



Experiences of Latino Male Students Enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Taryn O. Allen

Assistant Professor, University of Texas, at Arlington



Taryn O. Allen, Ph.D.

Despite the rising number of Latinos represented in K-12 schooling, recent data revealed that approximately 62 percent of Latina/o students earned a high school diploma and only 14 percent of Latinos earned a bachelor's degree (Stepler & Brown, 2015). This reality is further sobering when examining the educational challenges Latino males encounter in two-year and four-year institutions (Ponjuan, Clark, & Saenz, 2012; Saenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Saenz, Mayo, Miller, & Rodriguez, 2015; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Vasquez Urias, 2012; Vasquez Urias, 2014). Historically, discussions focused on the "gender gap" describe the prominence of male representation in educational and professional spheres (Lee & Ranson, 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Recent research indicates Latino males remain the least represented gender and racial group in postsecondary education. In 2013, Latino males represented 29 percent of all 18- to 24-year olds enrolled in degree granting institutions (US Department of Education, 2014). Over the past 20 years, Latina females have surpassed Latino males in higher education achievement (Lee & Ranson, 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011). In fact, Latina females outperform Latino males in every key K-16 transition point, including high school completion, college access, and postsecondary degree completion (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004; Ponjuan, Clark, & Saenz, 2012; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011).

Latino males are not keeping pace with their peers on the higher education pipeline, yet minimal research attention has focused on this emerging educational challenge (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009).

In response to this phenomenon, Dr. Taryn O. Allen's research focuses on understanding how the learning environment of Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) could counter the achievement gaps confronting Latino male students. The qualitative, phenomenological study referenced in this brief, explored the lived experiences (Creswell, 2014) of ten Latino male undergraduate students enrolled in two, four-year HBCUs in Texas. The guiding research questions for this study were: (1) What individuals, relationships, and experiences, if any, promote sense of belonging? (2) What individuals, relationships, and experiences, if any, hinder sense of belonging?; and (3) What do Latino males suggest to promote their sense of belonging at HBCUs? Sense of belonging was measured using Strayhorn's (2012) concept of sense of belonging in college.

HBCUs

HBCUs are institutions founded prior to 1964 and whose mission is to educate African Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). They include a broad array of institutional types (e.g., public and private, two-year and four-year institutions, faith-based and nonsectarian) and serve diverse undergraduate, graduate, and professional student populations (Gasman, 2013; Provasnik, Shafer, & Snyder, 2004). Of the 105 HBCUs located across the country, nine HBCUs were established in Texas (White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, n.d.). To attract Latino students, four-year Texas HBCUs, such as Paul Quinn College, Huston-Tillotson University, Prairie View A&M University, and Texas Southern University, have participated in political rallies, conferences, and church events in Latino communities (DiMaria, 2005, p. 25). Some HBCUs created scholarships to diversify their study body (Turner, 2006), while others have sponsored Spanish classes for faculty and staff (Roach, 2005) and created bilingual recruitment materials featuring Latino students (DiMaria, 2005). These efforts reveal a demonstrated commitment to enroll an emerging Latino population. The following is a summary of the key findings from this study.

Academic Support: Relationships with Faculty

The participants in this study emphasized the integral role of faculty in promoting their sense of belonging. Students described their professors as friendly and personable. The faculty's amicable nature emerged through their commitment and willingness to help students academically. Furthermore, students perceived faculty as someone not only friendly, but also willing to avail themselves to the students by maintaining an open door policy. Receptive faculty members helped students feel they mattered to the institution.

Social Matters: Individual and Group Relations

The Latino males in this study described the positive and negative social interactions that influenced their sense of belonging. I found their pre-college experiences with African Americans prior to matriculation shaped the students' perceptions of the institution's social context as well as their interactions with peers. For instance, Latino males who grew up in predominantly Latino communities and schools often continued to socialize with other Latino students upon matriculation. Alternately, Latino males with extensive

cross-racial interactions in their family or school life found their new college environment to be an opportunity to learn from different cultures. These Latino males described how their personal experiences with African American step-family members, choir, or church provided a context for understanding their new campus culture. This pre-college knowledge of customs and cultures as well as familiarity with HBCUs seemed to allow the participants to be more open to cross-racial interactions upon matriculation. These students perceived their enrollment in an HBCU as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Financial Responsibilities: Work Can Create Challenges

Off-campus employment proved to be a key obstacle in fostering sense of belonging among Latino males at HBCUs. Confronted with the responsibility to financially support or contribute to their family, Latino males in this study acquired one or more jobs. External employment drew Latino males away from campus, thereby disrupting opportunities to build relationships, create a sense of community, or even live on campus.

Conclusions

Based on the findings in this study, there are some conclusions that may be drawn about how the learning environment of HBCUs could counter the achievement gaps confronting Latino male students. First, Latino males' sense of belonging is reinforced by their professors friendly and personable nature. This was apparent through their commitment and willingness to help students academically and more importantly showing students that they mattered to the institution. Second, Latino males' sense of belonging was influenced by their pre-college experiences with African Americans prior to enrolling at their institution. Latino males who grew up in predominantly Latino communities and schools continued to socialize with other Latino students. Similarly, Latino males with extensive cross-racial interactions in their family or school life saw this environment as an opportunity to learn from different cultures. Finally, a key obstacle in fostering a sense of belonging amongst Latino male participants was their off-campus employment. Working off campus took them away from establishing meaningful relationships and networks, a finding that has been well established in prior research. Researchers, policy makers, educators, and practitioners can benefit from the perspectives offered by Latino males enrolled in two Texas HBCUs. These narratives can support the creation and implementation of best practices, effective policies and programming, and future research contributing to improving the academic achievement gap within the Latino community.

References

- Allen, T.O., Dinh, T., & Saenz, V.B. Understanding Latino males sense of belonging in Texas HBCUs. Presentation at the 34th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience, Dallas, TX, February 8, 2015.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DiMaria, F. (2005). Latinos find a home at HBCUs. *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 15(25), 25.
- Gasman, M. (2013). The changing face of historically Black colleges and universities. *Center for Minority Serving Institutions, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*.
- Gasman, M., Wagner-Lundy, V., Ransom, T., & Bowman, N. (2010). Unearthing promise and potential: Our nation's historically Black colleges and universities. ASHE Higher Education Report. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- González, K. P., Jovel, J. E., & Stoner, C. (2004). Latinas: The new Latino majority in college. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2004(105), 17-27.
- Lee, Jr., J. M., Ranson, T. (2011). The educational experience of young men of color: A review of research, pathways and progress. New York, NY: The College Board.
- Ponjuan, L., Clark, M.A., Saenz, V. B. (2012). Boys in peril: Examining Latino boys' educational pathways and motivation towards postsecondary education. Round Rock, TX: TG Foundation.
- Provasnik, S., Shafer, L. L., & Snyder, T. (2004). Historically Black colleges and universities, 1976 to 2001 (NCES 2004-062). *US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office*.
- Sáenz, V. B., Bukoski, B. E., Lu, C., & Rodriguez, S. (2013). Latino males in Texas community colleges: A phenomenological study of masculinity constructs and their effect on college experiences. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 4 (2), 82-102.
- Sáenz, V. B., Mayo, J. R., Miller, R. A., & Rodriguez, S. L. (2015). (Re) defining Masculinity through Peer Interactions: Latino Men in Texas Community Colleges. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 52(2), 164-175.
- Saenz, V. B., & Ponjuan, L. (2009). The vanishing Latino male in higher education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8(1), 54-89.
- Saenz, V. B., & Ponjuan, L. (2011). Men of color: Ensuring the academic success of Latino males in higher education. Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Stepler, R., & Brown, A. (2015). Statistical portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 1980-2013. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/05/12/statistical-portrait-of-hispanics-in-the-united-states-1980-2013/>
- Strayhorn, T. (2012). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Turner, D. (2006, September 25). Black colleges diversifying by recruiting more Hispanics. *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 16(25), 33.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2011). *Historically Black College and University capital financing program*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/hbcucapfinance/eligibility.html>
- Vasquez Urias, M. C. (2014). *Predictors of Sense of Belonging Among Latino Men in Community College* (Doctoral dissertation, San Diego State University).
- Vasquez Urias, M. (2012). The impact of institutional characteristics on Latino male graduation rates in community colleges. *Annals of the Next Generation*, 3(1), 1-12.

Dr. Taryn Ozuna Allen is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. Contact Dr. Ozuna Allen by email at: tozuna@uta.edu