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*This chapter highlights the factors that hinder or contribute to the success of Latino and Latina students at predominantly White institutions. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model is offered as a framework from which to create environments for Latino/a students to thrive in college.*

## Cultivating Campus Environments to Maximize Success Among Latino and Latina College Students

*Judy Marquez Kiyama, Samuel D. Museus, Blanca E. Vega*

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), because of the continued steady growth of Latino/a communities in the United States, this population now represents the country's largest racial or ethnic minority group at 17% or 53 million people. At the same time, Latino/a students continue to face racial inequities in higher education. Recent data demonstrate that Latino/a students are substantially less likely than their White peers to matriculate into a 4-year institution, attend a selective college or university, enroll in college full time, and complete a bachelor's degree (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013). Thus, it is important to understand the institutional factors that contribute to the experiences of Latino/a students, especially those enrolled at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the factors that hinder or contribute to the success of Latino/a students at PWIs and to discuss how campus leaders can transform their institutional environments to maximize success among these students.

### **Campus Racial Climate and Campus Racial Culture at Predominantly White Institutions**

Many factors shape the experiences of Latino/a college students at PWIs, including their levels of academic preparation, pressure to fulfill family obligations, challenges navigating higher education as first-generation college students, financial challenges, gender-role stereotyping of Latinas, stress due to new and culturally exclusive curriculum, and incongruence between

their cultural heritages and the culture of their campuses (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005; Lopez, 2005). In addition, there is a growing body of evidence that campus racial climates and campus racial cultures shape the experiences of Latino/a students in higher education. Whereas *campus racial climate* has been defined as “the overall racial environment” of post-secondary institutions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 62), the *campus racial culture* has been defined as the following:

the collective patterns of tacit values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that evolve from an institution’s history and are manifest in its mission, traditions, language, interactions, artifacts, physical structures, and other symbols, which differentially shape the experiences of various racial and ethnic groups and can function to oppress racial minority populations within a particular institution. (Museus, Ravello, & Vega, 2012, p. 32)

The campus racial climate and campus racial culture are both significant aspects of the campus environment, and each of them is important in efforts to develop holistic understandings of the experiences of Latino/a students at PWIs.

Several studies suggest that campus racial climates exhibit a salient influence on the experiences of many Latino/a students at PWIs (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Villalpando, 2010). When compared to White peers, Latino/a students and other students of color often report that the campus climate is less welcoming or is hostile (Lowe, Byron, Ferry, & Garcia, 2013). This discrepancy is due to the reality that institutions can and often do cultivate and perpetuate hostile campus racial climates that are permeated with prejudice and discrimination, racial stereotypes, low expectations from teachers and peers, exclusion from the curriculum, and pedagogy that marginalizes or tokenizes the voices of Latino/a college students and other undergraduates of color (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Lopez, 2005).

There is also some indication that negative campus racial climates result in increased feelings of marginality and isolation, decreased sense of belonging, higher levels of racism-related stress, increased withdrawal from classroom participation, and lower levels of persistence and degree completion among Latino/a students (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Lopez, 2005). Moreover, these environmental realities are often exacerbated by low representation of Hispanic college students, faculty, and staff. Because of this persistent low representation, campuses may call upon Latino/a students to lead diversity efforts and represent the perspective of all students of color on their respective campuses (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

Researchers have also begun to shed light on how campus racial cultures shape the experiences of Latino/a students and other students of color at PWIs. For example, the campus racial culture of PWIs often privileges

Eurocentric cultural values, perspectives, assumptions, norms, and symbols while excluding or marginalizing the cultural backgrounds and identities of Latino/a college students (González, 2003). On the other hand, research suggests that PWIs do have the capacity to cultivate campus cultures that contribute to the conditions for Latino/a students and other undergraduates of color to thrive (Museus, 2011). For example, there is some evidence that campus cultures characterized by strong networking values, a commitment to targeted support, a belief in humanizing the educational experience, and an ethos characterized by institutional responsibility for student success are more conducive to college success among undergraduates of color.

Higher education researchers have found that the interaction between Latino/a students' home and campus cultures shape their experiences and outcomes at PWIs (Cerezo & Chang, 2013; González, 2003; Museus & Quaye, 2009). For example, greater cultural congruity, or greater fit between the cultural values that students bring to college and the dominant values of their institution, contributes to enhanced sense of belonging, academic achievement, and greater likelihood of persistence (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Unfortunately, Latino/a college students often come from cultures that are substantially different than the ones that they encounter and must navigate on their respective campuses (González, 2003). And the burden of bridging or integrating Latino/a students' home cultures and the cultures of their campuses is often placed on the shoulders of the students themselves. Indeed, institutions often leave it up to Latino/a students to assimilate into the dominant cultures of PWIs (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Lopez, 2013). The challenges that Latino/a students face at PWIs, coupled with the continued assumption that responsibility to adjust lies primarily with these students, constitute a significant problem that warrants the attention of postsecondary educators.

Whereas the dominant cultures of PWIs often fail to reflect, and therefore frequently devalue, the cultural communities from which Latino/a students originate, these undergraduates can and do cultivate and perpetuate their own subcultures that reflect and engage their cultural communities and identities. Such subcultures provide sources of support and contribute to the conditions for those students to thrive. For example, scholars have shown how subcultures that center *familismo* as a core value can contribute to resiliency and success among Latino/a students at PWIs. The cultural concept of *familismo* includes a belief in the importance of maintaining strong family ties, the expectation that family is the primary source of support, an emphasis on loyalty to family, and a commitment to the family over individual needs (Mendoza, Hart, & Whitney, 2011). The notion of *familismo* is often extended to Latino/a peers within campus student groups as Latinos/as form a campus family or group of campus brothers and sisters. As a result, this surrogate or extended family can play an integral role in Latino/a students developing a sense of belonging, healthy identity, and the

foundation for academic success in higher education (Mendoza et al., 2011; Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013). In some cases, this extended campus family is found within Latino/a Greek-letter organizations, which help these students find peer support, engage in club and organization leadership roles, and cultivate motivation to persist and graduate (Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013).

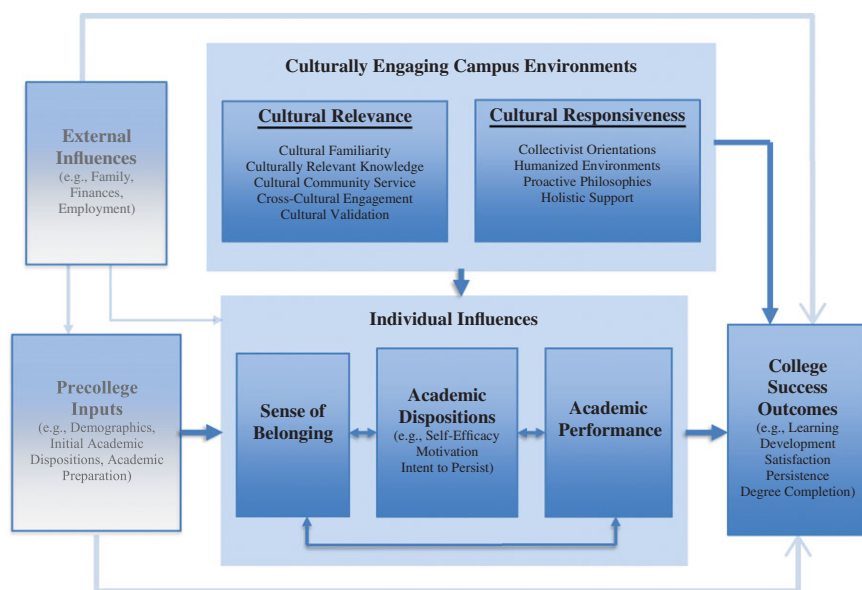
One reason subcultures that are based on core values, such as *familismo*, are important is because they allow Latino/a students to maintain critical ties to their cultural heritages while simultaneously navigating the culture of their college campuses. Indeed, evidence indicates that *familismo* and the importance that Latino/a students attach to maintaining emotional ties to their communities of origin partially determine the institutions to which these students apply and attend, and often lead them to choose campuses close to home (Kiyama, 2010; Mendoza et al., 2011; Sapp, Kiyama, & Dache-Gerbino, in press). In sum, Latino/a students' abilities to maintain connections to their cultural communities and their core cultural values represent an important source of emotional support while in college (Mendoza et al., 2011). In the following section, we discuss a model that can help mobilize campus conversations in ways that center Latino/a students' cultural communities and their cultural values in conversations about student success and integrate those critical cultural factors into institutional structures, spaces, curricula, policies, programs, practices, and activities to maximize success among these populations.

### **A Model for Understanding, Assessing, and Fostering Campus Environments That Reflect and Respond to Latino/a Communities**

To address the aforementioned climate and culture issues, educators can engage frameworks that allow them to (re)design campus environments that meaningfully engage the cultural identities of Latino/a students. Museus (2014) proposed the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model (Figure 3.1), which is derived from over 100 interviews and 20 years of existing research on diverse student populations in college. The CECE Model suggests that culturally engaging campus environments (i.e., environments that reflect and respond to their cultural communities of students) are associated with more positive student outcomes in college.

The CECE Model posits that there are nine characteristics of culturally engaging campus environments, which can be divided into two subgroups of cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness indicators. The first five indicators of *cultural relevance* focus on the ways that institutional environments are relevant to the cultural backgrounds, communities, and identities of diverse college students:

**Figure 3.1. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model**



Source: Museus & Smith (2014).

1. **Cultural familiarity** is the extent to which college students have opportunities to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers who understand their backgrounds and experiences.
2. **Culturally relevant knowledge** refers to opportunities for students to learn and exchange knowledge about their own cultures and communities of origin.
3. **Cultural community service** refers to the extent to which students have opportunities to engage in projects and activities to give back to and positively transform their cultural communities.
4. **Meaningful cross-cultural engagement** involves students' access to opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds to solve real social and political problems.
5. **Culturally validating environments** refer to environments that validate students' cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities.

The remaining four indicators of *cultural responsiveness* focus on the ways in which campus environments respond to the cultural norms and needs of diverse students:

6. **Collectivist cultural orientations** are cultural values that encourage collaboration and mutual success, rather than individualism and competition, on campus.

7. **Humanized educational environments** are characterized by institutional agents who care about, are committed to, and develop meaningful relationships with students.
8. **Proactive philosophies** drive the practice of institutional agents who go above and beyond making information, opportunities, and support available to encourage and sometimes pressure students to access that information, opportunities, and support.
9. **Holistic support** is characterized by the extent to which postsecondary institutions provide students with access to at least one point person—a faculty member or staff member whom those students trust to provide the information and offer the assistance that they need, or connect them with a source of support who will provide that information or assistance.

These nine indicators are based on empirical data and over 2 decades of research that link them to higher levels of engagement, sense of belonging, persistence, and degree completion (Museus, 2014). In addition, some research examining the CECE Model appears to suggest that these nine indicators are significantly correlated with key outcomes, such as sense of belonging, motivation, and self-efficacy among students of color (Museus & Smith, 2014).

Much remains to be learned about the efficacy of these indicators in promoting positive outcomes. Yet, existing evidence indicates that these nine indicators might be useful in assessing the extent to which campus environments reflect the conditions that are necessary for Latinos/as to thrive in college. Using these indicators can help educators facilitate dialogue and construct a common vision regarding the types of environments that diversity and equity initiatives should strive to achieve in order to maximize success among diverse populations. Ultimately, the CECE framework can be useful in understanding how institutions might transform or restructure their campuses and create optimal environmental conditions for these students to thrive. In the context of Latino/a student success at PWIs, the CECE Model suggests that engaging in discussions and efforts to more meaningfully cultivate campus environments that reflect and respond to Latino/a communities at PWIs might help maximize the likelihood that these students will want to engage, have positive experiences, feel a greater passion for learning, and succeed in college.

## **Recommendations for Cultivating Culturally Engaging Campus Environments for Latino/a Students**

In this final section, we elaborate on how PWIs can cultivate more culturally engaging campus environments by integrating the CECE indicators into their programs and practices. Although offering any holistic discussion of such transformation efforts is beyond the scope of this chapter, we provide

a handful of recommendations that can aid institutional leaders in advancing such agendas on their respective campuses. Due to space limitations, we focus on providing recommendations based on the indicators of cultural relevance. Many of our recommendations reinforce the sentiments of previous scholars (see Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Ortiz, 2004) but emphasize the need to focus on holistic efforts that promote institutional transformation. For a more comprehensive discussion of the ways in which postsecondary campuses can use the CECE Model as a framework to cultivate more culturally relevant and responsive environments, we refer readers to Museus and Smith (2014).

**Creating Spaces to Find Cultural Familiarity on Campus.** College faculty, administrators, and staff should invest substantial energy in racial- and ethnic-specific campus programming that can provide undergraduates with opportunities to connect with people from similar backgrounds. One critical way in which institutions offer such support is by providing Latino/a student groups office space where they can find cultural familiarity and connect with support from peers and mentors (Harris & Kiyama, 2013). Institutions can use such physical spaces to construct culturally relevant spaces that are based on the notion of *familismo* and reflect cultural values of loyalty, solidarity, and reciprocity (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). In addition, institutions should constantly seek new ways to engage broader Latino/a communities in their environments. For example, Metropolitan State University of Denver recently implemented *Orientación Familiar*, an orientation program designed specifically for Spanish-speaking families. The program focused on building upon family knowledge and resources while sharing examples of how to continue supporting students once they make the transition into college.

**Using Multifaceted Approaches to Engaging and Exchanging Culturally Relevant Knowledge.** The role of space is also a critical consideration within the context of academic programs. First and foremost, it is important for campuses to consider the value of Latino/a studies programs and courses as spaces where culturally relevant knowledge for the Latino/a community can be acquired and exchanged. Faculty and staff should consider compiling resources that can help Latino/a students find spaces where they can learn and exchange knowledge about their own cultural communities. For example, on campuses that do not house a Latino/a studies program, faculty and staff can construct a list of courses relevant to Latino/a studies so that students know where to access such courses upon their arrival. In addition, faculty and staff can make concerted efforts to provide Latino/a student organizations with information about other Latinos/as and more general diversity-focused scholarly events on their respective campuses.

**Providing Opportunities to Give Back to Cultural Communities.** Many Latino/a students arrive on campuses with a strong desire to provide service to their communities. To capitalize on this passion, institutions



should provide a wide range of culturally relevant service-learning opportunities that are built into academic courses or cocurricular projects. Work-study opportunities could offer unique experiences embedded in Latino/a community needs, and educators should make efforts to ensure that opportunities to engage in undergraduate research projects are culturally relevant.

**Understanding and Engaging Cultural Symbols to Provide Cultural Validation.** Making efforts to cultivate culturally validating environments can prompt institutions to review cultural symbols across campus. For example, if campuses host “fiesta nights,” they could refrain from tokenizing Latino/a culture by engaging in interdisciplinary programming efforts with history or anthropology departments and student organizations. Programming efforts can offer information on the historical significance of Latino/a symbols like sombreros in Mexican mariachi song and dance or the relevance of sombreros in both Mexico and the Philippines. When institutions engage cultural aspects of Latino/a communities, it is important that they review these items with faculty, staff, and students knowledgeable of *Latinidad*, or “the diverse array of competing paradigms of identity and heterogeneous experiences of various Latino national groups” to offer a more accurate representation of Latino/a culture and therefore a more culturally validating environment (Aparicio, 1999, p. 10).

**Conducting Continuous Assessment to Inform Institutional Improvement Efforts.** It is critical that institutional leaders engage in continuous assessment of their campus environments. For example, colleges and universities can use the CECE Survey (Museus & Smith, 2014) to better understand the extent to which they are providing the types of campus environments that allow diverse populations to thrive. The CECE Survey is a questionnaire that is derived from the CECE Model, has been tested and validated, and can be used to measure the nine CECE indicators. The data generated by the survey can continuously inform strategic planning, program evaluation and development, policy revision, and curricular reform efforts at postsecondary institutions.

## Conclusion

Although Latino/a students are members of the largest community of color in the United States, they continue to achieve college degrees at lower rates than other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, researchers and practitioners must better understand how to transform institutional environments to better serve this population. The CECE Model (Museus, 2014) provides an important tool that can prompt institutional leaders and educators to reflect on issues associated with Latino/a educational achievement and success rather than relying on students themselves for the answers. By integrating an understanding of the CECE Model and Latino/a culture into institutional environments, practitioners and researchers can be better equipped to construct

policies and programs that maximize Latino/a student success in higher education.

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