


Supporting Latinx First-Generation Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Institutions must adequately support Latinx first-generation professionals if we are to make significant progress in our racial equity work. While in the Educational Leadership doctoral program (CANDEL) at the University of California, Davis, my personal and academic experiences led me to conduct qualitative research on the experiences of Latinx first-generation professionals in student affairs. I sought to understand how institutional norms influenced their self-efficacy and how Latino and Latina professionals experienced them differently. Among the findings was the pervasiveness of professional invalidation and how Latina participants viewed their perceived shortcomings as personality traits, compared to Latino participants who viewed them externally and more skills based (Fuentes, 2021). These are critical findings that colleges and universities need to assess to understand how workplace norms contribute negatively to their experiences. As higher education institutions continue to work towards better serving Latinx first-generation students, Latinx-first generation professionals must not be ignored or taken for granted.

KEYWORDS

Latinx, first-generation professional, institutional norms

First-generation experiences for Latinx students can continue as professionals. Institutions approach support for Latinx first-generation students with distinct culturally relevant strategies. There is an understanding that more than the status quo is needed. However, this intentional support has not been developed for Latinx first-generation professionals in student affairs. It seems to be assumed that their first-generation experience simply ends when they graduate. For institutions to better support students, they must also understand the experiences of the Latinx first-generation professional staff at their institutions. They are the first in their families to work in a “white-collar” role and as a result have many new experiences, expectations, decisions, and conflicts that their parents never had to navigate for work. It is inadequate for institutions to hire Latinx first-generation professionals and then ignore them. Institutions need to cultivate and consistently nurture a professional environment and structures where they can grow and thrive.

MY FIRST-GENERATION JOURNEY

My family moved to California from Colima, Mexico shortly after I turned 5 years of age. My parents were primarily agricultural workers and performed arduous manual labor for low pay. Occasionally they would take my brother and me with them to help. On these occasions, they made it a point to explain that this was our future if we did not pursue an education. That message, or ultimatum, stuck with me. I knew I had their support as I navigated undergrad, but I also knew that there was only so much help they were able to provide because they did not know how the American higher education system worked. As the oldest of two, I was the first in my family to graduate high school, the first to earn a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, a doctoral degree, and become an academic

professional.

My parents consistently emphasized the importance of education but were not able to help with the specifics of the process. They were understandably disconnected from what my day-to-day looked like during my undergraduate studies. How do I explain my stress about the financial aid process every year? How do I explain my thought process around majoring in Latin-American studies and my growing annoyance with “what-are-you-going-to-do-with-that” type of questions? How do I explain to them that, despite their assumptions, not everyone who graduates strolls into a full-time job the day after? I graduated in the Summer of 2008, at a time when the job market and economy seemed to be getting worse by the hour. How do I express my panic as I approached graduation and prepared to head out into the “real world”? I knew I had family and friends rooting for me, but it continued to feel like the pressure was solely on me and I felt alone.

Like my student experience, as a Latino first-generation professional, I didn’t know what I didn’t know. For example, trying to figure out the differences and choosing between 457(b), 401(k), and 403(b) savings accounts seemed like a massive decision that could have big implications for me later in life. This felt not too dissimilar from the daunting task of selecting a major as an undeclared student. My parents never had the opportunity to choose between retirement options. They were extremely limited in their ability to share advice around job searches, professional development, on-boarding, negotiating salary, and career advancement strategies that were relevant to my career goals.

As I settled into a career in higher education, I began having a sense of déjà vu. While I was gaining valuable experience, I felt like I was having to figure things out professionally on my own. The experience felt familiar to me, because I was in a sense reliving my



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) cpedinitiative.org

impacting.pitt.edu
Vol. 9 No. 3 (2024)

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2024.436

journey as an undergraduate student. Just as I felt the university had somehow made a mistake in admitting me, I was just as sure there might have been some kind of error when I got hired for a new role.

It was conversations with colleagues and their frustrations about a lack of onboarding, training, and support when I became conscious of a pattern. It was noteworthy that many of my colleagues were also the first in their families to hold a white-collar professional position. I couldn't help but see a split screen with one side showing the way higher education talked about and supported Latinx first-generation students and the other displaying the lack of support provided to Latinx first-generation professionals.

It is understood that we need to meet Latinx students where they are academically and humanize them to support them holistically. We need to see them as students with just as much promise as anyone else, while acknowledging their socio-economic background and how they may be racialized in the American educational system (Rodriguez, 2021). However, this approach seems not to be applicable to Latinx first-generation professionals. Institutional norms dictate that we see them as workers with no context outside of their job, and whose only role is to produce (Fuentes, 2021). It was the exception when relationship-building was prioritized. Knowing who the person was, and understanding their motivation for working in higher education, did not seem to be prioritized.

MY CANDEL REFRAME

CANDEL's cohort structure and experience was vital because it connected me to colleagues from various professional and personal backgrounds. Through discussions, I had the opportunity to learn from their professional experiences, including their goals, hopes, fears, and frustrations. Seeing some cohort-mates transition into different roles also gave me insight on how they approached the interview process, the expectations they had of themselves, their teams, and their supervisors as they began new positions. What was also beneficial for me was understanding everyone's concept of what leadership was. There were examples of leadership being demonstrated every time we met through brave conversations in the classroom and sharing strategies on managing challenging circumstances.

Most importantly, my time in CANDEL through courses, discussions, and dissertation work, gave me the tools, opportunity, and confidence to begin finding my voice. The tools included theoretical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Additionally, the ability to actively listen to understand viewpoints I disagreed with was a skillset that was further strengthened throughout the course of the program.

When I began CANDEL in July of 2017, I saw myself as a fly on the wall. I was there to learn, be a sponge and soak up as much knowledge as possible. I did not see myself as someone who could offer up ideas, perspectives, or information that would be meaningful to conversations. Before the program, I also viewed education policy and its administration too simplistically. I did not fully appreciate the social constructs and assumptions imbedded in how education is structured in the United States. During the program that slowly changed, thanks to my professors, cohort-mates, and advisor who pushed me to further critically analyze these structures and find my voice in the process.

Every CANDEL course contributed immensely to my transformation into the scholar practitioner I am today. One of those courses was *Organization Structures and Change: Curriculum and Instruction Issues*. This course was helpful for me as a student, not only because it was primarily facilitated discussions, but because we were strongly encouraged by our professor to question educational norms by "noodling" on subjects and reflecting on our assumptions about them. For example, we were pressed to think through the need for grade levels. Must we organize students in this way? Although our professor was not necessarily arguing for or against grade levels, he guided us as a group to a space where we could re-imagine and question fundamental norms about our education system. For me, this was a liberating exercise. It reminded me that the many rules that act as roadblocks to racial equity are human-made. We do also have the power to reimagine what the future can look like.

It can sometimes be difficult to envision the future that you are fighting for. If your vision of it becomes blurry, in practice our work may suffer and feel stale. I appreciated the course, *Culturally Relevant Media Experiences and Teaching*, for stretching the way I think. The graphic novel, *Unflattering* by Nick Sousanis (2015) was used as text for the class, which was something I had not seen used before in a course. CANDEL expanded on the complexity and nuance of how education is a society mirror and a catalyst for change. An example is how educational policy and law can play out in practice compared to what was expected theoretically. The curriculum and discussions with cohort mates were validating reminders of how complicated our profession can be.

I want to also express my gratitude for my dissertation Chair, Dr. Marcela Cuellar. I intentionally delayed my research to have the opportunity and privilege of working with her. I learned how much work goes into writing clearly and precisely. I am grateful that no shortcuts were allowed to be considered. It was at times challenging to meet the high expectations asked of me for the literature review, writing, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings. However, along with that rigor, it was incredibly rewarding to meet the big and small milestones while receiving her amazing support. I will always be appreciative of this transformative experience.

The CANDEL program and the dissertation research I conducted has increased my focus on how Latinx first-generation professionals in higher education experience their workplace. This is also critical for me because understanding their experiences grounds my leadership. Now more than ever, this allows me to intentionally work backwards from their experiences when providing coaching and leadership. My own leadership has been centered deeper around the "how". This is not in a logistical sense, as in how we could modify or build a program, event, or support structures, but in how Latinx first-generation professionals may be experiencing the work that goes into the building of support structures along with the environment they do this in. Through my dissertation research, I sought to dig deeper and understand what the experiences are for Latinx first-generation professionals in student affairs.

THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINX FIRST-GENERATION PROFESSIONALS IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

For my research, I interviewed five (5) Latina and four (4) Latino first-generation professionals and used two questions to guide my work (Fuentes, 2021):



1. How do institutional norms influence the professional self-efficacy of Latinx first-generation Student Affairs professionals?
2. To what extent do norms influence Latinos and Latinas differently?

Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2002) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) frameworks were used to understand how institutional norms influenced participants in my study.

One of the findings included the ways participants perceived the support they received. Divisions, departments, colleges, and whole institutions may have strategies to support staff, but ultimately the support that is felt is in the day-to-day work and its implementation by managers. This is where participants had mixed experiences. As one participant described, "I think that the thought of support [from the department] is there, but it's not always felt." This inconsistency was also experienced during onboarding, which was primarily the responsibility of their direct supervisor. Some received what they felt was great onboarding, while others did not believe theirs was helpful. At times this was a result of being just as new to their role as their supervisor was to their own, or the supervisor position being vacant when they began their role (Fuentes, 2021).

The onboarding experience was important for participants, because there was a lot to navigate both in their new role and in understanding their new working environment. In the most challenging of scenarios, participants felt they were left to figure things out on their own. They felt they had to have the agency needed to seek out support on their own. This was analogous to what they needed to do during their undergraduate experience. In fact, some participants explicitly connected their experience of figuring things out on their own as first-generation professionals to their experience navigating undergraduate life. One participant explained, "To me that was nothing new, because those skills were built as I grew up and being a first-gen student. You didn't have those help agents in your corner" (Fuentes, 2021). This is an example of how participants displayed their navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) described this as a skillset drawn on to "maneuver through structures of inequality permeated by racism" (p. 80).

Beyond onboarding, another important element of support was professional development. Most participants cited professional development as a key element to feeling supported by their department. They valued the opportunity to grow in their roles and be more involved in their departments, college, and/or university. Those that had supervisors who made professional development opportunities available to them felt appreciative of this. One of the more interesting findings involved the way participants perceived workplace politics and how they navigated them. Politics was seen as a negative, and something to be avoided if possible. From this norm of avoidance, a type of advocacy paradox emerged.

Participants noted that they would only speak up if they absolutely needed to advocate for students. Many Latinx professionals work in the higher education field to support and advocate for students. Advocacy can be considered something central to the work. However, speaking up for students' needs was not considered the norm by participants. It was seen as a last resort because it was considered to be engaging in politics. Something in their work environments seemed to dissuade them from engaging in the valuable act of student advocacy. While the existence of the

advocacy paradox is troubling, perhaps the most concerning finding is the manner in which professional invalidation can be an insidious institutional norm (Fuentes, 2021).

Professional invalidation came in the form of experiences that communicated to participants that they were not seen as legitimate professionals in the spaces they were in. For example, some participants were consistently mistaken for students where they worked, and/or not having the knowledge needed to do their job because of their perceived youth (Fuentes, 2021). This is concerning because it can erode a sense of belonging within an institution for Latinx first-generation professionals. In her work, Rendon (1994) found that Latinx students can feel invalidated as students and not seen as capable. This seems to show up yet again in the professional realm. If we are working towards better staff retention, less burn-out, and a more supportive atmosphere, this form of othering must be acknowledged and addressed.

In understanding the experiences of Latinx first-generation professionals, it is also important to understand how Latino males and Latina women experience their workplaces differently. For Latinas in my study, there was a greater internalization of perceived shortcomings compared to their male counterparts (Fuentes, 2021). Latino male participants framed their perceived shortcomings externally as skills they can work on to develop as professionals. Alternatively, one Latina participant noted that she did not have a very good "poker face" which she felt may cause misunderstandings (Fuentes, 2021). Another mentioned that she needed to be more assertive. Latina participants appeared to connect their perceived professional shortcomings with who they were as people. Higher education as a workplace needs to fundamentally transform if Latina first-generation professionals feel they need to change who they are as people to be accepted in their professional spaces.

LEADERSHIP AND RACIAL EQUITY WORK IN HIGHER ED

How can higher education lead towards racial equity for students while not subjecting staff to an environment of professional martyrdom that disincentivizes rest, sustainability, and mental health? Professional inequities in the form of unrealistic expectations, toxic work environments, and limited support runs counter to the goal of providing equitable services for students.

The opportunity to better understand how institutional norms impact Latinx first-generation professionals in student affairs can shed light on some of the challenges that arise for them. With a better understanding comes the capacity to partner in improving support structures, including professional development, on-boarding, and performance evaluations practices, and help address these challenges. The support structures can also consist of campus/district-wide processes or policies to more individualized support.

Districts may already have structured support such as an orientation where retirement options are provided along with the process for selecting them. If it is only a review of the steps needed to set up an account, this is insufficient. It should consider the Latinx first-generation professional experience. The current process assumes that new colleagues are minimally familiar with the context or generalities of what it means to set up a retirement plan and the financial planning that accompanies it. It also fails to consider the potential distrust of financial institutions due to the history of Latinx

low-income communities being the targets of predatory lenders (Alvarado, 2021). Retirement and financial planning training that acknowledges cultural and socio-economic context is one in which Latinx first-generation professionals will benefit the most from.

The ability to navigate one's work environment is important for a new professional. Understanding what kind of skillsets are needed to not only survive but to thrive is key. Just as important for new professionals is learning how to critically analyze and understand the different types and norms of the learning environments in which they work. Is it the norm to speak about experiences as "sink-or-swim"? Is the culture primarily one of collaboration or competition? This is an instance where a formal mentorship program within a district/college can be beneficial. There is a lot to navigate and having at least one mentor can alleviate the potentially isolating feeling of starting a new role, particularly if one is new to the institution.

Mentorship can also increase job satisfaction and provide insight on career advancement (Underhill, 2006). Understanding that some professionals of color may have the tendency to under-sell themselves can help leaders and mentors identify or develop professional development opportunities that guide Latinx first-generation professionals through the process of resume and cover letter revisions, as well as mock interview opportunities. It is important for first-generation professionals to acknowledge their own accomplishments and growth.

Institutions must provide growth opportunities that go beyond job-specific training. Professional development was identified as one of the more impactful pieces in how Latinx first-generation professionals felt supported (Fuentes, 2021). Participants valued the ability to grow professionally and personally, and they appeared to value the fundamental existence of the opportunities (Fuentes, 2021; Dinise-Halter, 2017). These opportunities should go beyond training on Excel or new software. It is important to also provide opportunities to attend conferences, networking, and tuition reimbursement for graduate school. Seminars or structured trainings should include the norms and procedures of committee work, task forces, and governing boards. Additional opportunities can include access to professional development related to being on community non-profit boards.

One of the biggest opportunities for structural change revolves around the performance appraisal process. It is an important point of convergence where multiple factors influencing self-efficacy for Latinx first-generation professionals (Fuentes, 2021). Professionals already are in their roles with a high sense of responsibility especially if they are working with marginalized communities (Garcia, 2015; Wesley, 2018). They are not only providing mental and physical labor but also emotional labor (Mena, 2015). If a performance appraisal notes that someone did not meet certain goals, this has the potential to be internalized, affect self-efficacy, and how professionals see themselves. As one participant in my study noted:

It's really frustrating as well to know, "Well, I really did a lot, and you're telling me that I'm not doing enough [...] It's also difficult to give more when you're already tired of giving your all [...] you're overextend[ed at] your work, and you're staying longer; you're doing all of this, and it's not reflected as you [would] like it to be reflected. (Fuentes, 2021, p. 53)

When working with Latinx first-generation professionals, it is key to center how they experience their workplace in any conversation around the evaluation of their work and projects. They do not work in a vacuum. An evaluation of how projects are going also should not

happen once a year, or even once a quarter. This should be an ongoing conversation, and one where the onus is not solely on them to provide their supervisor a list of accomplishments for an entire year. Additionally, the experience should not feel like a negotiation. An evaluation of their work should leave them feeling supported, challenged, validated, and proud of their work. The process should be one where everyone understands next steps, how they will work towards ongoing or new goals, and how these goals will be measured.

CONCLUSION

Reimagining the workplace and being intentional about how we can better support Latinx first-generation professionals is more important than ever. We cannot expect to sustainably work towards equitable experiences and outcomes for Black and Brown students if we are not considering the work environments these professionals are navigating. This is especially true for Latinx first-generation professionals as the number of Latinx students continues to increase. Representation is critical in retention and success of students of color, and the effects of not supporting the staff who mirror the students will perpetuate inequities.

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