Moving Towards Engagement: Promoting Persistence Among Latino Male Undergraduates at an Urban Community College

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Latinos are being educated in American colleges and universities in greater numbers than ever before. Yet, despite the increases in population growth, Latinos are still falling behind. Little attention has been given to the experiences of Latino males enrolled at the community college. However, research shows that it is the community colleges in which a large portion of the college-going Latino population is enrolled. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how community colleges can increase Latino male engagement in the quest to promote their academic persistence. Findings suggest these 12 Latino men are faced with unique circumstances (familial commitment, employment, peers) both on and off campus that impedes their involvement. Institutions of higher education are encouraged to be more supportive by offering opportunities for engagement that are sensitive to lifestyle of these participants in order to maintain their enrollment.

The number of Latinos is on the increase, and so are concerns about their success in the higher education system. According to a 2008 Pew Research Center study, the population of Latinos in America grew by 29% from April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2007. Yet, despite the increases in population growth, Latinos are falling behind their other cultural groups when it comes to their involvement in higher education (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). Only 24.8% of Latinos aged 18-24 were enrolled in degree granting programs in 2005, compared to 60.6% of Asians, 42.8% of Whites, and 32.7% of African Americans (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005).

The majority of Latinos find themselves in community colleges (White House Initiative for Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000). Studies show that Latinos in the community colleges often struggle academically. Only 15.4% of Latino students who begin community college completed an associate’s degree within six years (compared to 24% for Asians, 17% for Whites, and 7.9% for African American). Latinos also transferred to four-year college at lower rates than their counterparts: 16% for Hispanics compared to 47% for Asians, 32% for Whites, and 24% for African Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).
Furthermore, males were underrepresented in the Latino population that received a postsecondary education. In 2004, only 35% of Latino college students who obtained an associate’s degrees were male (NCES, 2005).

Within higher education, researchers have conducted studies relating to the experiences of underrepresented groups in college. Few studies exclusively address issues relating to Latino male undergraduate students; even less research design includes Latino male students in community college environments (Chiang, Hunter, Yeh, 2004; Green, Marti, & McClonney, 2008; Hall & Rowan, 2001). As a result, there is limited information about how to promote retention and persistence of Latinos in community colleges.

Research has shown that increased involvement on their college campus leads to an increase in retention and persistence among underrepresented students (Harper, 2006). Thus, this qualitative study examines how community colleges can increase Latino male engagement in the quest to promote their academic persistence. To this end, this article examines factors that prevent Latino males from becoming involved in their community college campus. Using participants’ voices, recommendations for community colleges to overcome those barriers to Latino male involvement are offered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By reviewing the experiences of Latino males coupled with their time in community college, insights into how society and academic environment impact engagement are disclosed. While research focused on Latino students in higher education has been restricted to their undergraduate experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and at the senior college, little attention has been given to the experiences of Latino males enrolled at the community college. However, research revealed that Latino students account for 14% of the students enrolled in community colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Considering the rising number of Latinos in the American population, research conducted on Latino students is incongruent with the rise of this college-going group. Investigating the challenges faced by this underrepresented group at junior colleges will provide solutions for forthcoming young Latino males. As such, an exploration into the experiences of some Latino males in society and how they impact their preparation for college is needed.

 Latino Males in Society and Beyond

In relation to Latinos involved in higher education, Latinos went from overrepresentation in the 1970s to severe underrepresentation. The underrepresentation was a result of an increase in Latino high school dropouts. As such, 28% of Latino males aged 16 to 24 were high school dropouts, compared to 18% Latinas (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The effects of these dropout rates are in data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey. In a survey of 261,737 Latino respondents, the proportion of males compared to females entering four-year colleges fell from 57.4% in 1975 to 39.2% in 2006. The decline was most prominent among Mexican American/Chicano male students (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Cabreara, 2008).

Additionally, the costs associated with attending college coupled with the long term return on a college education can seem irrelevant due to low socioeconomic status of most Latino
Americans. Over the period of 1975 to 2006, the median income differential between Latinos and Whites increased from $800 to $3,300 (Hurtado et al., 2008).

The disparity between the high cost of a college education and Latinos’ socioeconomic status is a challenge for those wishing to enroll in higher education. This challenge also contributes to a difficult experience for those who do enroll in higher education (Hurtado et al., 2008). In addition to understanding the economic barriers to a college education faced by Latinos, other relevant information about their time in higher education is essential in understanding their undergraduate experiences.

Community College Experience

According to Laden (2004), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are public and private institutions of higher education that maintain Latinos enrollment of 25% or more full-time equivalent students. Approximately 70% of HSIs are community colleges, which are responsible for educating almost half of the Latino population enrolled in college (Laden, 2004). The students who attend community colleges were typically characterized as financially independent, attended college part-time, and worked full-time (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003; Horn & Neville, 2006). Moreover, the low tuition, proximity to home, and the open admission policy were factors that contributed to many Latinos pursuing junior colleges. When these students did earn credentials, they were more likely to be certificates and associate degrees rather than bachelor’s degrees. This is both a function of the institutions through which minority students are entering higher education (disproportionately for-profit, two-year and less-than-two-year institutions) and their representation within programs at those institutions.

Findings from the 88 students who participated in the National Education Longitudinal Study offered data relevant to the type of students who attend community colleges (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005). Accordingly, more than half of all young first-time undergraduates enrolled in community colleges were from low socioeconomic status households. While four-year public institutions and community colleges each enrolled about the same proportion of White and African American first-time undergraduate students, the percentage of Hispanic students in community colleges was more than twice the percentage of those in four-year public college (Bailey et al., 2005). Additional results from the longitudinal study on low-income and minority students report that community colleges discovered that Latinos earn credentials at lower rates and have disproportionately lower degree attainments. Furthermore, these junior college students were largely represented in remedial coursework as compared to their counterparts at senior colleges (Bailey et al., 2005). This trend was also true for students enrolled in certificate programs as compared to associate degree programs. Latino community college students who took remedial coursework were far less likely to complete a degree or transfer within six years than their peers who take no remediation. Specifically, those who take remedial courses complete at less than half the rate of those who do not take remediation.

How Student Engagement Impacts Students’ Experiences

Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement provides an understanding of the engagement patterns of undergraduate students. Astin’s definition of student involvement is based on five
noteworthy premises: (a) Involvement refers to the psychological and physical investment students make, however broad or specific, to enhance their academic experience; (b) Regardless of the activity, it occurs along a continuum where different activities receive different degrees of involvement; (c) Involvement can be measured by time spent being involved in one activity (hours spent studying) or by the quality of the experience (how much the student retained after studying) having been involved in that activity; (d) The amount of learning and personal development is linked to the quantity and quality of the involvement; and (e) The effectiveness of educational policy or practice is related to its capacity to increase student involvement. The widely studied and often cited research provided by Astin has informed higher education practices in the past; however, much is desired on how to employ best practices among today’s underrepresented students. Attempting to address such concern, Harper’s (2003) study on African American males at four-year residential institutions suggested that dedicating time towards joining clubs or organizations, interacting with faculty in and outside of class, holding academic and nonacademic conversations with peers, or spending time on campus spaces (i.e., labs, student center) contribute to students’ development. Recently, there is new information available relating to Latino males in higher education.

Using data from a 2003 NSSE survey, researchers were able to survey 2,149 Latino seniors from 321 PWIs and 2,028 Latino seniors from 26 HSIs (Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Salinas-Holmes, 2007). Findings from this study reveal that, overall, the average Latino senior at an HSI was similar in comparison to the average Latino senior at a PWI in terms of engagement, satisfaction with college, and gains in overall development. There were minimal differences that the institution played on the engagement of Latino students attending four-year universities. The reason for these minimal differences may be the short history of HSIs (Laird et al., 2007). Similar findings have been found for Latino engagement on the community college level.

Greene et al. (2008) conducted a study examining general student involvement at community colleges. Data was used from the Community College Student Report coupled with the Florida Department of Education Student Database to determine whether students from various racial and ethnic groups attending two-year colleges differed in the amount of time and energy they devoted to educationally effective practices. Green et al. (2008) also sought to determine the extent to which this investment, net of the effect from various precollege variables, contributes positively to desired outcomes. From the study, there were little significant differences found between Latino students and other racial and ethnic groups attending the various types of institutions. Research indicated that Latino students reported higher levels of mental activities factor (working hard to meet instructor’s expectation) than their White counterparts (Greene et al., 2008). However, the voices of Latino students were missing from the research; therefore, qualitative study examining their experiences at community colleges is warranted.

METHODS

Research Design

According to Creswell (2005), a narrative research provides “data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual” (p. 474). Creswell reminds us that using testimonies from individuals of a
marginalized group provides a voice for seldom-heard individuals in education. Personal narratives are the chosen method because the researchers wanted the participants to create a bond with participants so they can freely share their important stories (Creswell, 2005). In this study, the researchers sought to learn how Latino male community college students encounter and understand their educational experience. Students were offered anonymity, allowing the responses to be more candid without fear of repercussions in the future. Pertinent descriptions about data collection, the participants, and data analysis are discussed in this section.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited from an urban community college campus. Some participants received workshop credit in their freshmen experience course; other students in that class who were not Latino males were given an opportunity to refer a Latino male student to the study in order to also receive a workshop credit. Other participants had already completed their freshmen experience course and, thus, did not receive any academic credit for their participation. All students signed their informed consent prior to the beginning of the focus group phase.

Focus group interviews were selected as a narrative approach because they allowed participants to share common academic and social experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Additionally, “focus groups are beneficial when the interactions among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when interviewees are similar to and cooperative with each other” (Creswell, 2005, p. 215). Two focus group opportunities were offered to interested participants; participants chose to attend a particular focus group based on the convenience to their own schedule. Focus groups were held for two hours and were facilitated by the researchers. Study participants were asked a series of 20 open-ended questions as a way to spur discussion. Participants were encouraged to interact during answering the formal questions and free discussion was allowed. Following the completion of the formal questions, participants were invited to make further comments. Students were aware their discussion was being recorded. The discussion was transcribed and analyzed according to themes that emerged in their statements.

Site

The study was conducted at a Hispanic Serving Institution located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the institution. Urban Community College (UCC) is home to 9,592 students from the surrounding area. According to the Office of Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment at UCC, the self-identified demographics of UCC are as follows: 56% Latinos, 33% African American, 4% other, 3% White, 2% Asian, and 1% missing. The student body is comprised of 40% male and 60% female, of which 52% are full-time students and 48% are enrolled part-time. Sixty-two percent of UCC’s student body is below the age of 25.

Participants

Participants are 12 Latino male community college students from an urban community college. All have at least one Latino parent and are self-identified as Latino (one identified as Latino/Black). The participants range in ages from 18 to 31, with an average age of 21. Participants all are
in good academic standing (GPA above 2.0) and have completed at least one semester of college work. Of the 12 participants, six reported that they live in a two-parent home; four reported that they live in a single parent home headed by their mother; two reported that they live alone. Participants self-identified their social economic status as poor (6), middle class (2), and working class (4). When given a list of options, six participants reported that their mother has no college education; five reported that their mother has some education (but did not graduate with a college degree), and one reported that his mother has a bachelor’s degree. Seven of the participants’ fathers did not earn a college degree; three had received some higher education but did not graduate with a college degree; two participants did not respond, and none had received a bachelor’s degree.

Researchers Positionality

As professors of color teaching first-year students at Urban Community College, we were concerned with the low record of enrollment of Latino students. Collectively, we believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as young faculty counselors, helped create a bond between our participants and us. In turn, we credit this trust with allowing us deep insight into the participants’ experiences on campus.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using procedures prescribed by Creswell (2005). The researchers carefully read transcripts and indentified key situations that impacted each participant’s persistence. The researchers examined the transcripts looking for commonality among the data, which were grouped into themes. Creswell (2005) has underlined that “the identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences” (p. 482). Guided by these themes and patterns, 33 major codes and subcodes were assigned. The second reading compared the participants’ experiences to the literature. Both researchers, along with another colleague, engaged in a series of conversations regarding the participants’ experiences. The three researchers discussed the patterns that existed in the data and constantly referred to the transcripts to support interpretations. All three researchers were skilled in qualitative research and were familiar with the research; therefore these qualities helped our meaning-making with the males’ experiences. To illustrate how engagement has impacted Latino males while enrolled at a community college, the researchers established eight thematic categories that captured the essence of our participants’ experiences.

FINDINGS

In the following sections, we highlight the eight themes that emerged among the 12 participants. We discuss their decision to attend college, followed by how their engagement is shaped by their academic and personal commitments. Finally, we include their suggestions for improving Latino male engagement. The responses can be grouped into the following eight themes: (a) a lack
of college options, (b) improving their life status, (c) college vs. precollege life, (d) lack of on-campus engagement, (e) barriers to engagement, (f) “the streets is watching,” (g) need for support and social service, and (h) a desire for faculty interaction.

**Theme 1: A Lack of College Options**

The first theme to emerge was students’ lack of options when it came to choosing a college to attend. Half of the students only applied to their present community college; the other half of the students applied to two or more schools, but either they did not get accepted or found the cost too prohibitive. Of the students who applied to two or more schools, only one applied to a school that was more than 20 miles from his current home. When asked their reasons for choosing their current community college, participants’ responses fell into three categories: price, familiarity, and convenience.

One student stated, “I applied to some technical schools but the price was overwhelming. [UCC] was the only community college that had an automotive technology program.” Many students spoke to UCC’s familiarity to them and their community. A student stated, “My aunt and my cousin came here; they did really good and they transferred. They’re doing well for themselves; I thought I could do the same.” Speaking to his familiarity with UCC, another stated, “Nice campus, I went to summer camp on [UCC] campus, so that’s why I came here, everyone seemed nice.” Similarly, participants spoke to the convenience of UCC in terms of location. For two students in particular, location was an influencing factor. “It was close to home, there was easy transportation,” one participant commented.

**Theme 2: Improving their Life Status**

When asked what the reasons were for attending college, the majority of students commented that they sought a better life. Only one student claimed to have pressure from parents to attend college, “Well, there wasn’t really an option, I had to go to college, there was a continuing from elementary to high school [to college].” For those seeking a better life, three were older students who had experienced “life on the streets,” and all three had served time in prison. One of these participants stated, “The eye opener for me before I came to school was that I was on the streets for 15 years, I saw my friends locked up and killed, I didn’t want to end up like them, I’m the first one in my family to graduate, I wanted something positive.” More than half of the participants spoke to witnessing poverty in their lives and their hope to find a better life. Our participants said the following in reference to improving their life status:

Growing up...I saw my parents struggle, I wanted to be something, I wanted to continue to excel and force others to do the same and give my parents a better life.

A lot of members of my family had GED, no high school diploma, I wanted to make sure I was the only one who was supporting my family and keep my education going.

I saw my siblings, my brother and my sister, and my cousins, my aunt, I see what they have, I looked at my mom, my father and my other cousins/aunts, they didn’t go to college, I see what they didn’t get, they didn’t achieve, they’re struggling, the ones who went to college have a better life.
Theme 3: College vs. Precollege Life

Students were asked to speak about their transition to life on campus and in college. All participants responded that they did experience college very differently than their precollege life. For the nine students who were attending college straight from high school, this was due in part to having the freedom to choose their own curriculum and having a less intensive class schedule: “To have a break, I never had a three hour gap to come back to class.” One student had a particularly tough transition because he had no high school experience at all: “[I had a] rough transition, I never went to high school. I was out of school for like eight years, getting a GED. The experience [of college] was completely new. I never even went to high school; it was difficult to adjust myself to new schedule. It was an eye opener to disengage from streets.” Most participants did comment on having a sense of responsibility to succeed in college. “The professors aren’t on your back all the time, if you mess up it’s on you, it’s your future,” was a comment that echoed the thoughts of the participants.

Theme 4: Lack of On-Campus Involvement

When asked whether they were involved in extracurricular campus activities, only 3 of the 12 students commented that they considered themselves to be involved in such activities. Of these 3 students, 2 were employed by the college and 1 regularly played handball on courts that were located on campus. None of the students were formally involved with on-campus clubs or sports. Two students had attempted to join the school’s sports teams but were unable to continue due to schedule conflict or a lack of communication from the coach.

The students who were employed by the college did speak positively of their experiences. “My job has helped me, I work in a computer lab, so if you were to have another job it would be different but I’m basically in a college environment. You’re on a computer doing your homework.” Both claimed to spend more hours on campus than they were being paid for, “Work on campus, it’s an extracurricular activity. Even if I’m not getting paid, I’m still here doing it.” These students who worked on campus expressed that they felt their campus employment was key to keeping them off the streets.

Theme 5: Barriers to Participation

Participants who were not involved in campus life attributed their lack of involvement most to three issues: time, personal life, and off-campus activities. Echoing something all students alluded to, one participant stated, “I got five classes; I don’t have time for extra, studying all the time, writing papers.” Similarly, a student said, “[I] think the time as well, I have to run from school to work I don’t have time to do anything other than that.” Not having the time to participate in on-campus activities was closely related to students’ stress about their lack of money. A student stated, “…since I live by myself I have to pay bills, sometimes I don’t want to skip one day of work because I might be short my paycheck, even though I’m tired when I get out of school, I have to go to work.” Many students voiced their agreement. Another student who felt he had limited time to dedicate to on-campus involvement was not receiving financial aid and was working full time in order to fulfill tuition obligations.
This lack of time spoke to students’ overcommitment in their personal lives. “It’s been a bit hard in a way, like, I come out of class at 2 p.m. and I gotta be at my job at 3 p.m., it’s hard to get to work real fast before I’m late, I don’t get home till 9 p.m., I don’t have too much time to do stuff because I have to sleep to wake up the next morning,” a participant commented. Another student stated, “I haven’t given much thought about [on-campus involvement], [I have] no time, I work.” This statement reveals how students do not give much consideration to how campus involvement could fit into their lives. “I got five classes and a newborn baby, when I’m going to classes, I’ve got to study for good grades,” explained a participant about the busy lifestyle that prevented him from on-campus involvement.

In addition to their commitments to work and their personal lives, many participants engaged in off-campus activities with friends who did not attend college. “On campus, I’m not involved, but off campus I am,” says one who alluded to a weekly soccer game with friends. Other students voiced their agreement.

Theme 6: “The Streets is Watching”

Participants were asked about how their personal lives affected their views on attending college. Their comments mirrored a popular song by the hip-hop artist Jay-Z, “the streets is watching.” Over half of the students made reference to moving between two worlds: a world of academics and another of “the streets.” These comments were representative of those of the participants:

I was raised in the projects, lots of drugs, gangs, I hung out with street people. For me to be in college is like something...like a big experience for me, out of all my friends, I’m the only one who went to college, when I go back home and I see my friends doing what they were doing and I’ve got a book bag, it affects me.

When you go home, that stuff is still waiting for you, that hasn’t changed, what they’re doing on the block. They want to hang out with you; they expect you to be the same way. It’s hard to separate yourself from your personal life, and your responsibilities. I have a child as well, I have people who depend on me.

It influences me since I live in a neighborhood that not a lot of people go to college and try to pursue their dreams; [it] pushes me further to get out of that neighborhood and get a better life.

Even a student that reported his personal life did not influence his academics made reference to the fact that his off-campus life did affect his attitude towards school, “[My personal life] doesn’t influence me at all. It makes it worse, when I’m at home, school doesn’t exist to me. As of right now, when I’m home, it’s all video games, t.v. and, the computer. I end up coming here even on days I don’t have class.” Similarly, other participants did agree that being on campus helped them stay focused on completing schoolwork.

Theme 7: Need for Support and Social Services

Participants were asked what services the college could offer to assist Latino male students. The responses to this answer fell into two common themes: opportunities for socializing that were conscious of the students’ restrictive schedules and employment opportunities.
All students voiced an interest in increasing their socializing with fellow Latino males on campus. Some of the responses are as follows:

- A movie night for only guys.
- Fraternities.
- Male related programs.
- Opportunities to be involved with social justice issues.
- Using the on-campus athletic field to play baseball on weekends.
- Informal sports events during the week.

Participants did acknowledge that it may be difficult to capture the interest of students on campus, “that’s... an obstacle because if you schedule a baseball game on a Saturday, maybe half or more are working or have other things to do... you have a bunch of other things to do it’s like ‘why should I go there.’”

Other participants wanted more services that assisted with employment opportunities. “[The college should] provide more services in terms of getting a job, only people who receive welfare get those services. I called [career services] to get help look for a job but they said they can’t help me because I’m not receiving anything from the government.”

**Theme 8: Desire for Faculty Interaction**

A majority of the participants stated that they wanted to have more opportunities to interact with faculty members. A student commented on professors’ approachability: “Professors should look past their degree, look past ‘I got my degree,’ look at a person, look at us as a person, don’t look under them. I know we’re not exactly equal, but if I could talk to them like a peer, look at us here as we are all here academically on campus for a reason, the common ground is us being here for an academic purpose.” The students did indicate that interactions with professors were important for their academic success. “Most of the time I approached a professor, I was struggling in class. Just by you approaching a professor the first time, that shows interest, it shows you are serious, even though you are struggling in class, [the professors] will help you.”

**DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS**

The aim of this study was to increase the engagement pattern among Latino men enrolled at an urban community college. The men in this current study confirm the profile of a typical community college student as financially independent, attend college part-time, and maintain full-time employment (Hoachlander et al., 2003; Horn & Neville, 2006). These characteristics presented as challenges to their academic pursuits. Although living with their parent(s), participants indicated they play an active role contributing to their family income. Some participants mentioned they were independent, while others reported themselves as caretakers. As such, the multitude of responsibilities associated with these titles impacted the time they could dedicate to academics, let alone any effort towards cocurricular involvements. It is commendable that these men want to be in school and create change for themselves despite constantly facing adversity in their development.
Dealing with such adversity on and off campus has an impact both on Latino academic and social development. This supports findings from similar research (Hurtado et al., 2008). Latino male undergraduates experience a higher degree of stress than their White counterparts because of the many challenges they encounter. Instances such as overcoming peer pressure, being an integral vein towards household income, and unsupportive relationships prevent some Latino male undergraduates from being part of the institutional culture. Comments like “when I go back home and I see my friends doing what they were doing and I’ve got a book bag” indicates that these are the realities that many Latinos face when they are not on campus. Additionally some of their obstacles take precedence over the responsibilities associated with college attendance or the long-term benefits of degree attainment.

Although faced with many challenges, some of the men in this study became connected to the community college. With this in mind, involvement is defined through contextual examples. Consistent with Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory, these men discovered both traditional and untraditional ways of becoming involved. Traditional mediums of involvement were reflected through some participants’ interaction with faculty; while others mentioned they were involved as an on-campus employee. Equally important, were experiences of unconventional methods of involvement that reaped similar results. One participant shared how on-campus employment kept him in the campus environment, which promoted his academic responsibilities. Other men in the study discussed how playing handball on campus allowed them to connect with other collegiate Latino men. Some of the study respondents found time in their schedule to play sports off campus, but having this outlet on campus will provide a chance to interact with fellow college-going Latinos. With repetition, students talked about how they wanted to play a sport on campus, but services were in not in motion for them to feel integrated into the campus life.

Data from 12 Latino students enrolled at an urban community college were presented to disclose the experiences of these men as well as how to encourage their efforts of involvement. Recent trends in education suggest that enrollment of Latino community college students is on the rise. Given this information, the next section offers strategies that facilitate greater engagement among this group.

It is clear from the response to our focus group that Latino males on community college campuses are craving the opportunity to share their similar experiences with one another. In our focus group, participants lingered after the formal group meeting in order to continue socializing and discussing what it means to be a Latino male in college. Seven of the 12 students asked whether there would be other opportunities for the group to come together and continue sharing their experience. Community colleges should encourage Latino males to create bonds with one another by hosting counseling staff or faculty-led social groups. This would serve two purposes. First, an on-campus social group would allow Latino males to connect with others who have similar academic goals. Many of our participants commented on the difficulty of going back to their homes, only to be confronted with images of Latino males working the streets as gang members, drug dealers, or do nothings. By facilitating socializing among Latino males, they can express their frustration with such images and recharge their motivation to succeed in an academic setting.

The second purpose of such groups would give Latino males a further connection with the campus community. Students in our focus group commented that they would like to have such interactions. Their candor regarding faculty and staff indicates a need for more assistance and support from the campus community. Seeing counseling staff and faculty members dedicate
their time and energies to Latino male successes would go far in improving the relationship of students and members of the campus. Involving counseling staff members would promote the visibility of counseling services. Traditionally, Latino males have underutilized counseling services, but by providing them an opportunity to meet with counseling staff in a nonmental-health setting, they may become more open to meeting with the staff for mental health purposes (Chiang et al., 2004).

We also recommend that a community college campus provide students with many opportunities for on-campus employment. Latino males who participated in our focus group frequently discussed the difficulties they experienced with managing their work and school schedules. The two students who were employed on campus spoke highly of the experience. They felt it met both their needs for on-campus involvement and a steady income. These two students also credited the employment with helping them stay focused on their studies. Importantly, students employed on campus stated that they spend additional time on campus, even when not working because they enjoyed the academic atmosphere and close connection to the college community. Other individuals in the group expressed interest in obtaining on-campus employment. Many of the participants in the study stated that campus involvement was not a possibility because of their work commitments; on-campus employment tends to be more flexible and would allow students to modify their schedules to allow involvement. Unfortunately, on-campus employment generally pays less than off-campus work and may not meet the needs of all Latino males. We strongly encourage departments to write student workers into their budgets.

A fourth recommendation is for the institution to offer activities that are reflective of individuals from the community. We encourage institutions of higher education to create less structured sports for those students who have limited time on campus. Towards this end, intramurals are recommended. The men in this study offered handball as a game that is commonly played in their neighborhoods that can be easily transformed into an informal team sport. Over time, the intramurals may serve as precursor to team-sport participation. Assessing students’ interest through surveys during orientations and testing sessions may be a viable opportunity. For example, on the campus of UCC, soccer is a favorite sport among the students. Having open hours on the soccer field to promote informal games may increase the time students spend on campus.

CONCLUSION

This study is one step in the proper direction of creating a more inclusive campus for Latino students, particularly at a community college. Subsequent research should continue to focus on the solutions to increase the persistence of this group in this setting. Moreover, research should not be examined through traditional methods but scrutinized using unconventional out-of-the-box reasoning and logic. Through this lens, it is advantageous to understand what our students are doing right, as opposed to what they are doing wrong. It is often the burden of the student to make the most of his/her collegiate experience with little commitment from the institution. However, as colleges espouse their commitment to diversity and well as their goal to diversify the workforce, such strategies should include students of color as an obligation. Institutions of higher education should be more accountable for making the campus more inclusive and not place the onus solely on the individuals. Therefore, it becomes critical for colleges and universities to provide a campus environment that welcomes and nurtures Latino male undergraduates; this is essential for helping these students persist.
REFERENCES


