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## The Persistence and Ethnic Identity of Latino Fraternity Members at Predominantly White Institutions in Georgia

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Bello Escobar et al.: The Persistence and Ethnic Identity of Latino Fraternity Members  
THE PERSISTENCE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY OF LATINO FRATERNITY  
MEMBERS AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN GEORGIA

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*We explored how Latino fraternity members at predominately White institutions in Georgia perceive their affiliation affects their collegiate persistence and ethnic identity development through an interpretive qualitative research design. Torres's Bicultural Orientation Model served as the theoretical framework. Our findings indicate that participants strengthened and solidified their ethnic identity during their college years. Fraternal interactions and their college environment enhanced or helped them solidify their ethnic identity. Latino fraternity members perceived their involvement enhanced their academic persistence through various aspects of brotherhood and academic expectations. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.*

*Keywords: Latino fraternity members, persistence, ethnic identity development*

Student involvement increases student persistence and assists in students' overall development (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 2010; Tinto, 1975). Fraternities and sororities help keep college students engaged on college campuses and in their community (C. Garcia, 2020a; 2020b). These organizations are often a home away from home, especially for students who are members of underrepresented populations, such as Black or African American, Asian American, Indigenous people, and Latinx students (Adam, 1999). In this study, Latinx is used as an inclusive term that does not adhere to only the traditional gender binary system, encompassing all individuals within the gender spectrum, and may be interchangeable with Hispanic and Latina/o/@ to identify the same population type (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). The researchers and study participants use the term Latinx to refer to both genders unless when specifically addressing a cisgender, self-identified man (Latino) or woman (Latina) (Cantú & Fránquiz, 2010; Milian, 2019; Martinez, 2020).

According to Torbenson (2009), the number of students with historically marginalized racial and ethnic identities has increased in colleges and universities in the United States (US), particularly since the 1960's. Culturally-based sororities and fraternities emerged to support connections among these students. The first African American culturally-based fraternity was created in the early 1990's in response to an increase of Black college students in US colleges and universities (McClure, 2006). Like Black college students, the number of Latinx college students in the US has also increased, particularly over the last decade (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019). Latinx fraternities and sororities in US colleges and universities has increased in response to this trend (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019).

Student organizations, including Latinx fraternities and sororities, exist for multiple reasons, ranging from increased social interactions, academic support, and personal growth (C. Garcia, 2020a). For example, Latinx fraternities and sororities

help students create positive self-images (Arelleno 2020; Case & Hernandez, 2013; Miranda, 2020; Pérez et al., 2020). One of these qualities is their ethnic identity, which develops over time, and it is influenced by different environmental factors (G. Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). The development of ethnic identity is enhanced as students gravitate, interact, and learn from one another. However, few studies report on the experiences between Latinx fraternities and sororities and their members' ethnic identity development (Arelleno, 2020; C. Garcia, 2020a; Orta et al., 2019). As such, how contextual factors affect the development of ethnic identity among Latinx college students is unclear.

It is also important to gain a better understanding for how Latinx students' experiences affect their college persistence and success, particularly at predominantly White institutions (PWI). Understanding the Latinx student college experience can help college and university professionals tailor academic programs and social support, as well as help inform educators and researchers about this population's influence on economic and educational development (Brown et al., 2003; Valencia, 2010).

Examining Latinx students' experiences within Latinx fraternities and sororities in PWIs located in a traditionally conservative, anti-immigrant region of the United States can also help inform us how these students cope and maneuver within these spaces. We explored the perceptions of Latino fraternity members' ethnic identities at PWIs in Georgia, as there is a lack of research in this specific area. The purpose of the study was to understand how Latino fraternity members perceived how their affiliation affects their ethnic identity and persistence at PWIs .

### **Latinx Student Persistence in Higher Education**

The Latinx population is the largest minoritized group in the US, as 18.5%

of the US population identified as Latinx during the 2020 US Census (US Census Bureau, 2021), and is predicted to more than double by 2050 (Krogstad, 2014). Understanding Latinx college educational achievement is important, and it is an essential benchmark for assessing contributions to the United States' educational economic and civil health (Brown et al., 2003; Padilla, 2001). According to *Excelencia in Education* (2019), a non-profit organization dedicated to accelerating Latinx student success and a significant education policy influencer, Latinx students' college enrollment has increased over the last ten years. However, the number of Latinx students earning two- and four-year college degrees is not proportionate to other ethnic groups. In 2019, Latinx students made up approximately 13% of the entire US college undergraduate population (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019).

However, Latinx students are not earning as many college degrees compared to White students. For example, based on six-year graduation rates, White students gain bachelor's degrees at four times the rate of Latinx students, 62.3 % vs. 14.9%, respectively (NCES, 2020). Also, the degree attainment rate gap between White students and Latinx students increases for advanced degrees and by gender, with Latino men lagging compared to their White male and Latina counterparts (NCES, 2020). These findings indicate that the Latinx college education pipeline is not as promising as it is for White students, particularly among Latino males.

Like many underrepresented populations, Latinx students face many adversities in attaining a post-secondary degree in the United States. Being accepted to college is one of the first hurdles Latinx students overcome; getting adjusted to campus life and persisting through graduation are among the more significant challenges they face (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado

et al., 1996; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Many come from low socio-economic backgrounds and tend to have added responsibilities for sustaining specific family affairs throughout their collegiate years (Brown et al., 2003; Padilla, 2001). Moreover, Latinx college students may face low academic expectations, discrimination and may not find support from Latinx faculty or staff due to their small existence on college campuses (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Valencia, 2010).

Pérez (2014) and Pérez and Taylor (2016) explored factors that contributed to Latinx student success at PWIs. For example, Pérez (2014) found that affirming identity through language created a positive environment to support student success and college persistence. Furthermore, Pérez and Taylor (2016) found that sustaining students' social group and cultural identity through their collegiate years supported Latinx student success in PWIs. Additionally, they identified that familial and social capital promoted students' success. Familial support allowed their participants to enrich academic activities, which promoted their academic success and collegiate persistence. Pérez and Taylor (2016) also found that participants who sustained their social support and cultural identity through their collegiate years were academically successful. Lastly, the researchers found that students' social capital is developed through on-campus social support groups, including Latino fraternities. These factors allowed participants to learn from older students and persist through their collegiate experiences. Thus, research on the college Latinx student experience that positively affects their retention and persistence in post-secondary education needs to be supported (Kiyama et al., 2015).

### **Culturally-based Fraternities and Sororities**

Active campus involvement positively affects student persistence, retention, academics, and graduation rates (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 2010; Tinto, 1975). Students stay engaged in their respective college campuses through student organizations and fraternity and sorority life. Fraternities and sororities date back to the early 1800s; however, they differed from what we see today as they were exclusively for wealthy White men (Torbenson, 2009). Fraternities and sororities are often safe spaces, especially for students who leave home to attend college and may also hold historically marginalized (Arellano, 2020; Miranda, 2020; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013).

Culturally-based fraternities and sororities emerged in response to increasing cultural diversity in student population (Torbenson, 2009). While Black students established fraternities and sororities as early as 1906, the Latinx fraternity movement started after 1975 and again in the 1980's (Peña, 2020). The largest organizations by membership numbers and chapters are Lambda Theta Phi Latin Fraternity, Inc. and Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc. (Torbenson, 2009; Peña, 2020).

Not all fraternities and sororities have expanded nationwide; some are regionally based and are only located in Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs). Following the first period of growth between 1975-1980, the second period of nationwide Latinx fraternity and sorority growth occurred between 1980-1990, known as the *Fuerza* (Force) phase of Latinx fraternities and sororities because of the growing number of leadership opportunities for Latinx college students. Organizational development continued in the 1990's but was then referred to as the *Fracmentación* (Fragmentation) phase, due to the challenges with institutional support, collaboration, and lack of a single

governing umbrella organization (Miranda et al., 2020).

To date, there are more than 25 Latinx sorority and fraternity organizations in the United States (Miranda et al., 2020). As of 2022, a review of different Latinx fraternity and sorority websites revealed that Georgia has fourteen active chapters pertaining to different Latinx fraternities and sororities. Historically and recently, culturally-based and most Latinx fraternities and sororities in Georgia exist within predominantly white institutions (PWI), with two Latinx fraternities and sororities existing in Minority Serving Institutions (MSI).

### **Latinx Fraternities and Sororities and Ethnic Identity Development**

According to Moreno and Banuelos (2013), Latinx fraternities and sororities provide spaces for member identity and their respective learning environment to merge by providing benefits beyond the social components that other general student organizations provide. Fraternities and sororities imitate family-like environments, supporting and encouraging members to succeed in college (Moreno & Banuelos, 2013; Torbenson, 2009). Fraternities and sororities help catalyze on-campus student engagement without letting students go of their cultural values and beliefs (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013; Sanchez, 2011). Often, Latinx students exist in a cultural microcosm within the hegemony (e.g., speaking a different language, holding different customs) as such, Latinx fraternities and sororities help bridge these cultural differences as members interact and learn from one another (Luedke, 2018).

Pérez et al.'s (2020) had similar findings for Latino fraternity members. Participants in their study of high achieving Latino men in college described their brothers as "members of extended family" (p. 128). The men also described their organizations

as a place where they develop leadership and time management skills, key elements in college student success. The concepts of extended family and leadership development were also found by Del Real (2017) in his case study of Sigma Lambda Beta Latino fraternity members' civic engagement. Del Real used Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model as a framework. Participants indicated civic engagement helped them develop familial capital, as per Yosso's model, and what Del Real referred to as a new form of capital, "leadership" (p. 73).

Scholars have found that African American fraternities and sororities can facilitate ethnic identity development of Black students (McClure, 2006; Strayhorn, 2019), however, few studies focus on the ethnic identities of Latino fraternity members (Arelleno, 2020; C. Garcia, 2020a; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013). In studies on Latinx fraternity and sorority members' perceptions of racial and ethnic diversity at PWIs, Delgado-Guerrero and Gloria (2013), Delgado-Guerrero et al. (2014) and C. Garcia (2020a) found that Latinx fraternities and sororities positively impact the Latinx college student experience. Also, Latinx students who are affiliated with Latinx fraternities and sororities tend to have a more defined sense of ethnic self, suggesting these students are more academically successful than those who are not part of these organizations (Arelleno, 2020; C. Garcia, 2020a, Miranda, 2020; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013; Pérez et al., 2020, Sanchez, 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework: Torres's Bicultural Orientation Model of Ethnic Identity**

The Bicultural Orientation Model (BOM) is a cultural competency framework used in working with Latinx college-aged students and with participants like those in the present study (Torres, 1999). The BOM helps explain how

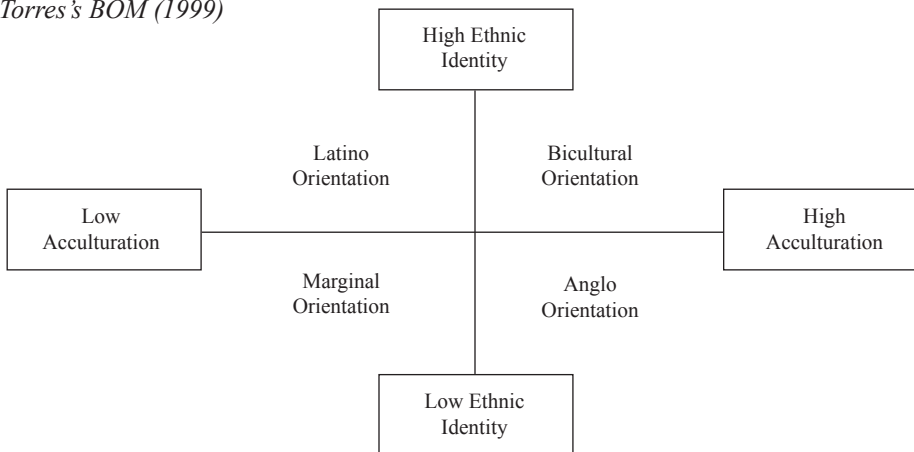
students function in multicultural settings. The BOM is a two-dimensional model that integrates acculturation and ethnic identity as two separate constructs because both have internal and external factors that vary independently (Sodowky et al., 1995; Torres, 1999). Ethnic identity is “a multidimensional concept that can change for an individual over time, develops from sharing culture, religion, geography, and language with individuals who are often connected by strong loyalty and kinship” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 134). Phinney (1990) defined acculturation as “cultural conflict between two distinct groups and the psychological consequences of such conflicts for individuals” (p. 502).

Torres’s (1999) BOM considers various aspects of the student’s cultural experiences, including the cultural environment the function in. For Latinx college students, interactions of their ethnic culture and the perceived new culture on campus (environment) may be in conflict. In essence, as Latinx students make choices about their adaptation to the majority culture (acculturation) and the maintenance of their culture of origin (ethnic identity), a distinct orientation develops incorporating both cultures (Torres, 1999).

The BOM presents two separate continuums, and where they meet in the middle is where students fall into that orientation. The BOM depicted in Figure 1 shows a quadrant with high or low levels of either acculturation or ethnic identity. The four quadrants of the BOM model are *Hispanic [now Latino] orientation*, *Bicultural orientation*, *Anglo orientation*, and *Marginal orientation*. Torres (1999) explains each orientation as follows:

A person with a high level of acculturation and a high level of ethnic identity has a *Bicultural Orientation*, indicating a preference to function competently in both the Hispanic and Anglo cultures. A person with a high level of acculturation and a low level of ethnic identity has an *Anglo Orientation*, indicating a preference to function within the Anglo culture. A person with a low level of acculturation and a high level of ethnic identity has a *Hispanic Orientation*, indicating a preference to function within the Hispanic culture. A person with a low level of acculturation and a low level of ethnic identity is considered *Marginal*, indicating that he or she is not able to function adequately within the Hispanic or Anglo cultures. (Torres, 1999, p. 286)

**Figure 1**  
*Torres’s BOM (1999)*



We aimed to explore the experiences of Latino fraternity members' perceptions of their ethnic identity at PWIs and how their affiliation affects their college persistence. Many factors contribute to the development of ethnic identity and persistence of Latinx college students, including environmental factors. Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of key persistence factors of the Latino college student, including their academic atmosphere. The BOM model is an appropriate framework for this study because it helps explain how Latino fraternity members function in learning environments that are culturally different than their own. However, the study of ethnic identity development is complex and interwoven, thus, we focused on only one aspect of identity development with our participants.

### Methods

The first author served as the primary researcher for this study; the additional authors served as faculty mentors. Using a constructivist approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we sought to understand how Latino fraternity members perceived their affiliation affects their ethnic identity and persistence at PWIs in Georgia through a basic qualitative research design. Qualitative research is subjective; thus, study findings are not generalizable (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). The primary researcher implemented purposeful and criterion sampling techniques. To help interpret and understand the unexplored lived experiences of Latino fraternity members warrants a qualitative investigation. The following question served as a guide for this study: How do Latino fraternity members perceive their affiliation affects their college persistence and ethnic identity at Predominately White Institutions in the state of Georgia?

### Participant Recruitment and Selection

The primary researcher recruited participants by outreaching to fraternity

and sorority life offices at PWIs in Georgia and using various already established connections. Additionally, the researcher administered an online survey to ensure inquiring participants met the criteria to participate in the study. To provide different experiences, participants must have met the following requirements: (1) be a member of a Latino fraternity; and (2) currently attend a PWI in Georgia with a Latino fraternity or have graduated within one year from their respective institution. Latino fraternities tend to be small, with an average of fifteen members per chapter (C. Garcia, 2020a); however, most Latinx fraternities and sororities in the Georgia have five or fewer active members during our data collection period.

Ten Latino fraternity men self-selected to participate and met the study requirements. All participants were members of Lambda Epsilon Nu, a pseudonym for a single national Latino fraternity with chapters in Georgia. Table 1 provides participants' self-identified race and ethnicity, university attended and the number of active years in Lambda Epsilon Nu. To protect the anonymity of the institutions and participants, pseudonyms are used.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The primary researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews, using a modified version of Seidman's (2013) three-interview series. Data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic; interviews took place via Zoom and lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. Seidman's (2013) approach guided the interview protocol and open-ended questions captured context, the reconstruction, and the meaning of experiences to obtain rich descriptive data during the interviews. The semi-structured and flexible interview process explored essential areas to discover answers to the research questions. It is important to note that as a data collection method, virtual

**Table 1**

*Participant University Enrollment, Active Years in Fraternity and Self-Identified Race and Ethnicity*

Pseudonym	University and Enrollment Status	Active Years in LGLO	Self-Identified Race	Self-Identified Ethnicity
Aang	Yellowstone University Alumni	4	Other – if available, if not White	Latino – half Peruvian and half Guatemalan
Anthony	St. Elizabeth University Alumni	4	Indigenous or Native-American	Latino or Mexican American; depends
Caleb	St. Elizabeth University Currently Enrolled	0.5	White	Hispanic
Fidel	Maximus University Currently Enrolled	3	Other	Latino or Mexican American; depends
Gilbert	Reiki University Currently Enrolled	2	White	Tejano
Jacobo	St. Elizabeth University Currently Enrolled	3	White	Latino
Jandro	Reiki University Currently Enrolled	2	White and Black	White-American
Leandro	LaKit University Currently Enrolled	2	None – if required, then White	Hispanic
Neftali	Maximus University Alumni	3	None – if required, then White	Latino – Guatemalan
Rigo	Yellowstone University Currently Enrolled	3	White	Chicano or Mexican American; depends

*Note:* Active years in fraternity are rounded to the nearest whole number.

interviewing compared to traditional in person interviewing has its limitations (e.g., decontextualized setting, difficulty reading body language) (Roberts, et al., 2021). As such, the researcher gathered as much visual information as possible to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ intentions.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued that data collection and data analysis should be done simultaneously in qualitative studies. The primary researcher recorded interviews; each interview was transcribed automatically through the Kaltura video cloud platform. The researcher edited the auto-transcription from Kaltura to ensure



transcript accuracy. The researcher then read the transcripts and wrote memos to reflect on what he read. These memos and notes captured the researcher's analytical thoughts, reflected on the research's purpose, and developed initial coding categories and relationships (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Furthermore, the researcher actively listed and read the transcripts multiple times and engaged in pre-coding and jotting (Saldaña, 2016). Moreover, after each interview, the researcher video-recorded himself to capture his thoughts and reflect on them using the Kaltura video cloud platform.

The primary researcher developed preliminary codes by manually coding four interviews to create a codebook. This first coding round enabled the data to be coded into various categories. These categories denoted reoccurring patterns and themes, which enabled thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher tested the finalized codebook with the remaining six interviews. Data saturation was reached at the fourth interview as no new code modifications occurred.

The primary researcher created a matrix to display themes from the coded data into a visual representation. The categorical coding matrix highlights all themes, statements, and descriptions in corresponding columns and rows (Saldaña, 2016). Organizing the data in such a manner allowed the researcher to visually make connections between and within participants' responses and answer the research questions.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) used the terms "trustworthiness" and "rigor" (p. 237) to address validity and reliability in qualitative research. They asserted all research should be rigorously conducted, and the academic community may have confidence in how a study was conducted and produced credible results. The

researcher implemented multiple methods to ensure both trustworthiness and rigor. The researcher continuously sought to identify bias as data was collected and analyzed by completing video memos to reduce these effects. Member-checking, an additional method to reduce bias, was implemented by transcribing all interviews and asking participants to review them for accuracy and clarification. Participants provided feedback and confirmation.

Further, data were triangulated between each research site and compared. Lastly, as another form of triangulation, peers and mentors reviewed and commented on the deidentified codebook and findings. These activities attempted to target the noted validity threats, thereby increasing the trustworthiness and rigor of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Author Positionality**

The first author served as the primary researcher for the larger body of research associated with this manuscript. He was born in Mexico and his family immigrated to the United States when he was nine years old. His early US education presented many challenges. A well-behaved student who loved school could not do homework or participate in class because he did not know the English language. His fifth-grade teacher informed another student that he was being transferred to another classroom with Spanish speakers as he was not completing any academic activities. Though excited to learn with fellow Spanish speakers, he was shunned and ridiculed by other Spanish speakers because he was "not like them." His peers criticized his Spanish as "too proper," and not sharing similar stereotypical things that other Mexicans experienced. "You're from the city, and we're from the country. You think you're better than us," they said. He felt guilty and ashamed for not being "Mexican enough" (Martínez, 2020) and not being American at such a young age. As he

continued, he intentionally made the decision to assimilate entirely and tried to remove as much of his “Mexican-ness” as he could to be accepted by the majority of his American White peers; however, it was not until college that this transformative learning experience came to its actual fruition (Flores & Patrón, 2021; Patrón et al., 2021; Suriel & Martínez, 2016).

During his college years, he decided to initiate the first Latino fraternity, Lambda Epsilon Nu, at his institution because he recognized something was internally missing but did not know what it was. Being exposed to other college-level and like-minded individuals challenged the researcher to rethink his “Latino-ness and Mexican-ness.” He dialogued with other fraternity brothers that shared a similar experience. Through this discourse and support from his newly found fraternity brother, he expanded this organization to help others like himself who had similar experiences. Through older brothers, he learned that it was “ok” to be his “authentic ethnic self.” As time progressed, he implemented this plan in college and through various new roles as a higher education professional. These higher education administrator roles enabled him to help underrepresented students like himself succeed academically and explore their identities. Authors two, three, and four served as faculty mentors for the larger body of research. The second author is a tenured associate professor and former student affairs professional. She is a member of a co-educational professional fraternity but does not self-identify as a member of the fraternity and sorority community. She has a growing body of research around fraternity and sorority experience, both at the campus and organizational level. The third author is a professor with tenure, teaches classes related to differentiated multicultural education instruction, critical pedagogy, racial/ethnic inequality, educational law, research methodology, and has published

articles and books focused upon critical race studies and Latinx education, with a particular emphasis on urban and rural education, youth gang risk factors, and immigration reform. The fourth author is an immigrant Latina, associate professor in Teacher Education, and previous bilingual education science teacher. Her research and instruction are orientated towards socially just practices particularly addressing the education and advancement of the Latinx community.

### Findings

Latino fraternity members experience their ethnic identity through personal connections, past interactions, and environment. Fraternal interactions and the college environment enriched or helped participants solidify their ethnic identity. Ultimately, Latino fraternity members perceived their involvement in their fraternity enhanced their academic persistence through various aspects of brotherhood and academic expectations.

### Fraternal Interactions: Ethnic Identity Development and Persistence

All participants described their fraternity experience as positive, which allowed them to explore further, enhance or solidify their ethnic identity through various fraternal interactions. Fraternal interactions in this framework are complex as they extend through various personal and organizational interactions participants had with members of Lambda Epsilon Nu. These interactions created a family-like environment, provided mentoring and overall support, and created a sense of belonging that supported or enhanced their ethnic identity development. Furthermore, the Latino fraternity members perceived their involvement in Lambda Epsilon Nu enabled them to persist academically through brotherhood, academic expectations, and role modeling, which manifested through their fraternal interactions.

All but one participant noted that their fraternity experiences helped support their overall ethnic identity development or knowledge of their ethnic identity. Participants recounted their most memorable fraternal experiences, and for most, their new member show was the most meaningful experience. Their new member show is also known as the coming out show, probate, or new member presentation. It is an event in which culturally-based sororities and fraternities showcase their new members and are welcomed to their new community, the fraternity, and sorority life community. For example, Aang shared an experience about his new member presentation and shared that being part of Lambda Epsilon Nu opened the door to understanding differences within the Latino community:

Joining [Lambda Epsilon Nu] gave me the opportunity to create bonds that really go past even ethnic boundaries. But at the same time, it strengthens that appreciation for the ethnic roots we have. Because we all share the same ideals, we kind of share a very similar culture; whether we come from the same place or not, we go through the same struggles.

Furthermore, Gilbert described a time when he was going through something rough and almost dropped out of college. Still, his Lambda Epsilon Nu brother supported him, enabling him to persist academically. “The fraternity has had the biggest impact on my persistence, like them being there for me whenever I was going through something rough. That way, I can continue my college education.” Additionally, Jandro expressed that his Latino fraternity allowed him to see himself beyond the four-year degree and persist through his current undergraduate degree. “Oh yeah, my persistence increased like a lot like over the years all the way to even graduation or master’s degree in engineering; they push me to go further into college [and] to continue pushing.”

### Brotherhood

Building upon the fraternal interactions theme was the concept brotherhood. In this context, brotherhood consisted of interactions with fraternity members that created a positive connection with each other. The participants had an affirmative and encouraging experience with their respective Lambda Epsilon Nu chapters. All participants provided various instances in which their interactions provided them with positive influences. These brotherhood and family-like interactions validated their ethnic identities and strengthened their Latino identities. Aang described the fraternity as an opportunity to get closer to the Latino community: “The fraternity really opened a gateway for me to develop as a person, as a student, as a leader. I think I honestly attribute a lot of that to the fraternity.”

Leandro initially wanted to join a historically Black fraternity. However, he ultimately decided to join a Latino fraternity because he felt an affinity towards others who shared similar characteristics as him: “I’ve never had an older brother, and I’ve obviously never had a younger sibling either... I felt like I yearned that brotherly love by someone that looks like me, sounds like me [and] talks like me.”

Similarly, Jacobo reaffirmed that Lambda Epsilon Nu helped him strengthen his Latino identity as he had previously questioned his identity during his K-12 years. Jacobo felt rejected and disconnected from the Latino community during his high school years because he did not speak Spanish. Becoming a fraternity member allowed him to reconnect with his dormant Latinx identity:

I’ve always carried along that [when] I was [a] young White Latino. And joining [Lambda Epsilon Nu] itself is not really like any other organization that would solidify me not having to question like ‘oh, I’m not Latino enough.’ I think [Lambda Epsilon Nu] itself is what

solidified me not having to question [my identity].

Furthermore, participants had several interactions with other fraternity members that allowed their social identities to be validated, which enabled their ethnic identity to be enhanced or solidified through these connections. Leandro and others discussed meeting other fraternity members who had a variety of Latinx ancestries and cultures. As reflected by Leandro:

The Latin fraternity has definitely helped out like [to] meet different individuals from different backgrounds. Even though they may be of the same Hispanic or Latino culture descent. But yeah, it has helped me meet like a different number of different individuals; to learn about them, their customs, and the way they talk. Because even though we all may speak the same language, as far as like per se, like Spanish. There are different [Spanish] dialects.”

Additionally, many participants shared that their members were from various parts of the world or different Latinx heritages. The understanding of ethnicity and race became more pronounced as their fraternity brothers surrounded them. As elaborated by Aang, “Every other fraternity brother in my chapter was Mexican. And so, I was the only one who wasn’t Mexican. So, I kind of got even more exposure to the Mexican community, and I have more appreciation for that.”

### **Family-Like Environment**

Participants had many fraternal interactions that created a family-like environment among their brothers. In this context, a family-like environment were experiences that showed a close bond with each other because of their fraternal interactions, which enhanced or validated their ethnic identity. Many participants shared that Lambda Epsilon Nu extended beyond their home chapter at their PWIs. Many noted that being part of the

fraternity allowed them to have a family-like environment and connections beyond their post-secondary institution as Lambda Epsilon Nu has many chapters not just in their state, but nationwide. Anthony, who graduated from a PWI in Georgia in 2020 and then moved to Florida, recounts that he is still involved with the fraternity as he has connected with the members in his new home state of Florida:

I’m trying to get more and more involved still, you know, even though I’m a little couple hours away from my home from my chapter, but even at Tampa. I hang out with the guys [fraternity members in Tampa]. It’s easy to meet more people through the fraternity and to get a little more involved. So, I think it’s great. It’s a family anywhere you go.

Additionally, Leandro shared that he was a “solo,” meaning he was the only member joining the fraternity the semester he joined and as he was preparing for his coming out show performance, he felt alone but:

After my new member presentation show, I felt the love from all these people, and they all came out and to see me, all came out to support me, and all the brothers in the area came out to support me. And it just, it was just a nice experience overall.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Lambda Epsilon Nu members experience various fraternal interactions that promoted brotherhood and developed a sense of belonging on their PWIs. In this framework, a sense of belonging were feelings and experiences that allowed participants to feel like they were part of their PWI communities and provide home away from home sentiments due to their membership in Lambda Epsilon Nu. This theme can both be considered a stand-alone concept, as well as an overarching theme that indicates how critical meaningful relationships are to

participants. These fraternal interactions supported and validated each other's experiences allowing them to openly express themselves on their respective campus while increasing their cultural pride, thus enhancing their identity.

After joining Lambda Epsilon Nu, Gilbert noted that he feels more comfortable telling people about his *Tejano* identity and dresses the part while on campus:

I feel like it helps other people as well. Like when you really express yourself or like your culture, where you come from, I feel like it's a good thing because it enables everyone to be able to do the same thing. And it makes people happy. I am happy being who I am... I am able to express more and be more comfortable with who I am.

Like Gilbert, Rigo notably mentioned that his chapter's cultural and ethnic pride had increased since he chartered Lambda Epsilon Nu at his PWI. This heightened sense of cultural pride contributed to their ethnic identity by creating a sense of belonging:

The fraternal organization that we established at the university. We're proud. I know they're proud because we voice [it] all the time what it means to be Mexican, what it means to be Chicano, what it means to be Guatemalan... It's a brotherhood that I could rely on these guys for anything. They would have my back. We would hang out a lot. Have a lot of events together, study together, have a couple of drinks here and there... And I will also say it [reason to join] was probably having a sense of belonging to a family or belonging to something on campus...

Moreover, Jandro was already deeply involved in other student activities when he decided to join Lambda Epsilon Nu in spring 2020. He and many others described how it was easy to connect with other fraternity members: "I can relate with it.

Fit in and be part of myself, have no filters, and just try to fit in pretty much. Fit in as it felt like home, a place where I belong." Furthermore, the fraternity allowed him to be proud of his ethnic identity as his brothers have embraced him as who he is:

[The fraternity has] made me feel to be proud of me. To accept it. How can I tell you? To love it. To cherish it and to go with it. Basically, it's to let you know like 'hey, you can't change it but at least learn how to go with it and learn to love it,' and that's pretty much what it is and how it has impacted me.

### Mentoring and Support

Participants noted varying fraternal interactions in which they felt mentored and received a significant amount of support from other members of Lambda Epsilon Nu. In this subtheme, mentoring means interactions in which participants received mentorship and support that enhanced or solidified their ethnic identity while supporting their persistence. Many participants described their mentorship made a significant impact in their life. Jacobo and Nefali noted that their fraternal interactions allowed them to spark an interest in higher education and would like to earn a master's in higher education once he completes his undergraduate degree. In addition, Jacobo noted:

The mentorship that I've gotten from the fraternity, like the older bros. I think it's something that I needed, and they helped me mature. Like whenever I did things, you know, my big [brother] would pull me off to the side and be like, 'Look, I love you before I hate you, but you can't be doing all this and that. And this is ways that you should learn to grow up to be a better, gentlemen.'

Additionally, many participants received support in many ways – from personal to financial support. Caleb became a fraternity member late in this academic career as he initially had doubts. Even though he only had less than six

months of membership, he expressed that Lambda Epsilon Nu has provided a deep sense of support that he had not felt before. He noted that he could see how “everybody’s just supportive [and] how this really is like a brotherhood.” Moreover, he witnessed how “if anybody ever needs any help, they post it in the [group] chat we have... and we just see nothing but support... It just feels like a brotherhood, really.” Caleb especially remembers the time when fraternity brothers were offering a place to spend the holidays.

Lastly, Jacobo, Aang, Leandro received financial assistance from members of their Lambda Epsilon Nu. Aang and Leandro noted that they would not have been as involved with the fraternity or enrolled in school without Lambda Epsilon Nu’s brother’s financial support. Furthermore, Jacobo indicated that:

There have been times where I have financially struggled, and I’ve had bros helping pay for like my car insurance or [they say] I can help you pay for this month’s rent or part of it. So, like on average, I’ve had a lot of support financially. And then when we can talk about mental [support] stuff, the amount of support is great.

### **Academic Expectations and Role Modeling**

Connections participants made with their fraternity brothers benefited them socially, they helped support participants’ academic success. Academic expectations and role modeling through fraternal interactions were significant factors in the participants’ persistence. In this context, academic expectations were academic rules and regulations set forth by Lambda Epsilon Nu and personal academic expectations they gave themselves. While academic role modeling was experienced by seeing other fraternity members academically excel and thereby pushed participants for academic excellence, thus supporting their academic persistence.

Participants shared organizations had many academic expectations they had to meet. In addition, their state board recognized the chapter with the highest cumulative grade point average. For instance, Leandro stated that his fraternity kept him in college and pushed him for more: “The fraternity kept me in college, like [to] keep me going, so I guess the fraternity has definitely been like that catalyst on me wanting to be part of a platform that’s helping the Latino community and graduate.” Furthermore, Aang noted that while he wanted and knew he wanted to graduate:

There were definitely times throughout college where I doubted myself and struggled... and having that support system of brothers that were going through the same struggles were willing to help no matter what it took, are willing to take an hour [of study] out of their day to stay with you.

Anthony, like many others, described that his Latino fraternity helped him to stay in college and eventually graduate as his fraternity members pushed each other for academic achievement: “The peer support, a fellow college student, knowing that we had to keep that grade to keep my fraternity, you’re proud of the stuff the fraternity does. So, you also want to show it in your grades.” Fidel shared that he has academically struggled and that his fraternity members have influenced him to persist, especially when life has gotten rough for him academically:

I don’t think I would be academically wise and as involved as much as I would if I wasn’t in the Latino fraternity, to be honest. Like it gives me, like seeing the fact that I see other brothers, the involvement they have within the fraternity, like see them progress with their academic excellence and career. It makes me strive to be like, ‘okay, maybe that will be me one day. Maybe I can be that way, or maybe I will be that way.’

## Discussion

We aimed to explore Latino fraternity members' perceptions of their ethnic identity at PWIs. Torres's (1999) Bicultural Orientation Model (BOM) model served as the theoretical framework. From our ten interviews, three thematic concepts emerged: (1) fraternal interactions: ethnic identity and persistence, (2) brotherhood, family-like environment, and sense of belonging, and (3) mentoring, support academic expectations, and role-modeling. Moreover, Latino fraternity members experienced their ethnic identity through personal connections, past interactions, and their environment. Likewise, fraternal interactions and their college environment helped them solidify their ethnic identities. Finally, Latino fraternity members perceived that their involvement in Lambda Epsilon Nu enhanced their academic persistence through various aspects of brotherhood and academic expectations.

All participants described their fraternity experiences as positive, which allowed them to explore further, solidify their ethnic identity through various fraternal interactions. The ten participants shared many experiences about their collegiate lives; however, the most recent experiences depicted their BOM orientations as these orientations also intersect with their educational environment (Torres, 1999). Notably, while the BOM model allows everyone to have a preferred orientation based on their ethnic identity and acculturation levels, timing and environment are significant factors.

Some of the participants, growing up, may have started in the Anglo orientation as they were in tune with US American culture and only spoke English or did not feel Latino enough. As they interacted with Lambda Epsilon Nu members during their college years, they transitioned into the Bicultural orientation. These findings are different from Torres's (1999) findings as two of her non-bilingual participants

were of the Anglo orientation. Still, all the monolingual participants in this study felt more attuned with the Latino community and culture due to membership in Lambda Epsilon Nu. Furthering the idea that being Lambda Epsilon Nu members enhanced participants' ethnic identities, potentially moving participants from the Anglo orientation to the Bicultural orientation. Similarly, the participants of the Anglo orientation in this study were bilingual but were more apt to identify with the US American culture, and noted that environments, experiences, and personal choices influenced their ethnic identity development regardless of their fraternity participation.

At the same time, fraternal connections allowed for participants to feel supported enough to persist academically. Fraternal interactions in this context are multifaceted as they extend through various personal and organizational exchanges between members. These interactions created a family-like environment, provided mentoring and overall support, and created a sense of belonging that supported or enhanced their ethnic identity development. Furthermore, all participants but one perceived that their involvement and association with their fraternity enabled them to persist academically through brotherhood, academic expectations, and role modeling. These findings are consistent with other studies that researched Latinx fraternities and sororities (Arelleno, 2020; C. Garcia, 2020a; 2020b; Orta et al., 2019).

The findings of this study are also consistent with many researched factors that showcase Latinx student persistence. Some of these factors include, but are not limited to, positive campus climate, ethnic and cultural identity, familiar and social support, and student involvement (Del Real, 2017; Miranda, 2020; Orta et al., 2019; Pérez, 2014; Pérez et al., 2020). Brotherhood, a family-like environment, and a sense of belonging were concepts

that were shared among all ten participants. Brotherhood in this context were interactions with fraternity members that created positive connections while creating close-knit groups and environments.

A family-like environment was experienced by participants that showed a close bond with each other due to their fraternal interactions. A sense of belonging were feelings and experiences that allowed participants to feel like they were part of their PWI communities and provide “home away from home” sentiments due their fraternity membership. Consistent with studies conducted by Moreno and Banuelos (2013) and C. Garcia (2020a), participants in this study felt that being a Latino fraternity member provided additional benefits beyond the social components other general student organizations offer. Their brotherhood and family-like interactions validated and strengthened their Latino identities. Like other studies, participants in this study found refuge and safe spaces, especially for those students who moved out for college (Miranda, 2020; Orta et al, 2019). Close-knit atmospheres provided by Latinx fraternities and sororities enables Latino men to learn from each other mutually and reaffirm their cultural values while enhancing their cultural connections (Luedke, 2018; Villalpando, 2003).

### Limitations

There are both limitations and delimitations associated with this study. The primary researcher focused on Latino fraternity members only; he did not interview Latina sorority members’ or non-affiliated students. Furthermore, he focused on current Latino fraternity undergraduate members and recent alumni but left out alumni who were more than one-year post-graduation. Participants were only recruited from PWIs in Georgia, leaving out other Latinx fraternities and sororities from Minority Serving Institutions in Georgia and other institutions outside the

state. Further, the purpose of this research was to explore participants’ affiliation and ethnic identity development. Other aspects of development, such as gender, sexuality, or spirituality were not explored.

The researcher conducted interviews students who self-selected into the study by responding to an advertisement. These participants may have different characteristics and college experiences than other Latino Georgia students and those who qualify but chose not to participate in the study. Their experiences and engagements were limited to students’ available experiences at their respective institutions and within their organization.

A delimitation of the study is that interviews were conducted in a virtual manner instead of face-to-face due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, while qualitative research is not generalizable, the researcher attempted to have maximum variation and capture all sections of this small yet significant population by interviewing participants from all available Georgia PWIs with Latino fraternities. Therefore, while the findings of this study are limited to Georgia Latino fraternity members in PWIs, readers may be able to adapt the results in other parts of the South similar to the state of Georgia.

### Implications

Advisors, both campus-based as well national organization staff and volunteers, may note that Latinx fraternity and sorority members and those interested in joining these organizations seek a family-like atmosphere and embrace Latinx culture. While these could potentially be found on campus through their multicultural student affairs office, participants indicated experience with their fraternity provided a deeper and richer experience that enhanced their ethnic identity and college persistence. If students request, advisors may support the expansion of Latinx fraternities and sororities. As indicated in the study’s findings, their family-like



environment may help students persist. At the same time, advisors must acknowledge that many of these organizations are maintained through alumni-volunteers who have full-time jobs and often leave organizations with fewer resources than those with organizational-paid employees (Workman & Ballinger, 2019).

Moreover, those working closely with Latinx fraternities and sororities may have high cultural competence and understanding of these organizations to serve these student populations. Also, when a Multicultural Greek Council or a National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO) council is being formed at an institution or considered, advisors may undergo training to effectively serve these new organizations or councils, particularly if the staff members or volunteers do not have experience working with these types of organizations.

By intentionally establishing Latinx fraternities and sororities, advisors and student members create more inclusive and culturally aware institutions, where all students learn from global perspectives while promoting general student success and diversifying the institution, regardless of status (e.g., DACAmented, undocumented). Lastly, advisors and national organization staff and volunteers may acknowledge that Latinx fraternities and sororities support student persistence while supporting minoritized student recruitment efforts.

While several research studies connect the collegiate experiences of Latinx sorority and fraternity members to their ethnic identity development (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013; C. Garcia, 2020b; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013), a literature gap still exists. Most studies are location and institutional-type bound studies. No studies had been conducted with Latinx fraternity and sorority populations at PWIs in Georgia, and the present study partially fills this literature gap.

While Torres's (1999) BOM was an ideal framework for this study, study findings could also be interpreted through the lenses of other models. Yasso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model could be applied to explore how participants view themselves within the six forms of cultural capital. Multiple models which incorporate the concept of sense of belonging, particularly which explore the concept with historically marginalized populations (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Phinney, 1992; Strayhorn, 2019) could be explored with this population as well. It is evident the participants felt they belonged in their respective fraternity, and directly applying the sense of belonging theory could yield interesting results.

Lastly, this study only recruited Latino fraternity members from PWIs located in Georgia. There are Latino fraternities at minority-serving institutions in the region - how do they differ from the PWI experience, if at all? How do they differ in other parts of the country, if at all? What are the perspectives of Latina sorority members on these campuses? What are the experiences of Latinx students who join historically Black and White fraternities? Do non-sorority and fraternity culturally-based student organizations also enhance ethnic identity and persistence? If so, how? How would a quantitative approach to this study look like? These questions merit further investigation.

The findings of this study suggest that Latino fraternity members' ethnic identities were strengthened and solidified on a college campus and by participating in their fraternity. Furthermore, college persistence was enhanced for Latinos when affiliated with a Latino fraternity. The findings of this study carry several implications for fraternity and sorority advisors, national organizations, as well as current Latinx fraternity and sorority members. As post-secondary institutions continue to focus on student success with a goal to increase degree-bound program

completions, the present study findings provide ways to enhance Latinx student persistence.

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### Author Biographies

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**Dr. Jamie L. Workman** (She/Her) is an Associate Professor of Higher Education Leadership at Valdosta State University. She specializes in student affairs content areas including student development theory, social justice and inclusion in higher education, and current issues in student affairs. Her research focuses on undergraduate student success primarily from a major and career development perspective among other topics related to higher education and student affairs.

**Dr. James Martínez** (He/Him/Él) is a Professor of Education at Valdosta State University. James was a teacher and sports coach for over a decade in rural, inner-city, and urban profile public schools. His teaching and research interests are racial/ethnic inequality, critical pedagogy, critical

race theory, differentiated multicultural education instruction, education innovation, immigration reform, and youth gang risk factors.

**Dr. Regina L. Suriel** (She/Her/Ella) is an Associate Professor of Science Education in the Department of Teacher Education at Valdosta State University. As a previous bilingual high school science teacher in New York City multicultural schools, her research centers on increasing the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in science through effective and socially-just curricula. She also supports effective mentorships of Latinx faculty in Institutions of Higher Education and has published works in this area.