(Re)defining Masculinity through Peer Interactions: Latino Men in Texas Community Colleges

Victor B. Sáenz, Jeff R. Mayo, Ryan A. Miller & Sarah L. Rodriguez

a The University of Texas at Austin

Published online: 19 May 2015.

To cite this article: Victor B. Sáenz, Jeff R. Mayo, Ryan A. Miller & Sarah L. Rodriguez (2015) (Re)defining Masculinity through Peer Interactions: Latino Men in Texas Community Colleges, Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 52:2, 164-175, DOI: 10.1080/19496591.2015.1018269

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2015.1018269

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
(Re)defining Masculinity through Peer Interactions: Latino Men in Texas Community Colleges

Victor B. Sáenz, The University of Texas at Austin
Jeff R. Mayo, The University of Texas at Austin
Ryan A. Miller, The University of Texas at Austin
Sarah L. Rodriguez, The University of Texas at Austin

This study uses a phenomenological approach to examine how Latino male students at community colleges engage with their male peers. The analysis utilizes a male gender role conflict (MGRC) framework and employs cultural conceptions of masculinity, specifically machismo and caballerismo. Practitioners and researchers might leverage positive aspects of masculinity associated with caballerismo to help men succeed academically, while promoting reflection on and interrogation of aspects of masculinity that might lead to negative educational outcomes.

Peer groups are an important influence on student persistence and can help students gain independence, offer emotional support, provide opportunities for cross-culture interactions, and offer validation outside of academics (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). Latina/o students may experience increased feelings of stress, loneliness, and alienation when the predominant values of the college environment do not align with their values of origin (Suarez, Fowers, Garwood, & Szapocznik, 1997). For Latina/o college students, peers are an especially important resource during this transition to college (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). While Latina/o college-going rates have increased in recent years, their college graduation rates continue to lag behind peer groups (Pew Research Center, 2013). Higher education leaders and stakeholders must find ways to creatively leverage resources such as peer support and peer influence in improving the educational persistence and success for Latina/o students. The current study explores the influence of peers in the educational experiences of Latino male students at Texas community colleges. The authors examine the ways in which Latino men at Texas community colleges negotiate their masculine identities and contend with male gender role conflict (MGRC), in particular through their interactions with peers, in and outside of the college environment.
The role of peer influences for Latino male students specifically warrants exploration in light of the sobering educational attainment data for this subgroup. Only 12% of Latino males over age 25 have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 30% of all males 25 and older (Soza, 2007). Because educational attainment correlates to a myriad of personal, economic, and societal benefits, the gap in educational attainment for Latino males could have far-reaching consequences for the Latina/o community and society as a whole (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Perna, 2004; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Student affairs practitioners, faculty, and policy makers should consider new strategies to better support the success of Latino male students (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), but further inquiry is needed to understand how males can positively leverage their peer interactions toward their eventual academic success. This research is needed in light of the complex ways in which a male’s identity can influence his views on education, help-seeking, and perceived status among peers. The authors are especially interested in how a Latino’s gender roles can manifest in conflicting ways through his educational experiences and interactions with peers. Male Gender Role Conflict (MGRC) provides a framework to explore the “negative outcome of adhering to or deviating from culturally defined and restrictive masculinity ideologies” (O’Neil, 2008, pp. 364–365). With this study’s focus on Latinos, the authors bridge MGRC with the cultural construct of machismo, defined as “an ethos comprised of behaviors prized and expected” (Panitz, McConchie, Sauber, & Fonseca, 1983, p. 32) of Latino males. This rigidity in the expectations, more so than the positive or negative behaviors, associated with machismo limits males’ “human potential” (O’Neil, 1981, p. 203) to a narrow, masculine set of gender roles (Fragoso & Kashubeck, 2000).

Of unique importance to the current study is the institutional context of the community college, especially since a majority of Latina/o students begin their postsecondary experiences in the community college sector (National Center for Public Policy and Education, 2011). In examining the influence of peers on Latino male students enrolled in Texas community colleges, the authors derive recommendations for institutional leaders, faculty members, and student affairs practitioners to facilitate and support more effective peer interactions among Latino male community college students. The authors focus on framing peer influences within the lives of Latino males in community colleges, which necessitates an examination of the emerging literature on Men of Color and specifically Latino males in higher education. The context of community colleges further narrows the current study’s focus on how students at these institutions face unique challenges and opportunities. This study uses the MRGC theoretical framework (O’Neil, 1981, 2008) because it complements other constructs for Latino male identity, such as traditional machismo and caballerosismo, traits that are often most evident through peer interactions. The body of literature on Latino male enrollment, attainment, and success is sparse (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), and within this meager body are glaring gaps on Latinos in community colleges and the use of male gender role conflict theory for Men of Color (Saenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013). This study aims—as part of a larger ongoing study of Latino male educational pathways—to address this gap by appropriating an MGRC framework while exploring the cultural concept of machismo.

**Literature Review**

Peer interactions can help lead to smooth transitions into college life, especially for traditional first-year students entering emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) but can also negatively effect students during their transition to college (Zimmerman, 2003), modeling poor academic behavior and emboldening students who have decided not to enroll in or complete college. Peers also serve as reference points to gauge achievement, status, and gender role development, particularly for male college students (Harper, 2004; Harris, 2008; Hong, 2000), and provide validation or disapproval of behavior as students develop their masculine identities. Male students negotiate
their relative status within peer groups by displaying behaviors defined by their peers as masculine. For men in college, peers often validate these definitions of masculinity, which often include hyper-masculine behaviors of dominance, aggression, and homophobia. These traditional male traits correlate with academic struggles, decreased levels of campus engagement, and increased likelihood of depression (Davis & Laker, 2004; Good & Wood, 1995). Harper (2004) and Hong (2000) found that peers are able to reinforce productive behaviors traditionally not associated with masculinity, such as academic success, community service, and nonviolence. As with student persistence and development of academic skills, peers can heighten or assuage MGRC.

**Latino Student Peer Interactions**

The transition from high school presents all students with many new concerns and challenges as they learn to navigate the college environment (Hurtado et al., 1996; Tinto, 1988). For Latina/o students, peers are an important resource during this time (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado et al. (1996) reported that Latino students in their first two years of college experience higher levels of college adjustment from both peer knowledge sharing and mentorships. Peer knowledge sharing is the reciprocal act of informing and learning between students early in their collegiate careers, particularly regarding student success or resource navigation strategies (Attinasi, 1989). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that discussions about coursework outside of class, a form of peer knowledge sharing, resulted in significantly increased feelings of belonging on campus, an important factor in college adjustment.

Much of the previous research on Latina/o students and their peer groups focused on the association between peer influence and cultural validation (Fry, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Cerezo and Chang (2013) suggested that connections with ethnic minority peers positively correlate to Latina/o student grade point average (GPA). The researchers found that opportunities in college, including student organizations and formal academic experiences with peers, may provide cultural validation for Latinos not experienced in K–12 education. As is the case with the majority of research on Latinos in higher education, Cerezo and Chang’s (2013) study examined students at four-year institutions, specifically predominantly White institutions (PWIs), limiting a generalization to community colleges designated as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

**Community College Context**

Although research on peer influence at community colleges is scarce, recent studies have supported the association between peer connections and Latino student persistence, typically through the lens of cultural identity development. Pizarro (2005) contended that community college “support systems [for Latinos] ideally would include a number of types of resource people, but even when they consist only of peers, they can make a significant difference in students’ lives” (p. 223). Students who formed relationships with more experienced members of the campus community, including student mentors, were more likely to overcome academic and personal obstacles in their path toward college degrees.

In a review of the literature on Men of Color in community colleges published from 1998–2012, Harris and Wood (2013) pointed to a paucity of research of non-African American men and that most of the research in this arena has used quantitative methods. Little research currently addresses peer influence on male gender role development in the community college context, particularly for Men of Color and Latino males specifically (Saenz et al., 2013). Using MGRC, Harris and Harper (2008) highlighted gender role conflicts among male community college
students and suggested a need for more research in this arena. We, similarly, utilized MGRC theory to investigate peer influences on Latino male students in Texas community colleges.

**Theoretical Framework**

Recent research has emphasized the need to view college men as complex individuals who experience a variety of identity intersections that inform their self-perceptions and individuality (Harper & Harris, 2010; Harper, Wardell, & McGuire, 2011; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005; Palmer & Wood, 2012). In examining the impact of peers on Latino males in community college settings, MGRC guides our analysis (O’Neil, 1981). Within the MGRC framework, gender role conflict arises when “gender roles have consequences or impact on the person or others” (O’Neil, 1981, p. 203), resulting in a failure to realize one’s full human potential. Men learn to fear and devalue femininity, resulting in outcomes and patterns of behavior such as restrictive emotionality; focus on control, power, and competition; homophobia; restrictive sexual and affectionate behavior; obsession with achievement and success; and health problems.

Previous research categorizes four of these gender role conflicts—status achievement, dominance, self-reliance, and avoidance of femininity—as either primarily achievement or restriction related (Good & Wood, 1995). Status achievement and dominance exemplify achievement-related conflicts, which promote competitive behaviors in “a drive for achievement that is accompanied to some extent by an evaluation of one’s comparative degree of achievement” (Good & Wood, 1995, p. 74). The pressure to “get ahead,” as defined by the goals and benchmarks set by gender role expectations, narrows males’ perceptions of achievement and encourages behavior viewed as masculine. Self-reliance and avoidance of the feminine, on the other hand, discourage certain behaviors, including help-seeking and academic achievement. For both achievement- and restriction-related conflicts, MGRC asserts that peer influence is capable of pressuring men, despite their personal goals and desires, into adopting the masculine behaviors of their peers (O’Neil, 1981).

In the context of Latino males, considering the cultural roles associated with masculinity, including traditional machismo and caballerismo, is also important. Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, and Tracey (2008) described these two traits as independent dimensions of machismo. Traditional machismo includes hyper-masculine qualities, such as aggression, homophobia, and chauvinist behavior, often expressed through sex-role dominance, underdeveloped coping skills, and intolerance of difference in other men (Arciniega et al., 2008; Saez, Cassado, & Wade, 2009). Caballerismo recognizes advantageous contributions of Latino masculinity, including being nurturing, family-centered, noble, and chivalrous (Arciniega et al., 2008). Though Latino cultures consistently hold males to the expectation to be good men, the manifestation may reflect varying degrees of both the negative traits associated with traditional machismo or the positive traits of caballerismo. This cultural index of masculinity aligns with the MGRC framework, identifying points of conflict between Latino males’ conceptual development of their masculinity and cultural expectations of men.

**Methods**

This qualitative study focused on the community college experiences of Latino male students, as explored in a series of focus groups at seven Texas community colleges. Utilizing phenomenology, this study centered on the personal and subjective experiences of the participants in the study and focused on how participants personally understood and made sense of their situations (Grbich, 2007). While phenomenology has often been associated with the interview technique, Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, and Fadden (2010) made a case for employing focus group methodology within interpretive phenomenological analysis. As this analysis focused on peer influence, focus groups provided a venue for the men...
in the study to both reflect on peer interactions and to confirm, challenge, or complicate each other’s interpretations of peer influences on their lives. The authors acknowledge the potential limitations of the focus group approach and realize that some participants may not feel as comfortable sharing their perspectives due to the peer environment of the focus group setting. To encourage group discussion, the authors reassured students that there were no right or wrong answers, that the discussion was about their individual experiences at the community college, and that the study’s findings could improve the ways in which colleges work with their students.

**Participant Selection**

All participants met the following three conditions: (a) self-identified as male; (b) self-identified as possessing origins from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, or the Dominican Republic, and identified themselves generally as Spanish, Spanish-American, Hispanic, Hispano, or Latino; and (c) were currently enrolled full- or part-time at one of the research sites. The study recruited student participants through existing professional relationships, with administrators acting as “gatekeepers.” Negotiating access through these gatekeepers was essential to connecting with Latino males throughout the community college research sites. Initial invitations were sent via email to eligible students using available university listservs.

**Research Site Selection**

All of the community colleges were HSIs with at least 25% Hispanic enrollment. The study examined three large (20,000+ students), two mid-sized (10,000–19,999 students), and two small (less than 10,000 students) community colleges. These community colleges were ideal sites for the study for three major reasons. First, the demographic realities of the state of Texas demonstrate that more research and resources will need to be directed towards understanding and serving the growing Latina/o population. Second, community colleges provide a very unique set of circumstances under which the researchers can examine Latino male peer interactions. Nationally, 50% of Latina/o students begin at community colleges (National Center for Public Policy and Education, 2011). Third, the federal and state imperatives around student success for Men of Color allow this study a special opportunity in space and time. Across the nation, imperatives like *My Brother’s Keeper* and *Closing the Gaps* are encouraging K–12 and higher education policymakers, researchers, and administrators to ensure that all of their students, including Men of Color, graduate.

**Data Collection & Analysis**

The investigators conducted 23 focus groups with 130 Latino male students at seven community colleges in Texas. Led by research team members, each focus group utilized a protocol to center the conversation on the educational experiences of Latino males at community colleges including pre-college experiences, current experiences in college, and future plans. Questions focused on college choice, the role of peers and family members in achieving academic success, and perceptions of the challenges that Latino males face in enrolling and completing college. Each focus group had four to eight participants, lasted approximately one hour, and was digitally recorded and transcribed for later review. For the current study, the authors utilized a small sample of transcripts to analyze for initial codes derived from the MGRC theoretical framework and approaches of *machismo* and *caballerismo* and supplemented with additional codes, as needed. Once the authors established the analysis codebook, research team members, in small groups, double-coded all transcripts.

The authors used collected data to find significant statements that highlighted individual experiences of the phenomenon. Once the significant statements were identified, the authors
created a list of these experiences, taking care to assign equal worth to all statements. The authors then grouped significant statements into larger “meaning units” or themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 193). This process allowed the authors to identify the meaningful experiences of the research participants and discover emerging themes within the data set.

To ensure trustworthiness of the study, the authors reviewed transcripts, exchanged ideas on coding and analysis, and discussed memoing activities. Reading through the collected information led to a better understanding of participant experiences and began the process of drawing connections between the data. Memoing in the form of margin notes allowed the researchers to capture initial perspectives on the data as well as pose possible patterns or additional questions (Saldaña, 2009).

Limitations

This study examined how Latino male students at community colleges engaged with their peers while navigating MGRC. While the sample size enabled the research team to delve deeply into the particular experiences of these Latino male students, their perspectives may not encompass all Latino male experiences at community colleges in Texas or across the nation. The study did not disaggregate by national origin, citizenship status, or first-generation status, each of which may have an impact on the way in which these students approach their community college experience. As a result of these limitations, findings are not necessarily generalizable to all Latino male students in the community college setting yet may offer transferability to similar settings and populations.

Findings

The authors’ findings aligned the students’ perceptions and acts of masculinity with four MGRC characteristics: status achievement, dominance, self-reliance, and avoidance of femininity. To frame their analysis in an appropriate cultural context, the authors describe these characteristics within the traditionally complex construct of machismo and the more positive caballerismo.

Achievement-Related Conflicts

Defining self-worth through power, wealth, and status relative to peers is a key component of the masculine gender role (O’Neil, 1981). Study participants commonly expressed a desire to measure achievement by status and to gain such status through dominant behavior. Status achievement represents the male obsession with accomplishments and distinctions as displays of self-worth. The authors’ findings suggest that peers, particularly those not affiliated with higher education, can reinforce machismo and caballerismo traits, in turn creating a conflict between their identities as students and identities as men.

Status achievement. Even as they sought to achieve status, the men in the study acknowledged the negative influence of the pursuit of status and recognition on their educational achievement. Many participants recognized that they frequently felt pressure from their peers, especially those off campus, to leave community college to gain full-time employment. Friends from childhood and high school who chose work over postsecondary education reinforced differential gendered expectations in which men go to work and women go to school, attitudes ingrained from an early age. One participant reflected:

The idea is you’re really a man when you work, and if you’re just going to school, then, you’re not a man; you’re still kind of a high school kid. You’re not like the rest of them that I hang out with who are working. So I think that comes into play.
This student’s perspective provides insight into the pressure placed upon Latino men who pursue higher education, especially in community colleges. Students often attend community colleges in or near their hometowns and neighborhoods and, as a result, have more connections to peers outside of the academic setting. Within our study, Latino male students indicated that peers outside of the academic setting often identified employment with manhood and college with boyhood (or even with femininity or homosexuality, a perspective voiced by several participants).

The students in this study expressed the conflict between this machismo perception of masculinity and their identities as male college students. Far fewer participants identified status or constructive pressure from their peers to be the “better” or “best” student or to persist academically. With the pressure from peers not enrolled in college to fulfill their obligations as men and join the workforce, students are able to frame the decision to leave college not as quitting school but as taking a step toward manhood. This rationalization creates a convenient exit for students who lack the tools or support to overcome early failures in college. Conversely, students may feel the need to highlight their pursuit of the status of a college degree as they separate themselves from peers perceived as unmotivated or unwilling to attend:

I hate to say it but some people…they use that excuse, “School wasn’t for them.” And they just refuse to go. They just wanna go ahead and distract themselves with parties, and just outside distractions, friends. And those friends aren’t the ones going to school, and they get drowned in that kind of circle...You could take a horse to water, but you can’t force him to drink…It’s that inner self-motivation they need to contain.

As this participant highlighted, some students in this study described distance between themselves and friends who had left or were not pursuing college. College students saw themselves as successful and achieving an important status, while separating themselves from peers who might be viewed as detracting from their success.

Dominance. Participants also felt stress associated with the conflict between projecting the appearance of a dominant alpha male among their peers while facing common obstacles related to the transition to college. Similar to the pressure to leave college for full-time employment, the expectation to be “the head honcho” sets a high standard for success. In this academic competition, “winning—not simply placing—is the only option for the truly ‘big man on campus’” (Hong, 2000, p. 273). In describing a perceived difference between Latinos and Latinas in the college setting, one student addressed how the need to succeed on the “first try” affects Latino men:

[Latinas] think more long term; they have an actual vision of what they’re trying to get at. They see it and they’re going to try and follow through. Males, I think, if we don’t get it right the first time, we’ll probably drop off and try to figure out what we are good at with our first try.

This perception suggests a need for validation of academic successes that Latino males experience but also the importance of long-term planning toward degree attainment and future goals so men do not lose sight of these future milestones. While a perceived need for dominance might push a student to achieve in the college setting, it may also inhibit his progress when he inevitably experiences some type of failure along the way.

Yet, some participants used the pressure for dominance as motivation, as one student explained:

I just don’t feel like our own culture is trying to go out there and, how they say, trying to go out there and go get it...I want to be with the people who do want to strive for it; I want to be around successful people.
This student acknowledged that few Latino males overcome the stereotypical expectations associated with *machismo*. His decision to apply his competitive nature to academics suggests that faculty members and student affairs professionals can leverage this *caballerismo* to motivate Latino male students.

**Restriction-Related Conflicts**

MGRC asserts that men restrict their behaviors and attitudes to avoid potential conflicts between their actions and beliefs and those of a stereotypical man (Good & Wood, 1995). Specifically, men suppress emotional expressions, eschew help-seeking, and avoid femininity. Though many students reported on the unproductive or negative outcomes related to *machismo*, the authors found that some students developed productive applications for these characteristics that relate to *caballerismo*.

**Self-reliance.** Despite facing increased academic expectations in college, participants reported they felt pressure to be self-reliant, characterized by avoidance of help-seeking and restrictive expression of feelings or vulnerabilities (O’Neil, 1981). Many participants claimed to resist approaching peers for help with academics or college adjustment out of a fear of appearing as less of a man and associated this behavior with “pride” and “machismo,” forged by family throughout childhood and reinforced by peers in college. Participants commonly described their fathers as having an important impact on their understanding of what it means to be a man. Both as role models through their actions and teachers through their rules and advice, fathers clearly defined self-reliance as masculine and help-seeking as feminine, as summarized by one participant:

> I think it’s harder for males because I’m first generation Latino here in the United States...Our father was like, “Men are men, and we don’t ask for help. We don’t need help; we can do it on our own.” So we’re less likely to ask for help like, “How do you go about doing this? What should I do to get these classes? How would I go about getting my degree? Or, how do I transfer?” and stuff like that. And females were always taught, “You’re weaker, you’re the girl.” So I think it would be easier for females to be like, “Oh, well, I need help so I can ask.” But for males its like, “I’m a guy. Why am I asking for help?”

Although reported less often than the expectation to be self-reliant, some participants did acknowledge peer knowledge sharing as essential to their academic persistence. The men highlighted the reciprocal nature of peer-to-peer academic support as a point of pride; the help they provided other students was equally or perhaps more important than the help they received from their peers. Unlike attending a tutoring or study-skills program, small study groups allow students to receive assistance while maintaining an identity as the provider of help. One student described a friendship that helped him to stay motivated:

> I have a good friend; we have the same backgrounds. We have the same problems. We have the same circumstances, and we push each other. We keep up with each other. It’s kind of a buddy system, and it has worked out pretty well for us.

A “buddy system” provided a safe space for this student to receive the encouragement and support that he needs to succeed academically without feeling reliant on or lesser than his peer. The young man does not view himself as a help-seeker, dependent on others to succeed, but as a help-provider in a reciprocal relationship. This identity reflects some positive aspects of *caballerismo* and may help Latino males embrace both their masculine and student roles.

As providers and nurturers for their peers, these students can overcome the reportedly “intimidating” nature of faculty and staff. One student mentioned the importance of learning
from peers and not exclusively from his instructors, asserting that all students “contribute something to our learning, not just the teachers.” Though the role of nurturer motivated participants to work in groups, the behavior reinforces negative traits of traditional *machismo*, seen in students’ avoidance of campus resources, namely formal academic support systems. Faculty must balance the use of peer study groups with the use of academic support services to provide students with an active role in their help-seeking and expose them to campus resources.

**Avoidance of the feminine.** The participants in this study described their Latina peers as “caring,” “welcoming,” and “supportive.” The men typically did not view their interactions with male peers in the same light. Supporting a male peer could be equated to adopting a female role in the group and subsequently must be avoided. This lack of support among Latino males adds to the obstacles to persistence faced by these men in the community college setting.

From a different perspective, the avoidance of femininity drives Latino men to create explicit roles for men and women. Although these roles create boundaries for both genders, *caballerismo* suggests men are family-centered and chivalrous. These concepts require men to provide and make sacrifices for the needs of their families. To live up to these ideals, participants expressed that some peers who did not continue formal education after high school encouraged their girlfriends or wives to pursue college degrees:

...maybe it’s because of *machismo*, a guy, he wants to be a man, and he wants to get a job, like right away to impress women...My male friends, they don’t go to college, but their wives do. And this is what I’ve seen, because my male friends, they do want to support their family, and they want to send their wives to college.

Although these peers from high school or their neighborhoods created strict gender roles, they did see higher education as positive for their families. Paradoxically, this pattern also led this participant’s male peers to view a college education as a hindrance, not a tool, in a man’s ability to provide for his family. *Caballerismo* may represent positive characteristics, such as being family-centered, that conflict with educational attainment for men.

Another participant reflected on the idea that Latino men did not necessarily need to attend college: ‘My fiancé’s friends, they’re like...‘Guys,’ why go to college, just to work? We don’t have to go. It’s a girl’s job. Let the girls go to college. They’re smarter than guys.” The essentialist notion of one gender (female) being naturally smarter or predisposed to pursue higher education may serve to discourage men from attending college or, for those who do attend, cause difficulty reconciling being a college student with being a Latino man.

The authors found that Latino males in Texas community colleges often associated help-seeking and the pursuit of higher education in general as feminine. These viewpoints caused some participants to distance themselves from their educational pursuits in order to reassert a traditionally masculine gender identity forged through employment, dominance, and self-reliance. Though participants struggled to merge their roles as students and males into their definition of masculinity, some participants discussed constructive ways to engage with peers through peer mentoring, knowledge sharing, and study groups, easing gender role conflicts.

**Discussion**

Given recent calls for research on the influence of peers on college men and their masculinity (Harper & Harris, 2010) and Latino males in community colleges (Saenz et al., 2013), this study offers insights into the varied ways in which peers influence Latino males enrolled in community colleges and how concepts of culture and gender shape peer interactions and their effects.
Specifically, these findings contribute new knowledge about the ability of peers to use perceptions of masculinity and *machismo* to inhibit or promote success in the community college.

The findings of this study align with four MGRC patterns, including status achievement, self-reliance, avoidance of the feminine, and dominance (O’Neil, 1981). Findings also support the need to complicate simple binary constructions of these patterns as positive/negative, or healthy/unhealthy, by considering the role of traditional *machismo* as well as *caballerismo* in the lives of Latino men in Texas community colleges (Arciniega et al., 2008).

Students often described pressure to drop out of college in order to improve their status among friends who did not pursue postsecondary education. This finding is consistent with Harris and Harper’s (2008) description of the pressure applied on college men by high school peers to quit the feminine pursuit of a community college education for employment. Viewed through the *machismo* and *caballerismo* lenses, this strain presses on cultural beliefs that men must financially support themselves and their families, and peers from outside the community college context do not necessarily identify higher education as a means to support one’s family. The findings also indicate that the MGRC pattern of dominance is a double-edged sword for Latino males. Though the competition to “be the best” among their peers propels some students to exceed their expectations, some students reported shame after early academic failures. Such embarrassment led many students to fall back on the stereotypically *machismo* MGRC pattern of self-reliance. Through their cultural lens, participants perceived help-seeking as constructive when engaging in strong peer knowledge sharing (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Yet, more often, students described deep familial and cultural pressure to succeed without seeking the help of peers or support services, preventing the natural formation of supportive, reciprocal peer support networks.

The authors found that an avoidance of the feminine exacerbated each of these first three patterns. To fulfill masculine roles, Latino males must reject the feminine. Though some community college students realize masculinity by competing for better grades and forming reciprocal study groups, far too often their fear of adopting feminine traits pulls students away from forming strong peer networks and leads to the poor retention and graduation rates of Latino males, consistent with previous literature on college men (Hong, 2000) and Men of Color specifically (Harper, 2004).

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Participants in this study voiced a desire to connect with their on-campus peers in constructive ways through friendships, class projects, study groups, and peer mentoring and knowledge sharing programs, each of which community colleges can have some role in developing, promoting, or supporting. By offering ways in which administrators and faculty members may support and leverage the positive influences of peers and peer groups, this study offers practical suggestions that can be put into practice to aid in the success of Latino males and poses areas for additional research.

**MGRC Exploration Opportunities**

This study suggests that given the complicated landscape of identity formation navigated by Latino male students, colleges should seek to create and sustain intentional opportunities for dialogue and introspection on identity exploration as it relates to Latino men and their masculinities. Two examples of such opportunities are intergroup dialogue (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007) and student organizations focused on Students of Color in general and Men of Color in particular (Museus, 2008). These settings offer opportunities to explore, confirm, question, and complicate notions of Latino male identity and “challenge men to embrace a wider
range of gender-related behaviors and help them develop effective strategies to resolve gender role conflict productively” (Harris, 2008). Such identity exploration opportunities may cast a positive light on positive qualities of *caballerismo*, such as being family-centered and nurturing, that may promote deeper connections between masculinity and academics.

**Small Peer Group Formation**

By taking proactive measures to form small groups of peers in and out of the classroom, community colleges should create an environment that encourages Latino males to seek help while maintaining their masculine identities. These groups may serve the additional functions of promoting a greater sense of belonging among students. In addition to recognizing student organizations and providing them with access to campus resources, community college leadership could encourage faculty members to create discussion or study groups within a class to facilitate group learning and peer connections. Engaging men as peer educators is a promising practice that “puts men in an ideal context for involvement,” (Heys & Wawrzynski, 2013, p. 201) and research suggests that college men grow significantly from this experience in learning domains such as cognitive complexity, intrapersonal development, and interpersonal development.

**Future Research**

In addition to these practical implications for community college faculty and staff, this study deepens the discussion of the MGRC framework by including the intersection of gender and race through the cultural concept of *machismo*. The authors’ findings suggest that peer influences can exacerbate or ease gender role conflict and that educators have an opportunity to facilitate positive peer interactions to encourage Latino males to explore their concepts of masculinity along with their role as students. Further research is necessary to integrate the MGRC theoretical framework with cultural conceptions of masculinity. Aligned with President Obama’s *My Brother’s Keeper* initiative, additional research should explore the ways cultural notions of masculinity play a role in the peer influence of other Men of Color, in various community college and four-year settings, through the lens of gender role conflict.

**References**


