Marginality and Mattering: Urban Latino Male Undergraduates in Higher Education

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Abstract. This qualitative study of first-generation, low-income urban Latino male college students considers their transition experience and success in various higher education institutions. Schlossberg’s theory of mattering and marginality is used as a lens to explore how these students navigate the college environment and build relationships with campus agents. The findings focus on the students’ motivations to attend college, the importance of the college environment, the impact of mentorship, and feelings of mattering as a result of relationships with campus peers and professional staff. The authors offer implications and program recommendations for student affairs professionals to better support and understand Latino male students at their institutions.

Historically, Latino college students have not successfully navigated the post-secondary system (Gandara, 1995; Marquez Kiyama, 2010; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). This has been particularly true of Latino males, who are members of the largest minority group in the United States, yet are one of the most under-represented groups in postsecondary education (College Board, 2011; Lumina Foundation, 2009; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012, p. xii) reported that only 26% of 18-24-year-old Latino males were enrolled in postsecondary institutions. Fry (2011) reported that Latino college student enrollment increased 24% from 2009 to 2010; however, the students were concentrated in two-year institutions. The common critique of community colleges is a low degree-completion and transfer rate for ethnic and racial minorities and first-generation students (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). In 2010, only 11% of 25-34-year-old Latino males earned bachelor’s degrees (NCES, 2012, pg. xiv). Saenz and Ponjuan (2011) found that, between 1977 and 2009, Latino males earned almost 28,000 fewer bachelor’s degrees than their female counterparts.
Solórzano et al. (2005) found that educational structures have hindered Latino males’ educational success, with low percentages completing high school and even fewer enrolling in four-year institutions. A recent study (Halx & Ortiz, 2011) examined Latino male students’ intentions to drop out of high school and found that students felt teachers and administrators did not value their presence or efforts to persist in school. Contreras (2011) and Noguera et al. (2011) reported that Latino male students were overrepresented in school suspension, labeled as learning or emotionally disabled, and often targeted by school police. When low-income Latino students are engaged in high school, access to timely and accurate college information is unreliable, which may further stunt the college-going chances for students (McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

When low-income Latino students enter higher education, many do not possess strategies to navigate and succeed in postsecondary institutions (Tierney & Venegas, 2006; Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006) and are also negotiating the demands associated with being a first-generation college student (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). They may also experience pressure to provide financial support for their families (Perna, 2006) and have limited knowledge of the financial aid system (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

The stories of Latino male students must be examined to better understand the trajectories leading to college completion. This paper explores the experiences of a small group of urban, first-generation, Latino male college students who have successfully navigated the K-12 educational system and matriculated to college.

**Literature Review**

The authors examined their data through the lens of Schlossberg’s model of life transitions, which includes the concepts of mattering and marginality (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1987, 1989). They used the transition framework because it provides a level of individual variability. The structural approach serves as a guide for practitioners to assist students and for scholars to gain a better understanding of the Latino collegiate male experience.

Transitions are the anticipated, unanticipated, or nonoccurring events that will alter one’s life (Schlossberg, 1984). Further, Bridges (2009) described the transition process, in part, as the realization that old habits and behaviors are no longer useful or needed and the adoption of new strategies as a coping mechanism. Sometimes, these strategies include a period of soul-searching, causing individuals to feel confused and
as if they are navigating "an emotional wilderness" (Bridges, 1991, p.5). Schlossberg (1984) identified four categories to help predict how an individual copes with a transition: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) supports, and (d) strategies (Schlossberg’s 4S system). The situation includes the transition trigger and its timing, the locus of control an individual has over the situation, the potential for a role change, and how the individual assesses the situation. The self category is the individual’s personal and demographic characteristics (e.g., personal demeanor, socioeconomic status), which influences perception and assessment of life situations. The support is the person’s networks, such as family, friends, and community associations, and strategies are the coping mechanisms a person uses to respond to the transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

In addition, two key components of Schlossberg’s transition theory are the concepts of mattering and marginality. Mattering is related to an individual’s perception that he or she is valued within a community, that they are the object of someone else’s attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Marginality may occur when an individual feels socially isolated and not part of the community. The types of communities vary, but active involvement in personal and professional interests often leads to formal and informal participation in these communities, thus, most likely creating a “mattering” situation for the individual.

A key component of Schlossberg’s support system is an individual’s social network, which educates members on the heuristics and norms of the group. Karp (2011) stated that students with collegiate social capital are better prepared to navigate the unwritten rules within academia. For example, a student might create collegiate social capital by developing a relationship with a faculty mentor who introduces academic culture to the student, aiding his or her discovery of resources, ideas, and simply “how to get things done.”

Although they offer established support networks, tailored college success programs for Latina/o students have faced challenges, including funding, lack of longitudinal data, underutilization of research literature, and lack of localized data specific to Latina/o students (Gonzalez & Ballysingh, 2012). Despite established social networks that help Latina/o students navigate the college admission process, few use them strategically to assist college completion and post-college planning (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012).

Historically, research on psychosocial development and experiences in higher education has not focused on Latino males, although recently a surge of scholars (see Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Sanchez, Huerta, & Venegas, 2012; Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010) have begun investigating this community. This research includes exploring the significance of race and gender in school success

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(Barajas & Pierce, 2001), the influence of social class on college persistence (Schwartz et al., 2009), low enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), and the influence of college preparation programs in increasing college-going behaviors (Sanchez et al., 2012). Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) asserted that the low enrollment of Latino males in higher education could be systemic because of “ongoing discriminatory practices in education” (p. 57), which may influence the cyclical negative attitudes towards Latino male students that being successful in school is similar to acting white. Compounding the systematic issues of access to college is the challenge of family support and motivation to pursue advanced education because of the families’ limited knowledge of the postsecondary system and expectations of their male children to support and contribute to the family financially (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2009). Similarly, research findings on Latinas highlighted the disparities of resource access and high school support among high-achieving students and non-high-achieving students (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009).

Barajas and Pierce (2001) suggested that Latino males struggle to develop their cultural identity in college because white male educators in high school neglected cultivating racial development and focused on individualism and meritocracy. This focus reflects a cultural incongruence because race and socioeconomic status strongly influence access to social capital (Solórzano et al., 2005). Their findings suggested that students’ economic status influenced their perceptions of education and their ability to relate to other Latino peers in college. Diversity within the Latino community, including generational and social economic status and acculturation to American values, can further complicate the pathways to higher education for Latino males (Nuñez, McDonough, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2008). Schwartz et al. (2009) asserted the stories and experiences of Latino males might have been “silent” because of the cultural influence of not exposing personal matters to community outsiders. This study is guided by the following question: How does the theory of marginality and mattering help explain the social and academic experiences of Latino male undergraduates?

**Method**

To expand the literature on Latino males in postsecondary education, this study examined the college experience using Schlossberg’s mattering and marginality to understand the various interactions with campus agents. Some of the interview protocol categories included (a) college and financial aid plans, (b) college characteristics and perceptions, (c) peer relations, and (d) questions about students’ ethnic identity.
Participants

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger research study on Black and Latino males’ postsecondary social and academic experiences. From September 2008 to November 2009, data were collected from six community colleges, one state comprehensive university, and two research universities located in the state of California. In total, 35 students participated in this phase of the study: seven Black and 28 Latino males from the participating nine colleges and universities.

In this paper, the authors focused specifically on the 10 Latino male students from the larger study who participated in a college preparation program and were part of the first wave of data collection. The students’ ages ranged from 17 to 23. Eight of the 10 students identified as Mexican and two as Central Americans. All 10 students were Pell-grant eligible and had minimal out-of-pocket college expenses. The authors did not place any additional demographic or social restrictions on students to participate in this study besides self-identifying a Latino ethnic background. The students were provided no incentives to participate in this study. Table 1 provides more demographic information about the students, outlining their pseudonym, major, college rank, ethnicity, and institution.

Table 1
Study Participants’ Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Year in college</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Beltran</td>
<td>Western University</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Urban planning</td>
<td>Honduran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuy</td>
<td>Western University</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeter</td>
<td>Pacific State College</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Social &amp; behavior sciences</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrique</td>
<td>Western University</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Political science &amp; minor in business</td>
<td>Salvadorian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Western University</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Health sciences</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaime</td>
<td>Road City College</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>Eastern University</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>Western University</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Civil engineering</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Road City College</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PokerX</td>
<td>Beach University</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Business economics</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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**Site Selection**

For the primary site selection, the authors identified four postsecondary institution types that had been part of the larger study: (a) a community college, (b) a four-year state college, (c) a comprehensive university, and (d) a large research university. More than 25% of students enrolled at the community college and state college identified as Latino. In addition to the large number of Latino college students enrolled at each institution, the authors used institutional agents to identify possible study participants. Seidman (2013) stated that the use of gatekeepers by outside researchers is important to understand the institutional culture and gain access to potential participants.

**Data Collection Procedure, Coding, and Data Analysis**

The authors used semistructured, individual interviews and reflexive field notes to illuminate the experiences of 10 Latino male college students enrolled in four postsecondary institutions. Semistructured interviews allow the flexibility to adjust the interview protocol to emerging themes derived from the data (Olson, 2011). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview duration ranged from 45 to 120 minutes. The findings were compared with other participants as part of a rigorous triangulation process, which included member checks and data analysis by those conducting the interviews, and a researcher not involved in the data collection provided additional insight from someone who was not so close to the data or who had a relationship with the participants (Creswell, 1994).

The authors employed descriptive coding to generate themes from the data. Saldaña (2013) suggested descriptive coding as a method to understand the central questions being asked and to share what the researchers “see and hear” (p. 88). The authors hand-coded each transcript independently to generate thematic categories that reflected the participants’ experiences. The use of multiple coders may increase the reliability and validity of the categorical themes discovered (Bazeley, 2013). Member-checking of emerging themes with participants was used to ensure that their stories were shared with dignity and reflected their perception of the data. Seidman (2013) stressed this stage as an opportunity to allow each transcript to “breathe and speak for itself” as the authors construct a story that answers the “why” in qualitative research (p. 120).

**Limitations of Study**

A common critique of qualitative studies is the limited transferability or generalizability to other contexts, yet the potential value of filling gaps in
understanding about the Latino male student experience in higher education outweighs this limitation. While these findings may not easily translate to other regions of the country or institutions, they do create an opportunity for dialogue about first-generation Latino male students in the larger higher education community. A more significant limitation for this study was the authors’ decision to interview only successful Latino males. Thus, the study provides limited insight into the experiences of Latino males who did not make a successful transition to college or chose not to matriculate as compared to their more successful, college-going peers.

**Findings**

Like many new students leaving their comfort zones, the Latino male participants described numerous transitions and challenges encountered in their new environments, including the newly found independence of being away from watchful parents and pressures to prepare for their academic and professional careers. Four thematic categories emerged from the interviews: (a) the motivation to attend college, (b) the importance of the college environment, (c) the impact of mentorship, and (d) feelings of mattering and marginality.

**The Motivation to Attend College**

Family was an important motivating factor for college enrollment for students in this study. Several of the participants commented on their obligation to serve as role models to their siblings, while others wanted their families to be proud of them. For example, Beltran, a second-year undergraduate student, attended Western University, a large, highly selective research university in an urban environment on the Pacific coast. Beltran engaged in various cultural and academic organizations on and near the college campus. His motivation to enroll in postsecondary education was to “be a role model to my younger sisters—it’s a ripple effect. But I have to do it [go to Western University]; despite the challenges, I have to do it.”

The motivation to pursue and succeed in higher education was important for the participants in the study, who echoed the theme repeatedly. Enrique, a fourth-year political science student at Western University, engaged in various campus activities and developed a community mentoring program for Black and Latino male youth to learn about higher education and cultural activities. He described the path to postsecondary education for his family, “My [older] brother cleaned up the way. I set the rocks [for] my sister. She’s [going to] pave the road for my little brother, [so he] can just run through.”
Lastly, Jack shared the importance of parental support and encouragement, “As far as my drive and my motivation goes, it has to be my parents. I guess the whole first generation mentality is you always want to make your parents proud.” His transition to postsecondary education was smoother than some students because his parents provided encouragement and physical space. With this support, Jack was driven to be successful in life and college.

While many students described the desire to set a good example for other family members, the negative experiences of family members were also motivating factors for college enrollment. Michael, a first-generation, second-year student enrolled in Road City College shared:

The single critical variable in my life that drives my success is probably not wanting to be like my mom. She had me when she was 15. And so, while my mom is successful now because she earned a vocational degree, I’m not taking the same path. It’s something negative that I reversed to be positive.

Michael witnessed his mother struggle with early social and economic challenges as an adolescent. Now that his mother has earned a vocational degree, she models financial stability and advanced education.

The Importance of the College Environment

The college campus provided a safe environment, encouraged academic success, and shielded students from some of the negative pressures and influences of the home environment. For some participants, their home environments were shaped by drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, and negative peer influences. Chuy, a first-year music industry major at Western University from Northern California, stated,

Home was cool, but it was like the neighborhood. I had a lot of problems. … All of my friends were gang members. … Being away from that comfort zone and, not only that, like, I feel like this is a quote, they said, “If you’re away from home, you’re away from failure.”

Having distance from his gang-ridden neighborhood gave Chuy the mental and physical comfort necessary to pursue his academic interests.

Jaime, a third-year sociology student attending Road City College, was slightly older than the other participants and worked multiple part-time positions to support himself and his family. He described his Latino friends who criticized him for his study habits.
Because I have a lot of Hispanic friends [who] didn’t go [past] high school, and they tell me not to study so much because I’m acting. … They tell me I speak like I’m white. … They tell me, “Only white people study like that.”

The college environment provided Jaime a space to study and engage with positive peers who promoted higher education and a path to economic and professional stability. In addition to the short- and long-term benefits of college for Jaime, the environment offered a safe space for him to explore his ethnic identity and engage with other Latino peers and professionals.

**The Importance of Mentorship**

The students commented about the value and influence of peer and faculty mentors, who helped shape their academic and personal trajectories. Jack, a high-achieving fourth-year student attending Western University, commented,

> My [mentor] Professor Morales inspired me to be a researcher. Public health is a good area of study. You learn about things you can change. That’s what I want to do, and he inspired me to do that type of academic career.

For Jack, the individual mentorship provided the support and motivation to hold on to his aspiration to pursue graduate or professional school in public health or medicine. For other students, mentors are institutional agents who provide information and strategies to navigate the college or university. Jaime stated,

> My mentor introduced a whole new world of education to me. She taught me how to pay for my classes, how to sign up for the correct classes, and how to decide what I wanted to do. So, she steered me in the right direction.

The importance of mentoring from peers, academic advisors, or faculty members may shape students’ perceptions about their commitment to an institution. It also provides a critical support network that can help with issues related to the transition to college, role identity, and academic self-efficacy.

**Feelings of Mattering and Marginality**

The level of support Latino male students perceived often reflected how valued they felt by others, including peers, family, romantic partners, and college faculty and staff. Several participants described experiences that made them feel they mattered and provided them with critical academic motivation and improved self-esteem. Demeter, a high-achieving, third-year student in social and behavioral sciences at
Pacific State College (PSC), participated in multiple summer research projects to investigate health disparities in minority communities with the support of PSC faculty members. Demeter held high ambitions of pursuing graduate education in sociology or health policy. Although he was a first-generation college student, he benefited from positive relationships with his faculty members. One faculty member encouraged him to enroll in a graduate-level sociology course, giving him the feeling that the new academic environment supported his intellectual ability: “What is significant is not that I took the grad school [class], but I felt for the first time somebody valued my potential.”

Jack, another student, elaborated on his fraternity and how its members became part of his family, offering more than the normal social benefits. He believed they were instrumental in his collegiate adjustment:

I’ve formed really good friendships here in college that will probably last me for a lifetime. I have fraternity brothers that I’m really close with. They know my family; I know theirs. I go over for Thanksgiving dinner, stuff like that. I would like to say they’ve helped me out through some rough times.

Participants shared stories of individuals who cared about them and made them feel valued. Some of these individuals were associated with a formal department or targeted success program within the institution; others were family members, significant others, friends, and mentors acquired during their experiences. These connections provided access to social capital that students may not have possessed at college entry. For example, Beltran shared,

More opportunities are available because I am Latino, ... but it also has its disadvantages, just in terms of vocabulary and in terms of being exposed to networks. ... Some students are given an internship as opposed to earning it, or they have their parents working at a certain law firm.

However, not all of the participants had positive campus experiences. Chuy and Enrique struggled initially with their attire and how their peers viewed them. Chuy was more comfortable in himself and disregarded how he was viewed, but Enrique chose to adapt to the mainstream campus culture so as not to subject himself to what he perceived as negative nonverbal gestures from campus peers. He shared how he changed how he dressed:

I got funny looks and stuff because of the way I dress and the way I choose to dress and talk, definitely. I mean, I get it here, but I choose to dress this way because this is how I feel comfortable. [I’ve] definitely changed up how I dress. My clothes [were] a little more baggy [for example], always wearing my hoodies.
and stuff like that, and ... I had to change that. ... I always saw people looking at me, like, “Wow,” like, “What the hell [is he doing here?”].

These study participants were actively negotiating the physical part of their identity.

**Discussion**

As demonstrated throughout this study, mentoring and a sense of mattering provided opportunities for students to access various forms of social and cultural capital, which was a valuable asset for the Latino male student participants. Too often, higher education professionals and faculty wrongly assume low-income Latino males possess the right forms of capital and know how to be successful at their college or university. Although colleges and universities are aware of the high needs of different student populations, students and their families still bear the burden to navigate the educational pipeline, determine and understand college finances, and be privy to constantly evolving admission standards (McDonough, 1994, 1997; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). McDonough (1998) stated education systems have the responsibility to better support and create a culture of college readiness for students to be successful in higher education.

Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen (2012) strongly advocated the power of social capital and how to use the networks to increase academic success and help students plan for their career aspirations. The stories told by Demeter, Jack, Beltran, and others underscore Karp’s (2011) concept of navigating the unwritten rules of academia by developing key relationships with faculty and knowledgeable peers.

Participants also discussed their struggles to conform to campus culture and the criticism from friends who labeled habits such as studying hard or engaging in academics acting. Sometimes, a participant felt marginalized by the way he chose to dress, while others had concerns about their academic self-efficacy. In addition, some participants continued dual-personas: one on display at college and another, conforming to peer expectations, at home.

Participants shared personal stories of gaining access to college and their motivation to attend. Revisiting Schlossberg’s 4S system, each participant was aware of his situation and self, but awareness of his levels of support and subsequent strategy planning varied. Several participants commented on being role models to their siblings (Beltran) and community (Enrique). Improving their quality of life for themselves and their families was very important and was a tenet of their identities (Huerta, McDonough, & Allen, 2014).
Conclusion

As the Latino population increases, the need for new educational infrastructures and policies that support a path to higher education is necessary to promote enrollment and completion. Although the overall Latino college student population is increasing, males are considered invisible, vanishing, or missing from campuses of higher education (Noguera et al., 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Low-income Latino male college students may benefit from mentoring relationships with Latino adults, who promote persistence and degree completion, at their institutions (Cammarota, 2004). Participants in this study navigated the educational pipeline with personal resilience and motivation by relying on family support and adapting to transitions in the college environment. Each student participated in a preparation program that provided higher education knowledge and success strategies and promoted college-going identities. Mentorship from college-educated peers provided additional guidance for the Latino male students to cultivate and consider larger personal goals. As the students noted, the roles of faculty and student affairs professionals could not be understated. Campus professionals played key roles in mentoring and building meaningful relationships with Latino male students in this study. The importance of strong and purposeful support staff and systems to help students in their transitions to higher education should not be underestimated.

Implications for Practice

Although there are limitations in this study, the findings provide a nuanced understanding of the postsecondary transition experiences of Latino male college students. Higher education professionals have a unique opportunity to unravel individual student motivation and perceptions of their community and college environment. These perceptions will vary, and participants in this study selected different approaches to cope with their transition to the academic environment using a variety of strategies and supports. The thematic categories provide opportunities for further study. For example, what motivates Latino males to attend college, and how do home environment, college environment, mentorship, and feelings of mattering support those initial motivations and decisions to remain enrolled and succeed in higher education?

Developing institutionally sponsored support groups and professional mentoring programs for men of color will help colleges and universities retain and graduate larger percentages of Latino males. These programs provide students opportunities
to build relationships with other men of color and professional staff, peer-mentoring, social support, and opportunities to share strategies for academic success. As new students transition into the college or university, the male support group can provide opportunities for students to build social networks with faculty and staff, who can share their personal stories in academia and encourage them to participate in activities that promote intellectual rigor, growth, and research opportunities, which help navigate the college environment and foster academic competence. The immediate benefit for students is the understanding that faculty and staff are willing to provide mentoring and may have faced similar challenges and struggles to gain access to higher education, simultaneously highlighting that graduate and professional degrees are attainable. These interactions with a person who cares about their attendance and success may increase the students’ feelings of self-worth (Schlossberg, 1989).

The role of mentorship for Latino male students should be explored further to evaluate the immediate impact on retention and graduation. The mentoring program can match upper-class students with first-year or transfer students to introduce them to campus services, resource centers, ethnic- or cultural-based student organizations, and campus agents who are sensitive to Latino student needs. These programs promote not only collegiate success but also help prepare students for life after graduation. Academic advising and orientation offices could collaborate with other relevant campus departments, such as the multicultural center, minority affairs, and academic departments, to initiate mentor programs. The authors advocate that higher education institutions revisit current admissions, orientation, and outreach practices; engage families in ways that they may not have considered; and evaluate the number of Latino graduate and professional students—who are critical components of the next generation of college students—in education fields.

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