

MENTOR EFFECTS ON THE LATINO/A STUDENT POPULATION

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MENTOR EFFECTS ON THE LATINO/A STUDENT POPULATION

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ABSTRACT

This study addressed the question of whether a correlation existed between involvement with a mentor and retention rates amongst Latino/a students enrolled at Higher Education Institutions throughout the United States. Previous literature and research in this subject project that a correlation does indeed exist.

A review of literature was performed in order to analyze various factors that were identified as increasing retention rates amongst Latino/a students enrolled at colleges and universities across the nation. Mentor programs were examined, as well as the application of mentor programs at institutions of higher education. Lastly, the staples of the Latino culture were studied and analyzed in order to determine why mentor programs tended to be successful, particularly for Latino/a students.

Results of this review determined that mentor programs were successful in helping to retain Latino/a students, and this was at least in part due to a higher sense of belonging and connectedness to the institution that the mentee gained throughout the experience.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At the time this study was conducted, the Latino population was growing at an unprecedented rate and was expected to increase by 115% to 119 million individuals by 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015, p. 9). With such growth in the past and projected for the future, the United States had been forced to consider how to adapt to meet the needs of this group of people. Each ethnic group has its own traditions and values, which are required for the individuals of the group to be capable of being their most successful selves. These traditions and values ought to be present in community life, the professional world, and in education. At the time of this study, the world of education had made strides to assist with the specific needs of the Latino population such as providing a more community-oriented campus that incorporated the extended family and community aspects of the Latino culture.

Student success programs were becoming more prevalent throughout the country. One of these programs identified was mentor programs, which were put into place not only to help students adapt and grow within campus and extended communities but also to help students grow within themselves by building an increased set of skills (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005). Mentors provided advice and support in that they often filled the voids that Latino/a students tended to find upon arriving at a new institution, college, or university. Without such programs, students were more commonly seen to struggle through both academics and social constructs, potentially causing increased dropout rates. With the projected growth of this group of people, it was important to consider any implications in education and how the community of higher education could work to be proactive in the development of the students.

Statement of the Problem

This study addressed the question of whether a correlation existed between involvement with a mentor and retention rates amongst Latino/a students enrolled at Higher Education Institutions throughout the United States.

Definition of Terms

Institutional Attachment: “The degree to which students identify with and have become emotionally attached to the university community” (Credé & Niehorster, 2012, p. 135).

Latino/a: An individual or group of “individuals living in the United States with ancestry from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, and Central or South American Spanish-speaking countries” (Sue and Sue, 2013, p. 409).

Mentor: An individual who supports, guides, advises, and enhances the student experience in such a way that he or she provides “(a) emotional and psychological support, (b) direct assistance with career and professional development, and (c) role modeling” (Jacobi, 1991, p. 510).

Sense of Belonging: A student’s integration, association, and identification with his or her place of institution and its campus community (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone, 2002-2003).

Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations to this study started with the fact that this study was designed to be a review of literature and does not reveal new information from original research. A second delimitation is that while the researcher explored the relationship between student retention of Latino/a students and mentor programs, the concluding findings were not taken as evidence of a causal relationship.

Method of Approach

Nation-wide research was collected by means of databases through the Karmann Library website at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. These databases included ERIC, Academic Search Complete, and Education Full Text. The primary search terms included “Higher Education,” “Latino,” “Hispanic,” “Mentor,” “Mentor Effects,” and “Student Retention.” This research study was based on a review of literature related to the correlation of mentors, mentor programs, and student retention. Once information was gathered from existing studies and research articles, conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made regarding how professionals in higher education might move forward to increase Latino/a student retention.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The Latino/a population in the United States was growing faster than any other demographic group at the time of this study and was expected to continue such growth over the following 35 years; the population was projected to be made up of at least 25% Latino/as (US Census Bureau, 2008 cited in Salas, Aragon, Alandejani, & Timpson, 2014, p. 232). While this growth had already been seen in United States colleges and universities, retention rates told a different story. The President's Advisory Committee (2012) reported that only about 13% of the Latino population held a four-year degree, however enrollment rates were rising like never before. Further, Mahaffy and Pantoja (2012-2013, p. 360) assessed as of 2008 that Millersville University saw 21.6% of its first year Latina/o student population graduate within four years, and 39.5% graduated within six years. The data was similar to what Revelt reported in 2008, resulting in a loss of nearly two thirds of the original Latina/o student population (as cited by Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2012-2013, p. 360).

Assisting Latino/a students required an examination of Student Success Programs, particularly those that serviced the Latina/o student population. The first step of research was to examine various factors, ideas, and practices that had been used in attempting to increase retention of Latino students. Mentor programs were one type of the many programs established to aide students' needs in order to help students achieve a greater level of understanding and success. Much research was conducted in regard to mentors and mentor programs, and specific actions and behaviors had been identified regarding mentor role expectations at the time of the study. Further, a number of reasons had been identified as to why the Latino student population

might have had varying educational outcomes as a result of mentor programs as opposed to other ethnic student populations. Achievement levels were incorporated because they helped to determine usefulness of mentors and mentor program application within universities, and whether such programs had an impact on student success and student retention. Much of the research records achievement levels using such measures as GPA, self-efficacy, and overall student retention rates. Latino/a students often came from a home life that consisted of a tight-knit network of family and friends that found respect and affection at the root of all relationships (Sue and Sue, 2013). The students' culture played a major role in seeking out an additional resource while enrolled in an institution, as well as influencing the success rate amongst Latino/a students as opposed to students of other cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds. The aforementioned factors and points played a significant role in the retention of Latino/a students at universities and colleges across the country.

Factors That Have Been Found to Increase Retention

Higher Education Institutions researched and invested in ways to keep Latino students enrolled in institutions. As Salis Reyes and Nora (2012) noted, much of the available literature pointed out that campus communities needed to promote and develop organizations and networks that supported each student in order to promote a sense of belonging. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) stated that “through elements of psychological validation, social networks, and cultural affirmation that Latina/o students are connected and sustained to the endpoint of graduation” (p. 386). The authors cited various examples of these elements such as receiving care packages, connecting to faculty, joining campus organization, connecting with other Latino/a students on campus academically and socially, discussing family life with a faculty member, and attending community-based projects that focused on the needs of Latinos/as.

Torres and Hernandez (2009, as cited by Schueths and Carranza, 2012) found that students with a mentor had a greater sense of satisfaction with faculty, were more apt to engage socially, experienced a greater reassurance in academia, and were more loyal to the university. Further, Mahaffy and Pantoja (2012-2013) stated that additional retention efforts included programs held through the summer to help students better adjust to campus life and academia, seminars and learning communities for first-year students, as well as mentorships. However, the authors also cautioned that the prior recommendations were not enough for the Latino/a student body, much like Tinto (2007) had advised (as cited by Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2012-2013). Mahaffy and Pantoja found that Latino/a students needed a stronger connection not only to the institution in which the students were enrolled, but to one another as well (Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2012-2013). Salis Reyes and Nora (2012) concluded from their reviews of the literature that “institutions must make sure to create campus environments which allow and perhaps even encourage students to maintain family and community ties throughout postsecondary studies” in order to better help Hispanic students succeed (p. 15).

What is a Mentor?

Many definitions for mentor were available at the time the study was conducted, many of which did not entirely capture the multi-faceted and complex relationships that might have existed between mentor and mentee. It was understood that a mentor helped the mentee in terms of advice, help, or suggestions (DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012). Further, mentor-mentee relationships often involved an individual with little or no experience gaining insight from an individual with more experience in the chosen field (Cox, Yang, & Dicke-Bohmann, 2014). Mentor relationships might have yielded different than expected outcomes for the students and the mentor too. Torres and Hernandez (2009-2010) suggested that mentoring was a helping relationship based on

reciprocity between the two parties, and that both individuals were able to grow and develop from the experience.

Although mentor roles and programs were very commonplace in schools, from buddy programs to mentor centers, these roles were not limited to the field of education. Jacobi (1991) referenced multiple definitions in the fields of higher education, management and organizational behavior, and psychology. Some companies might have implemented mentor programs, while others simply suggested building relationships with coworkers. The business world recognized the benefits of strong ties between experienced and novice employees. Singh, Ragins and Tharenou (2009) found that advancement was predicted for employees that participated in mentor programs resulting in factors benefiting the company such as further workplace participation and increased advancement (as cited by Cox et. al., 2014). What was interpreted from the majority of definitions that were provided was that the relationship was one of positive influences pertaining to the goals, aspirations, and development of the mentee.

Applications in Universities

In the two decades before this study was concluded, institutions all over the United States implemented mentor programs because of reported student success rates as a result of such programs; these programs were often aimed at helping underrepresented and underprivileged students. Latino/a students were no exception. Both faculty-led and peer-led/student-led programs existed. Both types of programs allowed for institutions to better serve students' needs in a personalized manner (Rios-Ellis, et. al., 2015). DeFreitas and Bravo (2012) pointed out that faculty-led mentoring was successful because faculty members were typically seen as intelligent and worthy individuals. Students were able to address faculty mentors with questions and issues beyond the classroom. Pope (2002) and Scisney-Matlock and Matlock (2001) found that faculty-

led mentoring helped to lessen the feeling that many first-year college students and underclassmen experienced, the sense of being alone and withdrawn from others (as cited by Hu & Ma, 2010). Lastly, according to Gloria and Castellanos (2003) and Hernandez (2000), “having others who believe in one’s skills and abilities, particularly a faculty or staff mentor, has been identified as an important factor in students [sic] belief that they too can succeed and ultimately persist in school” (as cited by Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales, 2005, p. 217).

Student-to-student mentor programs were also prevalent. Peer-led programs offered many benefits to students such as access to student employment as well as campus assistance and information (Rios-Ellis, et. al., 2015). In an already challenging environment for some, mentees were able to seek out such assistance from one individual. Further, such programs provided mentees an opportunity to connect with successful students who had likely experienced the same struggles and achievements (Rios-Ellis, et. al., 2015). Mahaffy and Pantoja (2013) found that the Latino/a students interviewed, desired a stronger connection to the institution the student attended, helping to diminish that lack of belonging.

Through research it seemed all too often that Latino/a students entered the higher education field at a disadvantage to others. Cavazos and Cavazos (2010) reviewed several studies that revealed an attitude expressed by some educators that higher education was a path that Latino students should not follow. Being exposed to such attitudes could lead many Latino students to develop a lowered sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Students might have been discouraged or uncertain and might not have had the proper resources to know where to turn.

Moreover, many Latino/a students were primarily first generation college students. These students were entering a new world, and did not necessarily have as much preparation as a second or third-generation college student. Where families and parents were able to discuss

“college life” with these individuals, first generation students had to rely on others for this information. Often, college graduates were not individuals with whom the students were familiar. Therefore, mentorships might have been valuable to these students in order to help build strength and help to instill a sense of belonging in that individual (Cox, et. al., 2014).

Cultural Significance

Every ethnicity contains values that carry over into the professional world and education field, and Latino/as are no different. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) explored the values and lessons that were learned from everyday events involving family, community, interpersonal relationships. In a culture where family support was widely sought and provided, supportive campus relationships amongst Latino/a students and their peers and faculty members was extremely beneficial (Schueths & Carranza, 2012). Over time these relationships often resembled those of an extended family, relationships that were interconnected throughout campus organizations, programs, and departments (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Through this sort of extended family, Latino/a students were able to form family-like bonds, increasing comfort and understanding on campus.

However, family was not the only important value of the Latino culture. In the experience of this researcher while working in a human resources role for nearly four years, community was often identified by members of the Latino community as more than just neighbors. In the researcher’s previous work experiences, it was witnessed that the community was so close that many Latino/a community members were considered to fill a family-like role. Comments regarding these close friendships were often heard and observed, both inside and outside of the workplace. Financial aid, family aid, and materials aid were commonplace and rarely questioned

by the aforementioned community members. Consequently, attention to these facets of the culture would be beneficial to increase retention rates amongst this particular group of students.

This study consisted of a review of literature, taking into account a considerable amount of research regarding the Latino culture and factors that had been found to increase retention. One such factor was the effect of mentoring on Latino/a students that did help to increase their enrollment retention in higher education. In fact, much research indicated that mentorships were one of the leading factors that were able to aid increased retention of the number of Latino/a students in a Higher Education setting. Mentor programs typically involved a “supportive, one-on-one relationship with a knowledgeable individual who guide[d] the mentee” (Schueths and Caranza, 2012, p. 568). As the research reported, mentor programs had been implemented across corporations and universities in order to increase the development of individuals (Singh, Ragins and Tharenou, 2009, as cited by Cox, 2014). Many colleges and universities applied these programs as program results indicated that mentoring helped to connect the students to the institution. Mentoring relationships often strengthened the mentee’s connection to the university whether the bond formed was one with another student or one with a faculty member. In addition, mentoring provided the mentee with a greater understanding of university history or policies and in some cases promoted a greater sense of community for the student mentee (Torres and Hernandez, 2009-2010). As the research corroborated, community and family are at the heart of the Latino culture. Mentorships related to and offered support for that cultural connection, eradicating or at least providing a surrogate for a cultural value that students had previously found missing upon arrival at a new institution.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to review the relationships between Latino/a student success and retention via mentor programs at the level of higher education. Research on this topic is extensive and rapidly growing; therefore, conclusions and recommendations will continuously change as research continues to advance. As a result of this review of literature, conclusions have been drawn and recommendations have been made for further study of this subject.

Conclusions

Many conclusions have been drawn from multiple sources of research about how to increase retention rates amongst Latino/a students. Many of those available conclusions are in support of mentor programs specific to Latino/a students, as well as other underrepresented minorities. As Tinto (1990), a pioneer in the work to investigate student retention, encouraged, the greater “the degree of integration of individuals into the university, the greater their commitment to the institution and to the goal completion” (as cited by Bordes and Arredondo, 2005, p. 127-128). Bordes and Arredondo continued on that “it appeared as though just having a mentor made a difference for the Latina/o students in the current study” (2005, p. 128). These research findings support mentorships as a positive program that helps students achieve success, and that also maintains student enrollment and retention at their respected institutions. If simply having a mentor encouraged that large of a commitment, then the promise of more structured

mentorships would imply a greater connection to the college and a higher success rate amongst enrolled students.

DeFreitas and Bravo found that faculty-led mentorships had a positive effect on Latino/a students, even when the student was not considered a minority within the institution (2012). Enrolling in and attending a new college or university is a difficult transition for many students, regardless of the students' ethnic backgrounds. Continuing to offer a learning environment that reflected various factors of upbringings would be conducive to the students' learning. Allowing and encouraging students to find their community, much as the employees had in the researcher's aforementioned prior experience in human resources, will help the students to grow both individually and as a unit. Factors such as social support, mentorships and mentor programs, and the university environment had a strong indication on student retention (Gloria et.al, 2005). Not only were mentorships an important factor to Latino/a students' needs, but a web of support services was also necessary to achieve student success, much as Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) found. In the experience of this researcher working in Student Services, it has not been the case that a single support service was credited for a student's retention; rather it took a combination of support and learning services to work with any one student to improve the experience and prepare the student for what lay ahead. While mentor programs have been reported as successful, interdepartmental communication and action will be needed to continue to build campus connections for not only the mentee but also for the mentor to be able to continuously benefit the mentee.

Recommendations

Aside from implementing mentor programs to aid and promote Latino/a student success, additional factors have been widely encouraged by many researchers. Some of these

recommendations include hiring faculty and staff of the same ethnic background who can then serve as mentors so that the student might feel a stronger connection to that mentor (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). The ethnic connection might help to bridge the gap between student and faculty or staff, mentor and mentee.

Further, Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) mentioned that bringing in Latino/a faculty and staff would “affect the university demography, a beginning point to enhance Latina/o students’ university connections” (p. 216). Not only might the university connections grow within the institution, but connections might grow within the surrounding communities. In the experience of this researcher, the greater the cultural diversity on a campus community, the greater cultural awareness seems to grow within the community and surrounding communities. However, cultural awareness may take decades before an impact is seen or felt within the communities.

At the time of this study, many institutions of higher education were facing drastic budget deficits, and so recruiting and hiring new faculty or staff members was not an option. Schueths and Carranza (2012) recommended that staff and faculty members endure in bicultural training should the institution not be able to accommodate mentors of the same ethnicity. Moving one step further, providing multi-cultural training would be beneficial to the interests of the institution. An enormous growth to the Latino culture has been noted in the early decades of the 21st century; while it is necessary to consider what the educational system can do to better the Latino/a student experience, other cultures and ethnicities must also be considered as cultures with which to continue to expand and interact.

In the experience of this researcher, adults are continuously growing and are affected by the encounters and experiences they have. Fulfilling the role of either mentor or mentee might

serve as a motivator for personal growth and development in their respected fields, areas, or current stages of life, much like Torres and Hernandez (2009-2010) suggested. While considering the benefit of the student as well as the financial state of any given institution, perhaps institutions should consider any and all faculty and staff members who are already advocates for the student(s) to become mentors. Allowing the mentee and mentor to interact would allow for growth by understanding what is taking place, and perhaps over time understanding what is commonplace from both perspectives. From the mentor's standpoint, much could be assessed regarding what recurring services the mentees, or students, truly need in order to succeed.

Lastly, it is recommended that the reader continues to review and analyze new and evolving research regarding this topic as the research continues to grow and expand rapidly. This in turn will help to properly examine specific programs and curriculums that help to either increase or maintain Latino/a student success.

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