigation of student academic and social integration.

The southeastern United States is an interesting location for studying this acculturation and adjustment phenomenon, as it had been accustomed to local racial dynamics (mostly Black-White) but had not experienced widespread international influence until recently (Kochhar, Suro, & Tafoya, 2005). The top four states in the country in percentage of Latino influx from 1995 to 2000 were (in order) North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Many of these newcomers were likely to be facing the challenges common to first-generation immigrants as they began to interact with school systems and other community structures (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005). The acculturation and adjustment process typically has a steep learning curve, which presents additional difficulties to immigrant students trying to move forward.

Several factors influence which students continue along the pathway to postsecondary education. Hernandez (2002) reported that 27.5% of Latino high school graduates (aged 18 to 21) were in college as compared to 46.1% of non-Hispanic Whites. Fry (2004) found that "less than one-quarter of young Latino entrants finish a bachelor's degree and nearly two-thirds end up with no post-secondary credential at all" (p. 2). Previous articles in the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* have examined various portions of the educational pipeline to describe how Latinos are faring. Most notably, the special issue on higher education published in April 2004 featured articles related to "the strategies, programming, interventions, and policy decisions that institutions and communities use collaboratively as they attempt to cope with this educational crisis" (Oliva & Nora, 2004, p. 121). Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) also made an important contribution with their exploration of how Latino students in a national data set perceived campus climate and their sense of belonging to the institutions.

However, those articles were drawn mainly from the West and Southwest, areas with longer histories of Latino presence. In situations where Latinos are newcomers to an area, possibly first-generation immigrants and numerically not well represented on campus, progress in postsecondary education may look different. Torres and Phelps (1997) studied Latino college students in the southeastern United States, where they hypothesized that fewer cultural resources in the community would put more pressure on one's ethnic identity. Their prediction was that "the prevalence of the American or Anglo culture will force them [Latinos] into a process of choosing to relinquish or retain characteristics from each culture at a faster rate" (p. 58). The heightened salience of culture in a context such as the Southeast may influence student persistence or attainment.

How do Latino college students experience academic and social integration on campus, particularly in areas where they still exist in small numbers? How do acculturation and ethnic identity play a part? The relationship between students' personal traits or self-concept and the nature of the campus community is important to explore. For example, are southeastern universities now receiving some of the newest Latino arrivals, those who are likely to be less acculturated to U.S. cultural norms and more likely to identify with their Latino heritage? How are the universities and the students faring?

A review of literature showed that culture is not consistently included in discussions of student progress in higher education. In his original work describing the impact of academic and social integration on persistence/dropout decisions, Tinto (1975) discussed some of the individual and institutional characteristics that may influence the decision outcome. These were general characteristics such as family background, educational goals, prior experiences with schools, the size and type of the institution, and the composition of the student body. However, he also indicated that further research into race/ethnicity as a component of dropout decisions (separate from ability or economic resources) was needed. In a follow-up study designed to empirically validate Tinto's model, Pascarella and Chapman (1983) concluded that the model did account for a modest proportion of the persistence/dropout decisions, but that other important variables had not been accounted for. Cultural factors may be one of those important unexplored areas that affect the academic and social integration of Latino students.

Other researchers have started to adapt Tinto's (1975) work for Latino populations. One of the earliest efforts was a qualitative research study with 24 Latino and Native Americans at a university in the Southwest, which probed how the participants saw their ethnicity in context of the social environment at the target university (Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991). The authors indicated that ethnic identity was rooted in family relationships, and thus campus social integration could not be understood apart from that connection. They also gave examples of how ethnic pride and awareness provided the participants with a secure foundation from which they could explore the social niches at the campus. Many students chose to integrate themselves with enclaves at the university (e.g., student clubs or social groups), not necessarily with the broadest level of campus life.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) also discussed the potential difficulties of minority groups attempting to integrate themselves on a predominantly White campus. Their quantitative study (done with structural equation modeling and national data) was an effort to clarify what academic and social integration might look like for Latinos. For example, working with a faculty member on a research project or being a guest in a faculty member's home

were not significantly associated with a sense of belonging for Latinos, although those were typically mentioned as important to academic integration with other groups. Although acknowledging the importance of Tinto's (1975) main ideas, Hurtado and Carter echoed the importance of maintaining family relationships while simultaneously building new connections among fellow students and participating in more localized cultural niches within the campus (attributed to Attinasi, 1989, 1992).

In a related study, Kraemer (1997) examined academic and social integration with adult Latino students at a 2-year college in Illinois and determined that the constructs were reasonable to utilize, although the behaviors which reflected social and academic integration look slightly different in that setting. Salinas and Llanes (2003) studied Latinos at a 4-year commuter campus in Texas, focusing on students who departed before graduation. They also indicated that students were not fully academically and socially integrated into the life of the institution, which may have made it easier for them to disengage. These studies help describe the importance of academic and social integration, but further emphasis on culture and ethnic identity is needed.

The current descriptive study examined Latino students at a university in the south-eastern United States. The purpose was to explore cultural markers and ethnic identity for their possible intersections with participants' social and academic integration at the studied institution. Given the recent demographic shifts, it is important to describe the experiences of Latino students in new arrival areas to understand adjustment issues and promote academic success and degree completion. This study reports highlights from a descriptive survey that was given to gain more information about the academic and social integration of Latinos enrolled at a Research I land grant university. The portions of the survey that are dealt with here related to demographics, ethnic identity status, involvement in campus cultural activities, use of academic support resources, and academic goals and confidence. More detailed information about the complete study can be obtained from the first author. Given the goal of understanding an under-represented population in higher education (such as Latinos) in a set of institutions where they have little historical presence (such as universities in the southeastern United States), the scope of the survey was broad and inclusive.

Method
Participants
There were 469 undergraduate Latino students enrolled in the university in fall of 2004 (approximately 2% of the total enrollment). Due to the size of the enrolled population, no sampling was done. The 109 students who responded to the survey came from every college at the university, with the largest percentages in humanities (30%), engineering (28%), and life sciences (12%), respectively. Eighty percent of participants were traditional-age college students (18 to 22), there was representation from each academic class, and 52% were females. In terms of ethnic or cultural background, students could choose a region (e.g., Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, South America, Spain, or a combination of the previous areas) and then specify the origin of their ancestry. The responses to this question indicated considerable diversity of ancestry in the sample. The largest group were students of Mexican origin (25%), followed by multiethnic students (24%), students from South American countries (20%), and students from Latin-Caribbean countries (17%). Subjective descriptors of socioeconomic status were also collected (as opposed to numerical family income, which some students may not know or may be reluctant to share). Nineteen percent said they had more than enough resources growing up, 69% said they had enough, and 11% indicated they had less than enough. Participants also described their generation of immigration (38% had been born in other countries; 44% were born in the United States to immigrant parents) and college generation (29% were the first in their families to attend college). About 29% of the respondents had spoken only Spanish at home, but the rest spoke English or were in bilingual households.

Measure
The survey was created by the first author, with the goal of describing the academic and social experiences of Latino undergraduates. Input was gathered from the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs and the Vice Provost for Diversity and African-American Affairs, an expert consultant on the topic. Table 1 displays more information regarding content areas, specific survey items, and structure of response. Some content items were created by adapting existing research related to the target question areas, such as ethnic identity (Felix-Ortiz,

Newcomb, & Myers, 1994; Phinney, 1992; Zea, Asner-Self, Birman, & Buki, 2003). Other items were typical demographic questions, or were taken directly from listings of student services, cultural events, and Latino student organizations available at the research location. The finalized survey was converted to an online format. The content areas that are presented in the current manuscript relate to ethnic identity, involvement in cultural activities on campus, use of academic resources, and academic goals and activities. Factor analysis of the section on attitudes and involvement will be presented to help confirm content validity.

Procedure

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval over the summer of 2004, electronic surveys were distributed to all undergraduate Latinos (age 18 or older) in the fall. International students on temporary visas were not included. There were 447 valid e-mail addresses on the university's list, and an introductory message including purpose of research, voluntary nature of participation, and informed consent was sent to each. With many computer labs on campus, no student would have been blocked from participation by lack of access. The survey responses *(N = 109, 24% rate)* were returned to the website anonymously.

Table 1
Survey Items on Ethnic Identity, Academic and Social Integration

Content Area	Survey Definition	Sample Items	Response
Ethnic identity	Factor f: Ethnic identity attitudes	I think a lot about how my life is affected by my ethnic group membership.	True/False Yes/No
	Factor d: Connection with home/ family	I participate in activities related to Hispanic/Latino culture at home.	
Involvement in campus cultural events	Factor a: Active involvement in Latino student groups	I participate with the Mi Familia group.	Yes/No Yes/No
	Factor c: Attendance at campus Latino cultural events	I attended Hispanic Heritage Month events on campus.	
Use of academic resources (within the past 12 months)	Factor e: Involvement with academic resources	I have used the campus library.	Yes/No Yes/No
	Factor i: Use of academic advising and counseling	I have used the counseling center.	
Academic goals and activities	Factor b: Academic honors and mentoring	I have used the honors/scholars office within the past 12 months.	Yes/No
	Survey items not included in factor analysis	I am confident I can research and write a term paper.	Likert scale (4 points)
	Survey items not included in factor analysis	I am sure I will graduate from this university.	Yes/No

Results
Survey Validity
In order to examine the construct validity of the survey, factor analysis was done with SPSS (version 12). Demographics and university resource utilization items were excluded from the factor analysis. All items (n = 33) related to attitudes and behaviors were entered in a maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation. A Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was within acceptable range (.567), and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi2 = 890.9$, $df = 528$, $p < .0001$). Twelve factors were found to account for 65.7% of the total variance, but only 9 of those factors were deemed sufficient for meaningful interpretation. This accounted for 55.3% of the total variance. The factors (with percentage of variance explained in parentheses) were named: (a) Active Involvement in Latino Student Groups (13.2%), (b) Academic Honors and Mentoring (7.0%), (c) Attendance at Campus Latino Cultural Events (6.1%), (d) Connection With Home and Family (5.6%), (e) Involvement with Academic Resources (5.4%), (f) Ethnic Identity Attitudes (4.9%), (g) Desire for Administrative Cultural Support (4.7%), (h) Needs for Different Types of Support for Latino Students (4.5%), and (i) Use of Academic Advising and Counseling (3.9%). The factor analysis of survey responses in this study reflected possible routes to academic integration (factors b, e, i) and social integration within the Latino community on campus (factors a, c, g, h).

Social Integration: Ethnic Identity and Campus Involvement

One set of survey items focused on ethnic identity status and the salience of that identity. After reading a set of exemplars (e.g., values, language, culture, appearance, music, political heroes, self-concept), participants were asked if they identified themselves more in those ways with the Latino community, the majority White U.S. community, or with both communities. Most students (47%) indicated that they identified with both, which would be equivalent to a bicultural identity status. Chi-square analysis indicated that this distribution was significantly different from expected ($\chi2 = 53.45$, $df = 3$, $p < .0001$). Biculturalism has been identified by other researchers as relevant to the experience of Latino college students on majority White campuses (Torres, 2003). There was no significant difference by region of origin (e.g., Mexico, Central or South America, Caribbean) in terms of which students claimed a bicultural ethnic identity ($\chi2 = 4.67$, $df = 5$, $p < .45$). The groups that identified primarily with the Latino community (23%) or with the majority White com-munity (21%) were evenly distributed. A few people (8%) also chose the option of identifying with no particular ethnic community. With respect to identity salience, 75% of participants agreed that they had a strong attachment to their own ethnic group. It is unknown whether the students who did not identify with an ethnic group or did not feel a strong attachment to their group were experiencing cultural alienation, but it is theoretically possible.

When asked if they had become members of three existing student organizations related to Latino or Hispanic culture, almost 70% of respondents indicated they had not. That percentage co-varied with generation of immigration, as 62.5% of first-generation immigrants claimed no involvement, whereas 70.5% of second-generation and 80% of third-generation immigrants had not participated with the organizations. A related item inquired about events or activities related to Latino culture that students may have attended. The general trend is that more students indicated they had attended an educational or cultural activity (59% on campus; 81% in the com-munity) than had chosen to become a member of a student organization.

A closer look at the respondents who had not joined any of the Latino-related student organizations revealed an interesting difference. Of the total 27 students of Mexican descent, 23 had not joined a group (85%). In comparison, 14 out of the 26 (54%) multiethnic students had not joined. In their answers to other survey items (socioeconomic status, generation of immigration, year at the university, grade point average, identity status, etc.), the nonjoiners responded similarly to the joiners.

As mentioned previously, there were four factors (a, c, g, h) that emerged in the SPSS analysis and had implications for social integration. For the respondents to this survey, then, social integration could include involvement in Latino student organizations, attendance at cultural offerings on campus, and interest in various kinds of sup-port from the administration. The items included in those groupings were reflective of behaviors like joining Latino student groups, going to relevant cultural events, or desiring a year-end banquet to honor exemplary Latino students. The factor analysis also indicated a trend for some students to have primary commitments at home as opposed to on campus (e.g., attending cultural celebrations or educational events with family).

Academic Integration: Involvement With Academic Resources

The demographic indicators of academic integration are encouraging for this group of Latino students. Respondents were located in all academic colleges throughout the university, from business to engineering to humanities. They reported healthy grade point averages (almost half of the students were above a 3.0 average) and were engaged with some of the main academic support services at the university. The three themes that emerged in the factor analysis with connections to academic integration (b, e, i) reflected activities like being part of the honors or scholars programs at the university, using the library and counseling center, and attending professors' and academic advisors' office hours. When comparing students who claimed a Latino-centered ethnic identity versus those who said they were more identified with the majority White U.S. culture, usage of academic resources remained similar, as did grade point average and academic major. Students with a Latino-centered identity were more likely to be first-generation college students (48%) and students with a majority U.S.-centered identity were more likely to have had parents who attended college (78%), but their responses

were otherwise similar. In addition, students maintained high percentages of academic resource utilization regardless of region of ancestry.

Beyond the demographic indicators, the Latinos in the survey sample also had positive attitudes about their academic experiences and commitment to the university. For example, in responding to items related to their confidence in academic abilities, the vast majority of the respondents were certain they could perform tasks like talking to professors, writing papers, and taking exams. In all eight items describing academic behaviors, 57% to 81% of the students responded to those items with complete confidence in their abilities. This high level of confidence existed across ethnic identities and geographic regions of ancestry. In addition, approximately 73% of the total sample indicated certainty that they would graduate from the university. Again, this certainty did not vary with ethnic identity status, but some slight variations could be seen with country of origin (e.g., 65% of Mexican origin youth felt certain they would graduate, as compared to almost 82% of students descended from South American countries). However, the main barrier Mexican origin students perceived was economic, not academic.

Discussion

The number of Latino students is increasing on many college campuses in the United States (Hernandez, 2000). In addition to understanding the adjustment and campus integration of the Latino students who are already present, college personnel would be well advised to look ahead to the potential candidate pool of future students. Acculturation will be a key variable for universities to understand. Given Latino population increases on the order of 200% to 400% in many southeastern states between 1990 and 2000, the students currently in elementary and middle school are those who may be moving toward higher education in the next 10 years (Kochhar et al., 2005). Data specific to the state where the current research was con-ducted show that the Latino high school population (currently under 5,000) will more than double by 2014, and could reach 20,000 students by 2016 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2004).

The state of academic integration of Latinos at the target university in the survey year (2004) seems to be relatively clear. Overall, the students can be described as confident, goal-oriented, resourceful, and academically successful. Cultural factors did not seem to alter the kinds of academic integration activities that the students identified on the survey. The cohort of Latino students present in 2004 seems to have achieved a good fit between their goals as students, their academic profiles, and that of the university. Factor analysis indicates that being a part of an honors program or finding academic mentors, utilizing the existing academic support services, and seeking advice and counsel when needed are important activities for academic engagement or integration of the survey participants.

It must be emphasized that the undergraduate population at the studied campus is between 2% to 3% Latino, making it likely that these are the vanguard, and not necessarily representative of the newer Latino immigrants currently progressing through the secondary schools in the southeast. Although the university can be pleased with the current state of academic integration of Latino students, the most pressing question is about the similarities and differences in the next wave of potential college students. Using data that are easily accessible, the university may wish to compare the grade point averages, college majors, and resource utilization of future students to the academic status markers shown in the 2004 survey. In particular, if students who are the first in their families to attend college or have learned English as a second language become more numerous, student needs are likely to be more pronounced. Approaches to academic support may need to be rethought at that juncture. Profiles of new immigrants to the southeastern United States suggest this could indeed be the case (Kochhar et al., 2005).

The survey results described a more complicated picture with regards to social integration and ethnic identity on campus. This highlights the multiple intersections among race, ethnicity, culture, gender, identity, and community for Latinos. Some students are fully acculturated to majority U.S. norms and experience little discomfort within the traditional educational systems. Other students find that their differences from the majority are quite salient and they struggle for a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Even students

with positive attitudes about their cultural background or ethnic identity may choose to limit the behavioral expressions of that identity in a setting where they are unsure of their reception. Hurtado and Carter (1997) comment, "Perhaps what is most important is that integration can mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education" (p. 326).

The factor analysis in the current study demonstrated that belonging to a Latino student organization was the most influential underlying theme in the survey results, with attendance at cultural events ranking third. The students who made connections with other Latinos through cultural events and student organizations may have used selective social integration to create a sense of belonging at the large, majority White university where they had enrolled. Although the number of students who chose to use cultural student organizations as social enclaves was small, it was meaningful for those few. Depending on their ethnic identity orientation, cultural background, and generation of immigration, a behavioral commitment to their Latino culture may have helped these students' efforts to persist and thrive on campus. This survey also echoed previous research findings regarding the importance of both family connections and campus integration for Latino students.

The fact that the majority of survey respondents did not choose to join a Latino student organization is also notable. There are several possible explanations, including time conflicts, developmental readiness of 18 to 22 year olds to make a behavioral commitment related to ethnic identity, or internal struggle with the meaning of one's identity in the context of a White majority culture. It is also possible that these students made different choices in identifying niches for social integration (e.g., joining a club related to majors, careers, or avocations). In any ethnic group, there are students who are inclined to lead and those who are not; not every student must join an organization to be well integrated. It would be interesting to gather more information about that subset of students, however.

Phinney (1990) discussed the relationships among ethnic self-identification (what people say they are), ethnic pride (how they feel about that identity), and ethnic involvement (how they may act on that identity). In some identity development models, an achieved identity includes commitment to one's group or internalization of the identity and willingness to behave accordingly. In terms of this particular group of participants, however, there was less carryover to action. Whether this is due to environmental factors (e.g., an undergraduate population that is only 2% Latino), person-centered factors (e.g., ethnic identity development, acculturation, personal preferences) or a combination of factors is unknown. Any of those elements could lead to the observed results—that many students claim a strong attachment to their ethnic background, yet prefer to limit their involvement to attending cultural events, as opposed to making the commitment to join a Latino student group.

It is also possible that there are differences within the collective group. Recalling the low numbers of students of Mexican descent who chose to join a Latino student organization, one could hypothesize that they had other obligations, such as work or family life, which kept them from participating with the groups. It is also possible that the pan-ethnic Latino groups on campus are not perceived as relevant or welcoming to Mexican Americans. With the acknowledgement that Latinos are a very diverse group, identification with country of origin may be the primary ethnic identity for some people. Some authors have questioned the meaning of an affiliation to a pan-ethnic umbrella term like *Hispanic* or *Latino* (Jones-Correa & Leal, 1996). Indeed, with such varied histories, geographies, customs, experiences, political attitudes, and social values, is it possible to speak of a common Latino ethnic identity? It would seem that the particulars of one's cultural background have important implications for belonging and behavior.

With small numbers of Latinos on some campuses, social integration may necessarily be with non-Latino groups. Some more U.S.-acculturated students may be comfortable with this, whereas others may not. The connections that students make with each other are very influential in terms of social adjustment, both within ethnic groups and across them (Hurtado, Carter, Spuler, Dale, & Pipkin, 1994). Again, it is important to consider the changes brought by the new Latino immigrants to the southeast. Will future university students continue to claim a bicultural identity and integrate themselves with many parts of campus, or will they be less acculturated to U.S. traditions and more likely to seek enclaves or familiar cultural supports? These questions

are important for institutions to consider, because "a person may perform adequately in the academic domain and still drop out because of insufficient integration into the social life of the institution" (Tinto, 1975, p. 92). For concerned student affairs professionals, there are some implications for practice. Factor analysis in the current study indicates that both social and academic integration are relevant topics to explore with Latino students, but the forms of integration could be modified given the diversity of ethnic identity, personal experiences, and environmental pressures that are present. As Torres (2003) noted, ethnic identity development can be influenced by conditions such as family and generational status, early childhood environments, and perception of how much or how little social privilege one has. The campus climate or environment may also be in a state of flux, given new immigration patterns, new demographics, and new political debates about how our country should respond to the undocumented portion of the community. Being mindful of these influences, support services or outreach efforts should not be provided in a one-size-fits-all manner. Universities may consider offering targeted support to those groups who are least likely to have a smooth academic or social integration, including first-generation immigrants and first-generation college students.

Surveys such as this one can begin to describe aspects of the experiences of Latinos on a target campus and help the faculty, administration, and staff to formulate more effective present and future responses. Although the work of Tinto (1975) was used as a framework for understanding the current survey results, the study was solely descriptive and not meant to empirically test the concepts of academic or social integration. It provides some preliminary information about social and academic integration, culture and ethnic identity, patterns of involvement, student needs, and family and cultural influences given the demographic variability within the Latino community. Limitations of the survey include its descriptive nature, the reliance on a sample of willing participants, and the specific restricted location of the research. The results are not necessarily generalizable, yet questions raised may provide a useful departure for other investigations. For example, future research could examine any differences between Latinos who are involved in culturally relevant student organizations, those who are involved in groups related to other topics (e.g., majors and careers, social service, arts, athletics), and those who do not join student organizations. Evaluation of effective programs to promote social and academic integration among Latino college students would also be a worthwhile project. Future studies should be conducted in different regions of the United States and at differing institutions of postsecondary education for more widespread evidence.

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