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# ***Latinx Internship Prepa: An Experiential Career Readiness and Preparation Program for Latinx, First-Generation Undergraduate College Students***

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**T**he Latino/a/x population is currently the largest minority group in the United States and is expected to grow by becoming 28% of the U.S. population by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The disproportionate rates of retention, persistence, and graduation of Latinx college students do not reflect their population in the U.S. (NCES, 2020). Latinx students have faced a variety of barriers and challenges to access higher education. For example, 25% of Latinx students have had family incomes less than \$40,000; 50% of Latinx students have had parents whose highest level of education was a high school diploma or less; and 45% of Latinx students have taken a remedial course in college (Santiago, 2011). In addition to access, completion of higher education is a challenge as 12.2% of the Latinx population have obtained a bachelor's degree (American Council on Education, 2017). Low educational attainment can often result in higher unemployment rates, lower earnings, and higher rates of poverty (Ciarocco, 2018; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009).

Studies have shown that high-impact educational practices (HIPs) promote student retention and increase student outcomes (Zilvinskis, 2019). Underserved students tend to benefit from engaging in experiential activities but often are less likely to participate in these activities. HIPs are defined as teaching and learning practices that are designed in different forms to benefit college students, such as first-year seminars, undergraduate research, capstone projects, and service-learning and internships, which are especially effective for student learning, engagement, and career preparation (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). Internships and other experiential learning activities serve an important role in supporting students' career development, self and major exploration, as

well as provide a safe learning environment through professional work experiences (Miller et al., 2018). First-generation college students perform academically better and their persistence and graduation rates improve when they engage with higher education institutions through HIPs (Conefrey, 2018). Additionally, cultural capital, the social assets that a student brings with them, such as their knowledge, skills, and connections, is crucial for marginalized populations as they navigate higher education (Garriot, 2020).

In the spring of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities were forced to shift to remote education for students (Cameron-Standerford et al., 2020). First-generation college students already faced obstacles that impacted their success in college, but the shift to online learning added an additional barrier to the academic environment and their academic success (Orme, 2021). A major barrier for first-generation students was the access to technology and the financial barriers which impacted their transition to online learning during the spring 2020 semester. In addition to this barrier, about one third of Latinx students reported having no one as a source of support (Black et al., 2020).

At a public four-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), during the summer 2020 semester, an academic success and retention office on-campus created "*Latinx Internship Prepa*," [1] which was an internship preparation and readiness program for undergraduate Latinx first-generation college students. It was designed to meet the needs of this underserved student population in order to prepare them to obtain internships and other experiential learning opportunities. The program was to be offered in-person but due to the pandemic, the delivery of the program was adapt-

ed and offered only in a five-week online synchronous setting that aligned with the university's policy to keep students, staff, and faculty safe and healthy. Based on literature of HIPs and Latinx first-generation college students, this program aimed to provide guidance and internship preparation for Latinx, first-generation college students, who often do not participate in these educational experiences. Twenty five Latinx, first-generation college students participated during the summer 2020 pilot program, and an additional ten Latinx, first-generation college students took part in the fall 2020 program. Data were collected from these college students to learn of the quality of the program. We utilized this secondary data, along with Yosso's (2005) social capital and resistant capital community cultural wealth theoretical framework and the literature on student engagement and retention in HIP activities, to explore and explain the experiences of Latinx, first-generation undergraduate students participating in a 5-week online synchronous internship preparation and readiness program. Following is a literature review about Latinx first-generation college students, cultural wealth, and internship readiness programs. We then report how a secondary data set was used to learn about the students' perceptions of a career readiness and internship preparation program. Additionally, we discuss students' results and indicate implications for future next steps.

## Literature Review

### *Latinx-First Generation College Students*

First-generation college students experience barriers navigating higher education. These barriers include academic preparedness, financial barriers, and guidance on navigating higher education (Boden, 2011). These barriers can impede their academic and career success and how they navigate higher education, but first-generation Latino college students rely on their cultural capital to aid them in their higher education journey (Zalaquett, 2006).

We can also interpret from the literature that HIPs can increase student outcomes and learning and have positive development for college students (Miller et al., 2018). Furthermore, the literature indicates that this population relies heavily on cultural capital to navigate higher education to overcome barriers and challenges they face. Cultural capital has been shown to be crucial for marginalized groups within higher education, particularly promoting academic and career success for first-generation college students (Garriot, 2020). For historically excluded and marginalized groups within higher education, in this case Latinx first-generation college students, the cultural

capital they bring with them includes: 1) their close connection to family members and the support and motivation they are receiving from them; 2) the responsibility of knowing that family and friends back home are expecting them to be the one who 'made it' and pursued a higher education and they have to pay it forward; and 3) cultural support from other students of color who are also navigating similar experiences in college, being the first in their family to have this experience (Matos, 2021; Zalaquett, 2006).

### *Cultural Capital*

For Latinx first-generation college students, cultural capital is crucial as they navigate higher education. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, which provides a foundational theoretical framework for this exploration, emphasizes six forms of capital through a critical race theory lens. This model does not provide a linear way of gaining support and using the wealth of capital that students bring with them but rather combines one or more of these capitals to be successful in higher education. For this study, we focused on two of the forms of capital: 1) social capital, the networks within communities that can provide support and resources for a population; and 2) resistant capital, the knowledge and skills developed through challenging inequality. Social capital was the connection with professionals who were either Latinx and/or first-generation, and resistant capital was the knowledge students gained to aid them in internship preparation and career development. The combination of social capital and resistant capital grounds students in achieving success in higher education. Additionally, finding racial and ethnic-based organizations, such as cultural student groups where students share a similar identity and come together to form friendships and networks with each other and faculty and staff who ingrain a sense of belonging for them, can provide support in navigating academic spaces while in college (Ayala & Contreras, 2019). When Latinx students participate in HIPs, they have had a higher feeling of inclusiveness in college (Ribera et al., 2017). While there is research that contributes to the outcomes of college students participating in HIPs and experiential activities, there is not much research that discusses how Latinx first-generation college students can prepare for these experiences.

### *Internship Preparation and Readiness*

Based on previous research conducted, we know that applied and experiential learning, both inside and outside of the classroom, that engages students in application or use of learning can help develop outcomes for students (Kolb, 1984; Trolian & Jach,

2020). Research also shows that first-year courses can positively impact the transition from high school to college for first-year college students (Smith & Zhang, 2010). Colleges and universities often design services for first-year students, but few institutions intentionally create programs and services to assist them with the transition out of college and into the workforce (Schriver & Teske, 2020). Studies have also shown that students, particularly those graduating soon, feel concerned about the transition to the workforce, and according to a recent study, students said that offering a workshop or seminar to provide them with more readily available access to information could help them with the transition (Schriver & Teske, 2020).

The social and institutional contexts that Latinx first-generation college students operate in often intersect and shape their student success (Hora et al., 2021; Nuñez, 2014). Internship preparation and design should not follow a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach but instead account for students’ cultural backgrounds, such as ethnicity, which can influence their process preparing for an internship and engaging in the experience (Hora et al., 2021).

## Methodology

We used a secondary data set that was originally created to obtain information from participating Latinx, first-generation college students to learn about the quality of the *Latinx Internship Prepa* program for future program development. An electronic assessment was administered at the end of the *Latinx Internship Prepa* program during summer 2020 and fall 2020. The assessment was created by staff in the academic success and retention office that facilitated this program, and it contained demographic data and program questions (open-ended questions and closed-ended questions [yes/no question; Likert scale]). The questions were developed using previous assessments for additional programs in the academic success and retention office. They were then adjusted to fit this internship preparation and readiness program. Participation in the program was voluntary, but completion of the program assessment was an expectation of the program. All 25 participating students in the summer and all 10 participating students in the fall were sent the link to the electronic form via email on the final day of the program and were given a week to complete it. A reminder email was sent a day before the due date. During summer, 25 students participated in the program and 72% ( $n = 18$ ) completed the assessment; and in the fall session, an additional 10 students participated and 70% ( $n = 7$ ) completed the assessment.

For the purpose of this research, identifying demographic information was removed to protect participant confidentiality. The study was approved as an exempt study by the University Institutional Review Board. From the program assessment, we selected six questions (four open-ended and two were closed-ended questions). These questions focused on Latinx, first-generation students’ perceptions of program quality and program benefits so our Office could better understand if we were providing them with the tools to help them prepare for internships and other experiential opportunities, and therefore be ready to navigate their careers. The four open-ended questions included the following:

- Please indicate the reason you completed the program.
- What are the program strengths?
- What areas of improvement for the program?
- Please include a short quote or testimony that we can use with your picture to promote this program on social media and to other students.

The two closed-ended questions included:

- Think about the reasons you completed the program, do you feel you got what you needed?
- Would you recommend the program to a friend?

We used this simplest level of mixed methods where both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions were used together to help enhance understanding of students’ experiences (Patton, 2002). For the open-ended questions, we independently analyzed the data for each of the four questions by participating in multiple levels of data analysis (Saldaña, 2013). We used descriptive coding to note key words and phrases for each participant’s data so that we could obtain an understanding of each participant’s individualized experience. Then we advanced our investigation to a higher level of analysis where we examined the data collectively to observe commonalities among the participants’ data which eventually led to development of themes. After we individually analyzed the data and developed a draft of themes, we met to discuss our respective results and review the data for greater understanding. Multiple discussions occurred to

comprehend these data and come to an agreement on thematic results (Creswell, 2013). Our analysis process was not linear as we had to revisit a previous level of analysis to help ensure quality of the results. Reanalysis was particularly important when we did not have agreement on coding and/or thematic results. Our independent and collaborative approaches were instrumental in processing the data and yielding themes that revealed these students' experiences.

## Results

Based on the four questions that students were asked in the program assessment: reason for completion, program strengths, program areas for improvement, and a testimony piece, we analyzed the data and found common themes within each question.

### *Reasons for Completing Program*

The findings revealed information that could be used to aid an institution in increasing retention, persistence, and graduation for this growing population. Results showed that common reasons that students wanted to participate in an identity-based program that would prepare them for internships were 1) to gain knowledge and 2) to engage in a program that was designed for first-generation college students.

### *Gain Knowledge*

Fifty-six percent ( $n=10$ ) of participants in the summer and all participants in the fall shared that a reason for completing the program was to gain knowledge about internships and the process of searching, with one student mentioning about learning skills that were "never taught." Participating in out-of-class experiences help translate knowledge and understanding from the classroom into action and therefore into the workplace (Trollian & Jach, 2020). According to one summer participant,

I wanted to gain knowledge on educational and work-force skills that I was never taught. This program has been able to provide me with information that has increased my self esteem and my strive to do better and be better. [Participant 12, summer]

### *Designed for First-Generation College Students*

This theme helped to solidify the relevance of our program. For the summer, 22% ( $n = 4$ ) said that they wanted to engage in a program that aimed to connect first-generation students to resources and other students of similar backgrounds. This type of social capital can serve as social contacts to provide instrumental and emotional support to navigate the system of higher education. According to one participant,

I completed this program because I wanted to learn more about the process of searching and preparing for an internship. As a first gen student I feel like you have to teach yourself a lot of things along the way. This program really helped my learn things that I didn't know before like what questions to ask an interviewer, how to prepare for an interview, and how to make my resume stand out using keywords. [Participant 17, summer]

### *Program Strengths*

Because this was a new program, feedback about participants' beliefs about how the program was properly functioning was considered essential to further establish this program. Analysis yielded the following themes regarding strengths of the program: 1) shared useful information (enhancing their resume, building their professional social media profile, and developing their interview skills), and 2) it provided students experiential activities to practice developing their skills and materials.

### *Shared useful information*

For the summer participants, 44% ( $n = 8$ ) and 43% ( $n = 3$ ) of the fall group felt that one of the strengths of the program was that the information provided to them was beneficial and would aid them in their future plans. Inclusion of first generation professionals and other resources enhanced these students' learning experiences. Taking a 'one-size-fits-all' approach overlooks the unique needs of Latinx, first-generation college students and does not provide the support and resources for student success that this group of students need (Hora et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). As one student wrote,

The strengths of the program lie within the fact that it is for first generation students and the fact that its focused on a specific population of students really helps unify everyone. The strengths are all of the new information provided to students, something that the students would not have known if it were not for this program . . . [Participant 2, Summer]

### *Provided experiential activities*

Providing a space for students to practice what they were learning and develop materials for their internship search while bringing in first-generation professionals to assist them with these materials was another strength of the program. In the summer semester, 22% ( $n=4$ ) of the participants shared that the experiential activities that students engaged in—creating a resume, building a professional social media profile, and participating in mock-interviews with professionals—was a strength of the program. These activities led a student to be more

prepared for the HACU [Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities] application process:

The program had many strengths that prepared me to apply for the HACU application and internships I was interested in. [A<sub>1</sub>] The deadlines we had to get our resumes reviewed and 100 word prompt was very useful. I came out of each appointment with new, useful information. I know the ways the write site can help me in the future with grad essays or personal statements. I gained confidence and tips during an interview because of the mock interviews we had. [Participant 11, summer]

These experiential activities serve as a conduit to meet the demands of employers to hire college students and recent college graduates who have the skill sets needed for the workplace (Trollian & Jach, 2020). Therefore, the activities in this program assisted these Latinx, first-generation college students to be more prepared for the workforce.

### *Areas of Improvement*

Because this was a piloted program, we wanted to consider participants' suggestions to effectively develop this experience for future participants. A common suggestion among the participants was more interactive activities with other members of the program so they could meet other participants and connect with each other which was reported by 28% ( $n = 5$ ) of the summer participants. One participant wrote, "*More time to connect with other program participants would have been nice*" (Participant 6, summer).

Noteworthy to mention is that a couple of students in the summer and one student in the fall suggested having the sessions recorded. A reason given was in case students were unable to attend.

### *Student Testimonies of Experiences in the Program*

At the end of the program assessment, students were asked to provide a program testimony about their overall experience participating in the internship preparation and readiness program. The themes found within the student testimonies showed us that 1) participants wanted to participate in an internship preparation program with the focus on first-generation students, 2) the program provided students with knowledge, and 3) students gained professional development skills and career confidence.

### *Focus on First-Generation College Students*

During the summer 2020 program, 39% ( $n = 7$ ) of students reported that they appreciated participating in a program that had a focus on developing

first-generation college students. Students shared that the journey of being a first generation student can be challenging, and the program helped them by providing an environment that involved support and information to navigate their journey. Rather than Latinx, first-generation college students adjusting to traditional university culture, services can be further developed and structured to not only benefit this group but also aim to ensure that all students are being served (Arch & Gilman, 2019).

As a first-generation student, entering a university is not as easy as you may think ... This program has made me realize I am not alone, I have gained support from professionals on setting my career goals straight and realistic. [Participant 1, summer]

### *Program Provided Students with Knowledge*

During the summer program, 33% ( $n = 6$ ) of students, and 57% ( $n = 4$ ) of the fall students reported that this experience equipped them with knowledge of internships and professional development tools that they would need to find internships and navigate the job search process. Using one type of approach is not a best practice when working with Latinx, first-generation college students or other racially and ethnically minority groups (Hora et al., 2021). Even though all of the experiential activities conducted in the program and all the sessions presented to them by campus professionals already existed across campus, packaging the services and activities into a program served this population of students well.

Joining the Latinx Prepa Program was a great opportunity for me to gain knowledge and understand the whole process of getting an internship. Being a first-generation student, everything can be overwhelming and confusing, programs like this can really serve as a guide for many students. [Participant 3, fall]

### *Professional Development and Career Confidence*

The intrinsic and extrinsic academic motivation that Latinx, first-generation college students have can influence student success (Trollian & Jach, 2020). Due to the packaged career development services and internship preparation tools that were provided for participating students in this program, such as mock-interviews, resume reviews, and personal statement writing sessions, 22% ( $n = 4$ ) of the summer participants reported that they were more prepared with professional development skills and felt that their confidence in their skill sets and experiences increased and were now more motivated to apply for these opportunities.

I definitely walked away from this program feeling 100% more prepared for life after college, from inter-

view practice, to professional norms, to navigating and using LinkedIn. I am really grateful to have been able to participate. [Participant 6, summer]

Nearly all of the participants ( $n = 17$ ) in the summer program and all ( $n = 7$ ) of the fall participants said that by being a part of this experience for Latinx, first-generation college students received what they applied for—to gain information on applying for internships and develop application materials as well as to participate in a program that was designed for first-generation college students. All participants in both the summer and fall programs reported that they would recommend this program to a friend.

## Discussion

One major finding of this study was that students enjoyed and appreciated the experiential activities that were provided throughout the program, such as the mock-interviews, resume reviews, building a professional social media profile, and practicing writing cover letters. Results showed that students said participating in these hands-on activities was very helpful and informational. This finding supports the previous research by Hora and colleagues (2021) in that to serve Latinx, first-generation college students, a one-size fits all approach does not fit (Hora et al., 2021). There needs to be additional guidance and support, such as in this case a specific program designed in a step-by-step model with experiential activities. Supporting and contributing to the previous literature by Kolb (1984) as well as Trolan and Jach (2020), applied and experiential learning engages students and aids in the development of outcomes for students (Kolb, 1984; Trolan & Jach, 2020). For Latinx, first-generation college students, experiential learning activities provide benefits of facilitating connection between students' lived experiences and their educational experiences (Thomas et al., 2017).

Another result was that a reason for students completing this type of experiential program was because it provided them with knowledge of internships and professional development tools for the job search process. There is currently a gap in the literature that discusses the benefits of preparing, as well as how to prepare Latinx, first-generation college students for internships and other experiential opportunities. The program was designed to increase the internship preparation and career readiness of Latinx, first-generation college students, and this design provided the opportunity to intentionally serve this population. The program packaged existing campus services into a guided program that helped Latinx, first-generation students learn new information

that would aid them in preparing for an internship and career opportunities, as well as their success as a student. This aids in addressing inequities in employability and social mobility for Latinx, first-generation college students (Martinez & Santiago, 2020).

## Limitations

One limitation was that the data were collected with the purpose of determining what worked and what did not work for future programming in an academic success office, not necessarily with the focus on conducting scholarly research on it. With this said, it limited the research team from understanding what some of the students had provided in responding to the open-ended questions. Along with a questionnaire, an interview with participants could have provided more in-depth information.

For career development sessions and experiential activities, a Likert scale was used, ranging from (1) “very unsatisfied” to (5) “very satisfied.” A limitation was that the third option on this scale was (3) “neutral/did not participate” which provided a challenge for the research team when it came to assessing individual sessions and activities, due to not being able to recognize if a participant selected this option because they did not feel any satisfaction or dissatisfaction towards the session or because they did not attend that session. Therefore, those questions were not included as part of the analyses for this study. Moving forward, the first author who was also a staff member who facilitated the program, will separate this answer choice into two separate selections for future assessments.

## Implications for Future Directions

Internship preparation and readiness programs are beneficial and are shown to assist students in preparing them for an internship, experiential activities, and/or post-graduation experiences (Zilvinskis, 2019). A suggestion for future directions is first to package existing services and programs into a structured program to provide guidance and support on navigating this piece of the career development process. One reason why this program was successful is that new campus services and resources were not created, simply organized into a ‘one-stop workshop’ for students, particularly for students with marginalized identities with low graduation rates and increasing enrollment rates in higher education; Latinx, first-generation students. Creating a structured program for students could mean expanding the internship preparation program to a program about applying for a full-time career or a graduate school preparation program. Students shared how they appreciated receiving step-by-step guidance,

especially being first-generation, and this could be adapted and implemented into other areas of learning for Latinx, first-generation college students, as well as in other types of experiential learning activities.

Another suggestion is to create identity-based programs for Latinx, first-generation college students, to connect with one another, find support from others with similar experiences and needs, and find a sense of belonging on their campus while providing academic and career tools for them. Based on the student data that were collected, these Latinx, first-generation college students shared positive experiences with this program due to being able to find spaces that supported them and provided them with guidance on exploring and applying for opportunities. Some ideas for this could be expanding this program for other racial and ethnic minority students to help them navigate this process, or a program designed for non-traditional aged college students to assist them in preparing for a career, while navigating other obstacles and challenges that traditional aged students may face. Creating environments where Latinx, first-generation college students can find support and gain academic skills and career development can help to overall close achievement gaps for historically excluded student groups. ■

## Notes

1. “Prepa” is Spanish for both preparation and a learning environment.

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