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Anchor and Launching Pad: The Role of a Latino Cultural Center in Latinx College Student Success at a Historically White Institution

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This exploratory case study examined the role of an ethnic cultural center in the experience of Latinx students at a historically White institution (HWI) located in the Midwest. Validation theory served as a theoretical framework to guide the data analysis. The research site was the Latino Native American Cultural Center (LNACC) at the University of Iowa. Eleven undergraduate Latinx students and six university staff members participated in a series of interviews during a 6-month period in 2013-14. Data analysis revealed four themes: Getting Connected, The LNACC Vibe, Anchor and Launching Pad, and Latinx Presence. Each theme provided insights into how a cultural center promotes the success of Latinx students at a HWI.

Keywords: Latinx students, cultural center, transition

It was because of the cultural center that I and others survived as students, because of the important space we were provided with—a space which embraced who we were without explanation.

—Dr. Nancy “Rusty” Barceló, 1996

Ethnic cultural centers first began to appear on college campuses in the Midwest in the early 1970s following the peak years of campus unrest and student protests of the 1960s. It was during this time that many institutions of higher education began addressing issues impacting diverse populations, which led to changes in the curriculum, recruitment practices, facilities, and support services (Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975). The development of cultural centers changed the landscape of higher education at historically white institutions (HWIs) by creating spaces and places focused on serving the needs of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups while promoting overall campus diversity.

Latino¹ cultural centers first began appearing at HWIs in the Midwest in the early 1970s—around the same time the Chicano Movement was reaching the Midwest from California. Like their Black cultural center counterparts, the first Latino cultural centers were created as a response to student demands for greater resources to address the needs of minoritized students – in this case, Chicano² and Puerto Rican students. Many of these centers served as hubs of activity where Latinx students engaged in lively discussions regarding issues impacting their communities. They provided a space for Latinx students to plan and participate in community outreach, publish newsletters and literary magazines, coordinate political activities, and express themselves artistically (Lozano, 2010).

While the Latinx student population increased in the 1980s and 1990s, Latino cultural centers in the Midwest continued to serve as critical spaces and places for students to meet and engage in social, cultural, and political activities. In 1992, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Latinx students staged a historic protest on campus culminating in a list of demands, which

included funding and greater autonomy for their cultural center, La Casa Cultural Latina (Student Life and Cultural Archival Program, 2010). Meanwhile, at the University of Iowa (UI), students used the Latino Native American Cultural Center (LNACC) as a home base to organize and establish some of the first Latinx-based Greek organizations in the nation: Sigma Lambda Beta Fraternity, established in 1986 (Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity, n.d.), and Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, established in 1990 (Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Inc., n.d.). These are just a few of the formative events that took place within Latino cultural centers throughout the Midwest in the final decades of the 20th century.

The arrival of the 21st century found many cultural centers at a crossroads. Often located in older, deteriorating houses or buildings, their survival became tenuous as budget constraints and competing political interests made it challenging to secure the institutional support necessary for centers to thrive (Hefner, 2002). HWIs began to grapple with the future of ethnic cultural centers and, in some cases, made the controversial decision to replace them with multicultural centers (Princes, 1994). Meanwhile, cultural center stakeholders argued that cultural centers have been vital to the success of marginalized populations (Barceló, 1996; Hefner, 2002; Hord, 2005; Patton, 2010). For instance, a University of Iowa (2006) Diversity Action Committee report listed revitalizing the campus cultural centers as one of its main recommendations to the university, stating: “The cultural houses have historically played a significant role in students’ lives and had a beneficial impact on minority student retention and academic success” (p. 15). In her research on Black cultural centers, Patton (2006) found that “these centers make a powerful difference in

¹ The term “Latino” is used when presenting historical information on cultural centers because that was (and in most cases, still is) the formal nomenclature used by the centers (e.g. “Latino Cultural Center”). The gender-inclusive term “Latinx” is used when referring to the general population.

² The term “Chicano” is used here because that was a common term used in the 1970s by student activists who first demanded the establishment of Latino cultural centers

student learning because they foster an environment that promotes leadership development, a sense of community, cultural identity, and a sense of mattering, all components necessary for engagement in the learning process” (p. 3).

Latino cultural centers, in particular, hold the precarious position of trying to serve ever-increasing numbers of Latinx college students, while dealing with the current political and sociocultural climate. Higher education environments are not immune from the anti-Latinx and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies promoted by the current president and his administration. Latinx students must navigate campus environments which are directly and indirectly influenced by the larger political atmosphere. Recent federal and state budget cuts to higher education threaten equity efforts and programs for students of color, including the funding of cultural centers. This underscores the importance of research to better understand connections between Latino cultural centers and Latinx college student success.

Latinx college enrollment is projected to increase by 34 percent between 2012 and 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), adding urgency to Ortiz’s (2004) call to action for the higher education community to consider the unique needs of Latinx students and “reconsider our basic assumptions as we construct learning environments and opportunities that allow all students to participate fully” (p. 1). This increase in the Latinx college student population is juxtaposed with the current dearth of empirical literature on the role of Latino cultural centers. The lack of studies on this topic has resulted in a knowledge gap regarding how Latinx college students engage in cultural centers and what role these centers play in student success. It is not enough to point to anecdotal evidence regarding the impact of cultural centers on Latinx students. Empirical evidence, through qualitative and quantitative studies is necessary to understand how cultural centers promote the success of Latinx college students.

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of an ethnic cultural center in the experience of Latinx students at a HWI located in the Midwest. The following research question guided this study: What role does the cultural center play in Latinx student college transition and success? This study contributes to the general knowledge base regarding the experience of Latinx students at HWIs in three ways. First, it focuses on Latinx students attending a university in the Midwest—an area often neglected because larger numbers of Latinx students reside and attend colleges in the West and Southwest. Second, it helps to close an existing knowledge gap regarding the role of Latinx cultural centers at HWIs. Third, it examines the role of a cultural center from Latinx student perspectives.

Methods

This study is informed by the literature on Latinx student success at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). The concept of “student success” encompasses both in-class and out-of-class experiences and includes both cognitive and affective elements. As the body of research on issues impacting the retention and persistence of students of color has grown, some scholars have begun to embrace

a more holistic view of student success—one that goes beyond institutional data indices and numerical representations (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Osei-Kofi & Rendón, 2005; Reason, 2009; Schreiner, 2013). As a Chicana who attended a HWI in the Midwest and has worked with Latinx college students at large research universities over the past 20 years, I came to understand that some students persist to graduation without ever achieving a sense of belonging on campus. This is the difference between the traditional notion of succeeding (graduation) and the more holistic view of success that includes thriving in and out of the classroom in an environment that recognizes and validates cultural differences. This study focuses on the latter as it applies to student experiences at an ethnic cultural center.

This study was also informed by Rendón’s (1994) validation theory. Validation theory speaks to the needs and strengths of first-generation, low-income students with a focus on student success (Rendón, 1994). Based on a qualitative study of diverse students attending four different colleges, the concept of validation emerged as a critical element to student success. Rendón defined validation as a process by which in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty members, students, staff, peers, family members) engage in intentional and proactive affirmation of students “as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community” (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12). Thus, validation may occur at both the academic level and the interpersonal level, providing a more holistic lens through which to examine student success. Rendón theorized that “for many low-income, first-generation students, external validation is initially needed to move students toward acknowledgment of their own internal self-capableness and potentiality” (p. 17).

Additional findings from Rendón’s (1994) study suggest that first-year success may be contingent upon students getting involved in institutional life, either on their own or through validating agents. Based on her findings, Rendón argued that even the most vulnerable students can be transformed into powerful learners through the validation process and that validation may be a prerequisite for involvement to occur. Although Rendón recognized that validation can take place in and outside the classroom, she focused mainly on what constitutes a validating classroom and how faculty members may serve as validating agents. This study is focused on student experiences outside the classroom, thus expanding our understanding of how validation theory is connected to student success.

Research Site

This study took place at the University of Iowa (UI) Latino and Native American Cultural Center (LNACC). UI is a large, historically White research university located in Iowa City, Iowa. At the time of this study (2012-2013), the total student enrollment was 30,119. Out of 21,999 undergraduate students, 1,166 (5.3%) identified as Hispanic and 48 (0.2%) identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native (The University of Iowa, 2012–2013). This study focused on Latinx undergraduate students who were participating in LNACC activities.

The LNACC is one of three ethnic cultural centers on campus, all of which are located within a few blocks of each other on the

west side of campus. Two of the centers—the LNACC and the Afro American Cultural Center—were founded over 40 years ago. The Asian Pacific American Cultural Center was established in 2003 (Center for Student Involvement and Leadership, n.d.). Each center is located in a stand-alone house, and at the time of this study, they all reported to the Coordinator for Multicultural Programs and Cultural Centers in the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership. A unique aspect of this cultural center is that it serves both Latinx and Native American communities. This model stems from the original founders of the LNACC—two Chicano/a students and one Native American student—who, recognizing their shared experiences of oppression and marginalization, formed a coalition to address issues impacting their communities (Solis, 2011). Although the study focused only on Latinx students, I recognized the importance of examining how the historical and contemporary context of my research site shaped the experience of my research participants and included this aspect of the cultural center in my research design, specifically in my interview protocol.

Participants

Eleven self-identified undergraduate Latinx students participated in this study. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Maximum variation within the sample focused on participants' year in college (first-year/freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), college major, generational status in the U.S. (first generation, second generation, etc.), permanent residency (in-state vs. out-of-state resident), and current residence (on campus vs. off campus). I also interviewed six full-time professional staff members, three of whom were directly affiliated with the LNACC and three of whom were indirectly affiliated. However, this article centers the voices of the Latinx student participants, so data from the staff interviews is included only briefly to supplement student voices.

I used multiple strategies to recruit a diverse sample of Latinx undergraduate students for this study. First, I reached out to specific key informants—UI staff members—to assist with recruitment of participants. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) point to key informants as “integral to identifying the most suitable participants for a study because of their insider status (p. 74). I contacted student affairs colleagues at UI to inform them of my study and requested their assistance in recruiting participants. Three key informants were particularly helpful in sharing information about my study with students. They included two staff/administrators at the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership and one staff member at the Center for Diversity and Enrichment. I provided them with an email announcement and call for research participants which they then forwarded to various Latinx undergraduate student listserves. Second, I posted flyers at the LNACC. The flyers provided brief information about the topic of my research study along with instructions to contact me if interested in learning more about participating in the study.

Participant demographic information is provided in Table 1. To protect the participants' identities, I have not matched any of the demographic data points for any individual students

(e.g., male, senior, out-of-state resident, etc.). I also was interested in achieving ethnic diversity in the sample; however, because all but one student identified their ethnic background as Mexican or Mexican American, I was not able to achieve an ethnically diverse Latinx sample. Only one first-year (freshman) student participated in the study because the interviews were conducted in September and October of the Fall semester, with the call for participants going out in August. Thus, newly enrolled Latinx students had just arrived on campus, making it unlikely for them to respond to the call for participants due to their unfamiliarity with the notion of participating in a research study.

Table 1.
Student Participant Demographics

Characteristic	<i>N</i>
Sex	
Males	3
Females	8
Residency	
In state	6
Out of state	5
Year in college	
Senior	4
Junior	3
Sophomore	3
First-year/Freshman	1
Course of study	
Double major, minor, and certificate	1
Double major and certificate	3
Double major	2
Major and minor	2
Major and double certificate	1
Major	2
Generational Status in U.S.³	
Second generation	9
Third generation	2

Data Collection Procedures

Key components of a good qualitative case study include the presentation of rich description and in-depth understanding of the case, which requires the researcher to collect multiple forms of data (Creswell, 2013). Merriam (1998) argued that “any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study” (p. 28). Data for this study consisted of interviews with students, observations of the physical environment of the research site, and document analysis. I adopted a modified version of Seidman's (2006) “three-interview series” model. In Seidman's model, the first interview puts the participant's experience in context by revealing background characteristics and experiences as they relate to the research topic. The second interview centers on concrete details of the participant's lived experiences related to the research topic. During the final interview the participant reflects on the meaning of their experiences. I used a two-interview process, combining Seidman's second and third goals into the second round of interviews due to the difficulty of scheduling a third round of interviews with students within one academic year. All three of Seidman's interview goals were accomplished in my modified process as explained in the next section.

³ Second generation: born in United States, with at least one foreign-born parent; third generation: born in United States, with both parents born in United States.

Interviews. I conducted individual interviews with 11 self-identified Latinx undergraduate students. Each student participant was interviewed twice for approximately one hour. The first round of student interviews was conducted in the fall semester (September and October) at the LNACC or other locations convenient for each participant. The interview began with structured questions regarding the participants' background, followed by open-ended questions regarding how the participants were introduced to the LNACC and level of participation in LNACC activities. This is consistent with Seidman's (2006) first-round interview purpose: to reveal background characteristics and experiences as they relate to the topic. The second round of student interviews was conducted six months later in the following spring semester (March and April), either face-to-face or by telephone. These interviews focused on what the LNACC experience meant to the participant and explored concepts that emerged from analyzing the transcripts from the first interviews. This is consistent with Seidman's second- and third-round interview purposes: to gain concrete details regarding lived experiences and how participants make meaning of those experiences. An open, semi-structured interview protocol was used for the student interviews. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Observations. I visited the LNACC several times to conduct student interviews. Those site visits provided an opportunity to examine physical aspects of the center including size, geographic location, artwork, furniture, technology, etc. I also attended one student meeting and one social event at the LNACC. I assumed an "observer as participant" stance during my observations, which means that my role as a research observer was known to the participants and that my participation in the activity was secondary to my role as a researcher gathering information. When I attended the social event at the LNACC, I interacted with other participants, but my main focus was on observing the physical setting, participants, interactions, and my own behavior. Gaining access to the site was not an issue, because the LNACC was open to the public and the events I attended were not private. During my site visits, I was cognizant of my role as an observer/participant and the ambiguity of being both a participant and an observer. My observations during the student organization meeting and the social event each lasted 30 minutes.

Document Collection. In addition to interviews and observations, I also collected documents related to the LNACC. I examined the LNACC website to gain insight on the mission of the center as well as its programs and services. While the official LNACC website provided an institutional perspective, reviewing the LNACC Facebook page for the academic year in which the study was conducted provided more of a student perspective (e.g. sharing of cultural, social, political news/activities important to students). Campus newspaper articles, along with LNACC archival materials located in the UI Main Library provided a historical perspective. Thus, document analysis provided context to the case site in three ways: (a) background information on the LNACC's history and original purpose, (b) insight into how the LNACC is currently portrayed in

public media outlets, and (c) understanding of how current students perceive the LNACC.

Data Analysis

I used Merriam's (1988, 1998) process for analyzing case study data and category construction. The first level of analysis involved rereading transcripts and other data combined with memo writing, which helps the researcher "hold a conversation" with the data—asking questions about what is missing, making connections between the interview transcripts and making comments about the data (Merriam, 1998). This first level of analysis illuminated preliminary themes and patterns. The second level of analysis involved coding of the data into units, which became conceptual categories. The third level of analysis consisted of developing broader themes. Merriam (1998) stated that this level of analysis moves the researcher toward the development of a theory that "seeks to explain a large number of phenomena and tell how they are related" (p. 146). For my case study, rather than generating theory, I was interested in understanding the role of the LNACC in the experiences of Latinx students at UI.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness of the data. First, triangulation of the data was built into the research procedures through a combination of participant interviews, researcher observations, and document analysis. I also conducted member checks with the participants to ensure accuracy and credibility of the case study account. A third technique to ensure trustworthiness and authentic research was using rich, thick description in my written account. Throughout the data analysis process, I also utilized a peer debriefer to gain an outside perspective regarding my rendering of conceptual categories and themes.

Results

An analysis of the data revealed four key themes: 1) getting connected, 2) the LNACC "vibe," 3) LNACC as anchor and launching pad, and 4) Latinx presence on campus. The first theme, getting connected, provides an understanding of the multiple ways in which the student participants were able to get connected to the LNACC, and that led to continued engagement with the center. The second theme, the LNACC "vibe," illuminates how students made meaning of their experiences at the LNACC, a space that many of the participants referred to as having a unique "vibe" or essence. The LNACC as anchor or launching pad theme represents the various temporal experiences of students as they either moved from frequent to infrequent engagement with the LNACC or continued to have a strong connection to the LNACC. The final theme, Latinx presence on campus, reflects the students' expressed desire for visibility on campus and their perception of the LNACC as a representation of the Latinx presence. These themes are described through the perspectives and voices of the Latinx students who participated in this study. Pseudonyms are used for each participant.

Getting Connected

The student participants in this study described multiple paths to getting connected to the LNACC. A majority of the students had participated in various college-bound programs for racially/ethnically underrepresented or first-generation students. These programs coordinated purposeful activities, including intentionally introducing students to the campus cultural centers prior to their enrollment at UI. Two of the students in this study were exposed to the LNACC through a merit and need-based scholarship program for first-year students of color who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents and / or first-generation college students. Other students were introduced to the LNACC by their advisors or by a family member who was an alumnus. Upper-level students (juniors and seniors) also played a key role in encouraging some of the participants to engage in LNACC activities.

Though the students may have taken different paths to their introduction to the LNACC, the experience influenced each of them to return to the center and become active participants. They reflected on what it meant to them to get connected to other Latinx students at the LNACC. Elisa connected to the LNACC through a peer mentor who was also a Latina student. The first thing Elisa noticed upon entering the LNACC was all of the photos of Latinx students, which helped her realize she was not alone. Elisa, like all of the students in this study, was drawn back to the LNACC because of the opportunity to connect with a group of peers. Teresa, a transfer student, joined two Latinx-based student organizations during her first semester on campus. Both organizations were affiliated with the LNACC, so she was there weekly. She explained:

I felt so deprived of my Latinidad...I just wanted to be surrounded by people who can speak Spanish and who aren't going to be bothered if I play bachata or cumbia or banda [Latino music genres] or whatever. And so I just kinda wanted a sense of community and just [to] be a part of something bigger than myself.

Teresa eventually would apply for a position at the LNACC as a work-study student, so she spent a significant amount of time at the center. Several other students commented that Teresa was looked up to as a resource and a role model.

Omar, who learned about the LNACC later than the other students in this study, believed it was inevitable that he would find his way there:

I feel like, at some point or another I would have ended up here, regardless, just because . . . I love my culture, I love every aspect of it and . . . I feel like this is a place where I can . . . share it with others as well.

Omar was struck by the welcoming atmosphere of the center, the artwork, and the sense of history portrayed through photos of Latinx students from previous years. However, he was somewhat resistant to get involved in LNACC activities at first: "I wasn't sure what to expect—like if this was actually, like, what I was looking forward to or if this was just going to be some like, pseudo-cultural thing, if you know what I mean." Based on their own positive engagement at the LNACC, most of the students interviewed were passionate about making sure that new students

had the same opportunity to experience the LNACC vibe, which is the second theme identified in this study.

The LNACC "Vibe"

In discussing the LNACC, many of the student participants described the facility as having a certain vibe or essence. This was a feeling they experienced when they walked into the LNACC and engaged in activities within the LNACC space. Based on their voices, the LNACC vibe consisted of several elements, both abstract and concrete, including a feeling of home (comforting and welcoming), the expression of Latinx culture (language, music, food, dance), and a sense of empowerment through the portrayals of significant Latinx historical figures (art).

Noel recalled how he felt the first time he walked into the LNACC: "I kind of got the vibe and just the, like the essence of it being like my grandma's house, my abuela's house." Elisa described the positive feelings she had the first time she entered the LNACC because of "the vibe" she experienced. She explained what she meant by the vibe:

I feel like... I don't know if it's just because the color red happens to be warm, but... it's relaxing too. I go there to study sometimes, and I feel like I can get work done there, and it's also I guess, playful, since I go there and I'm talking with my friends, and we'll just be laughing or just playing.

What Elisa was describing was a feeling of being comfortable in a physical space. Others, such as Monica, described this as a home-away-from-home feeling: "Like I always say, it always feels kind of like a home away from home. Like it's very relaxed. It's just a very, like, comforting atmosphere." Monica pointed to the kitchen as one of the spaces within the LNACC that fostered a feeling of home because she could cook favorite cultural dishes there. Omar added: "I come [to the LNACC]... and I can listen to any type of music and I feel at home." The home-away-from-home sentiment was perhaps explicated most directly by Victor, who said:

All 20 years of my life, I grew up in a house, I understood the feeling of "I'm home" as soon as I walk into a house. So that definitely has transferred over a bit to the LNACC... it's very easy to feel that feeling again when I walk into it.

Ten of the 11 student participants described the LNACC as a home away from home. Three students also associated feelings of home with their involvement in Latinx student organizations that were closely affiliated with the LNACC. However, some students pointed out that the home-away-from-home vibe at LNACC could be a double-edged sword causing some Latinx students to avoid it precisely because it reminded them too much of home at a time when they were searching for different experiences. Several of the staff members who participated in this study viewed the purpose of the LNACC as a home away from home for Latinx students. One staff member affiliated with the cultural centers explained that the LNACC staff (student workers) were trained to welcome others into the cultural center as if welcoming them home. Both the students and the staff members who participated in this study emphasized the significance of the home-away-from-home aspect of the LNACC. Students alluded to other aspects of the LNACC

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that contributed to its vibe including a sense of cultural community and the significance of the artwork at the center.

Another element essential to the LNACC vibe was a sense of cultural community, which included food, language, music, and dance. Patricia described how easy it was for her to connect with others at the LNACC:

I just found it easy meeting new people that I guess identified as well as me, as being a Latino, and you know, spoke Spanish. We had similar cultural backgrounds in the sense of things that we could relate about family or traditions. And so I knew that every time that I would be in there, I would be in some sort of contact with someone that I could relate with.

Based on the student interviews, the LNACC Facebook page, and my observations, other than student organization meetings, the majority of events that took place at the LNACC were social/cultural in nature. A few of the students expressed a desire to have more educational, political, or community service events at the LNACC, but they were aware that other students seemed to be drawn mostly to the social/cultural aspect of the center.

A final aspect of the LNACC vibe relates to the artwork within the center. The LNACC is filled with colorful murals, paintings, and photos representing Latinx and Native American culture. The warm colors of the LNACC and the vivid artwork on the walls had immediately captured the attention of the students the first time they entered the center. For all of the students interviewed, this was the first time they had experienced a Latino cultural center. Teresa, one of the LNACC student workers, described the significance of the artwork to her:

I feel like the LNACC has played a large part in my self-discovery and identity as a Latina in a predominately White institution just because I feel like, even just working here and having a place to come and seeing Frida [Kahlo] on the wall and Che Guevara, Pancho Villa... it's very comforting, whether I realize it at the moment or not. And I think it just goes back to acknowledging my roots and kind of developing that... It's been a part of my self-discovery.

Most of the students commented on the large mural painted directly on a wall in the living room. Originally painted in 1974 by California muralist Manuel Unzueta during a national Chicano conference at UI, the painting underwent a revision in 2000, which caused some controversy (Hebeler, 2001). The controversy was addressed in a historical display. One of the staff members interviewed for this study was working at the university library and had created a large display of LNACC history for the occasion of the LNACC's 40th anniversary celebration. The display was placed in an entranceway at the LNACC where it was the first thing a visitor would see upon entering the facility. The display included photos of students from previous decades, newspaper articles, posters, and written text explaining the history and evolution of the LNACC. One portion of the display focused on Latinx students and the other portion focused on Native American students.

Some of the students had participated in LNACC's 40th

anniversary celebration in 2011 and had gained a deeper sense of the history of the center. Noel described his reaction to meeting Dr. Rusty Barceló, one of the founders of the LNACC:

She was really, really, really, informed about the LNACC, and it was just great to hear her story, great to hear just her struggle... just to get the house [LNACC], and I think that's something that I didn't think about. I really didn't think about, you know, the people before me and how much they struggled just to get that house and that's something that, you know, I realize... I took the LNACC for granted. And I didn't appreciate it as much as I should have.

Noel also pointed out that the LNACC artwork was diverse in terms of reflecting Latinx and Native American culture. Similar to Noel, most of the students in this study appreciated the mix of Latinx and Native American artwork within the center. However, they also indicated that they had very limited interactions with the Native American community on campus, which they attributed to the small numbers of Native American students at UI.

Anchor and Launching Pad

After being introduced to the LNACC and experiencing it as a welcoming, comfortable, and culturally relevant space, students joined one or more of the student organizations affiliated with the center. These organizations include ALMA (which translates to "soul" in Spanish), Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity, Inc., and Sigma Lambda Gamma sorority. The Native American Student Association (NASA, formerly known as the American Indian Student Association or AISA) is also affiliated with the LNACC, however none of the students interviewed for this study was involved with AISA. Ten of the 11 students in this study had joined one or more of the three student organizations (ALMA, Sigma Lambda Beta, or Sigma Lambda Gamma) sometime during their first year at Iowa. Only one student was not a member of ALMA or the Greek organizations; however, she was a member of The Iowa Edge Student Association. The LNACC, through its strong affiliation with ALMA, Sigma Lambda Beta, and Sigma Lambda Gamma appeared to have served as either an anchor or a launching pad for students.

The students in this study were drawn to the LNACC during their first year at UI because they were seeking connections with other Latinx students. Subsequently, they spent a significant amount of time and energy participating in LNACC programs. For some students, the frequency of their participation in LNACC activities decreased significantly after their sophomore year as they moved on to other activities. These students recognized and were able to discuss the benefits they attained from their LNACC activities, particularly through involvement with ALMA, which provided them with the opportunity to meet and connect with other Latinx students on campus as well as to acquire a wealth of leadership skills. They did not completely disassociate with the LNACC. In fact, many of them stressed that they continued to support LNACC activities through their participation in specific annual programs, such as ALMA's Back to School Bash early in the fall semester. Students also spoke of

the LNACC with great fondness, even those who were no longer regular participants; as Andrea explained: “It was like my first place where I had the chance to meet other people and socialize and feel a part of the community again. So, to me, the LNACC will always be very special.” However, there was a clear pattern of students getting involved in other activities that drew them away from the LNACC after their sophomore year. Furthermore, they were joining other organizations as a result of the contacts and relationships formed at the LNACC. For those reasons, the LNACC may be viewed as a launching pad for some students—a culturally validating space and place where they were able to get connected to peers and become members of a Latinx student organization, and then move on to form connections with the broader campus community.

For some students, particularly the members of the Latinx Greek organizations Sigma Lambda Beta and Sigma Lambda Gamma, LNACC also served as an anchor. These chapters were founded at UI by students who used the LNACC as a home base. As a result, the LNACC was historically and symbolically relevant to chapter members locally and nationally. The second floor of the LNACC, which included the “Gamma room” and the “Beta room” acted as a symbolic anchor that tied current Gamma / Beta students, as well as Gamma / Beta alumni, to the center. The LNACC also served as an anchor for students who continued to stay closely connected to the center past their sophomore year. Two of these students expressed a passion for addressing political issues impacting the Latinx community, particularly immigration reform. All of the students interviewed for this project agreed that the LNACC lacked visibility on campus and expressed the need for a greater Latinx presence on campus.

Latinx Presence on Campus

The concept of a Latinx presence on campus was important to the students in this study. Most of the participants were aware that Latinx students were the largest minoritized group at UI, which caused them to wonder why there was not more of a Latinx presence on campus. They expressed concern regarding a lack of visibility of Latinx students and faculty on campus, as well as a lack of Latinx presence within the academic curriculum. Monica expressed dismay that a Latinx faculty member, whom she admired and respected, decided to leave the university because of an apparent lack of support. Other students indicated that they had never had a Latinx professor during their time at UI. The dearth of Latinx faculty members at UI, combined with the stigma of being the only Big Ten campus without a Latino Studies program, contributed to a feeling of urgency regarding the need for a greater Latinx presence on campus.

Students also expressed strong feelings about the LNACC’s lack of visibility in general. They often connected this lack of visibility to the geographic location of the center. Several students shared stories about how their friends had never heard of the cultural centers. Based on the perspectives shared by the students, it was clear that they were of two minds regarding the geographical location of the LNACC on campus: they believed that it was too far

away, inconveniently located or off the radar, yet they also liked the fact that going to the LNACC meant you could get away from the hub of campus. They all wished more people knew about the LNACC but at the same time, they viewed it as an oasis—a very unique place on campus. Adding more complexity to this issue is the fact that the students’ perspective regarding the LNACC location sometimes shifted as they moved past their second year on campus: the busier their schedules became, the more inconvenient the location of the LNACC became. However, both students and staff agreed on the importance of increasing student engagement in LNACC activities.

Students’ experiences of marginalization and/or racial microaggressions on campus was an important aspect of Latinx presence. Most of the students interviewed had experienced the “lonely-only” phenomenon: being the only Latinx or student of color in a class or other university setting. To a certain extent, the LNACC served to mediate the negative impact of marginalization on campus, especially for first-year students, by providing a welcoming and culturally nourishing environment for Latinx students. In many ways, the students looked toward the LNACC to get a sense of the Latinx presence on campus. Teresa explained why she expended so much time and energy in planning programs at the LNACC:

I feel that the LNACC is an important part of our campus. I wish it would have been like the first thing I had known about Iowa. Being in the state of Iowa, I just feel like it’s such an important part . . . it’s like “We’re here!”

The potential existed for the LNACC to serve as a significant representation of the Latinx presence on campus; however, that remained an elusive goal due to a lack of resources. Without full-time staff members, a sufficient budget, or a critical mass of Latinx faculty and staff members who could support LNACC activities and serve as mentors to students, it was difficult for the LNACC to reach its full potential.

Discussion

This study examined how a cultural center promotes Latinx college student success at a historically White institution. Validation theory provided a lens through which to understand the connection between a cultural center and student success. Focusing on student experiences outside of the classroom contributes to a broader understanding of validation theory which has previously focused mainly on classroom environments. Thus, this study allows a more holistic view of student success. Rendón (1994) emphasizes that the institution plays an active role in fostering validation. She provides six elements of validation theory:

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.
2. When validation is present, student feel capable of learning.

3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.
4. Validation can occur both in- and out-of-class.
5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic experience.
6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience. (p. 44–45)

Three key findings illuminate the connection between validation and Latinx student success within a historically White environment. First, connecting to the cultural center early in their college experience was essential to providing the students with cultural validation and nourishment that would sustain them at a HWI. For the students in this study, getting connected to the LNACC led to their involvement in student organizations and activities congruent with their needs: connection with other Latinx students, a home away from home, nurturing space for leadership skills, or simply a comfortable place to get away from the hub of campus. The student participants in this study described the LNACC as a “home away from home,” a place to connect and build community, and a comfortable space where aspects of Latinx culture (language, food, art, etc.) could be expressed and experienced. In essence, they all experienced a “sense of belonging” at the LNACC. This was particularly important for first-generation students. Ten of the eleven student participants were first-generation college students. Each of them recalled their experience as new students searching for something culturally familiar on campus. They found cultural nourishment and validation at the LNACC. The findings from this study indicate that cultural centers serve a unique role for first-generation Latinx students because they provide a space and place that validates the cultural background and knowledge of students who are searching for a sense of familiarity in a predominantly White physical, cultural, and academic environment. Connecting with the cultural center early in their college experience promotes a sense of belonging for first-generation students – something they might not find elsewhere on campus, at least not in their first semester. Thus, a cultural center can serve as a catalyst for first-generation Latinx students to develop a sense of belonging on a predominantly White campus, which in turn, may positively impact persistence and retention.

Second, students experienced validation of their own ability to develop as leaders at a HWI. As students became familiar with the LNACC and connected with peers, they began to join student organizations affiliated with the center. Upper-level students served as role models and reached out to new students to push them to engage in student organizations and prepare to take leadership positions. The older students were able to model leadership skills for new students while providing them with advice and feedback regarding organizational challenges. All of the students were able to point to the benefits and skills they gained while they were involved in the LNACC. Those skills

included connecting with a network of Latinx peers on campus, acquiring organizational skills (how to facilitate meetings, motivating student members, planning and implementing events, etc.), public speaking and interpersonal communication skills, and navigating university policies for student organizations. Some students, after acquiring and honing leadership skills through involvement at the LNACC, moved on to pursue leadership positions in student organizations outside the LNACC. Thus, the LNACC served as a “launching pad” for some students.

Finally, in serving as an “anchor” for some students and a “launching pad” for others, the LNACC accommodated varying needs for Latinx students to gain a sense of validation and success on campus. For all student participants, whether the LNACC served as an anchor or a launching pad or both, the experiences they had at the cultural center contributed to their sense of belonging and their ability to thrive as Latinx students attending a HWI by validating their Latinidad (sense of Latino-ness). At the LNACC, they built community with peers who offered support and validation as they developed their leadership capacity. For some it was the first opportunity to explore what it meant to be Latinx. Each of them felt a sense of home during a time of transition in a predominantly White environment. Not only were students thriving in the social / cultural domain through their involvement in Latinx organizations and other groups, but they were also progressing successfully in the academic world. Six of the participants were pursuing double majors; three of the six were also in certificate programs; and one of the six was pursuing a double major, a minor, and a program certificate. The LNACC complemented their academic success by providing a culturally validating space where students could feel a sense of belonging while developing as student leaders. When Latinx students experience success within the classroom, while also feeling a sense of belonging outside of the classroom, they are more likely to thrive on campus. This is the essence of holistic student success.

Limitations

The main objective of this study was to examine the role of a cultural center in the experience of Latinx undergraduate students attending a historically White institution in the Midwest. The study was limited to a select group of students who participated and were actively involved in cultural center events and activities. It is possible that the cultural center plays an indirect role in the success of Latinx students who have minimal or no involvement in the center, but those students were not included in the study. Also, the findings from this study should not be generalized to Latinx student experiences at other cultural centers because institutional context is unique for each campus. Rather, the rich and thick descriptions provided in the findings for this study may provide insights and a starting place to explore the role of cultural centers in the success of students of color at HWIs.

Conclusion

The results of this study clearly indicate the importance of a

cultural center in the experience of Latinx students to a HWI by providing a home away from home, cultural validation, a sense of belonging, and an opportunity to develop leadership skills with Latinx peers. The campus environment is complex and multidimensional. For Latinx students who attend HWIs, issues of race, class, and privilege permeate everyday experiences. Although this study was conducted prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the findings are particularly relevant in today's fraught political climate where anti-Latinx sentiment is expressed openly by politicians like Congressman Steve King (Ta, 2018) who represents the 4th District of Iowa, and is spread throughout social media platforms. Latino cultural centers can serve as critical resources to support Latinx students as they enter into and navigate HWIs in the current sociopolitical atmosphere. By connecting Latinx students to cultural centers early in their first year of college and understanding the critical role these centers play in validating Latinx student culture and leadership potential, higher education professionals at HWIs will be better prepared to promote and support Latinx student success.

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