

**Our Deliberate Success: Recognizing What Works for
Latina/o Students across the Educational Pipeline**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the best practices across the K-20 pipeline that work for Latina/o students for the purposes of developing a framework for Latina/o student success. The authors suggest that the field needs to be explicit when it comes to recognizing “what works” and encourage researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to embrace an additive approach when examining and creating future directions for Latina/o student success.

Keywords: Latina/o students; educational pipeline; student success; institutional culture; leadership.

Situating the Problem

The status of Latina/o students in the United States has received considerable attention over the last several years (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). While there have been modest gains in graduation and attainment rates in the K-12 and higher education systems, there are significant challenges that remain. There are still sizeable disparities in high school graduation rates between Latinas/os and White students (Rodriguez, 2014). The graduation rate/dropout crisis alone has been an ongoing reality for Latinas/os and other communities of color for decades (Swanson, 2004). Dropouts, along with other disparities in opportunities and outcomes by race, class, gender, and immigration status, characterize the reality facing Latinas/os in the United States (Miron, 1996; Orfield, 2004; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Rodriguez, 2014; Rumberger, 2004). Research from the Pew Center also shows that students of color and Latinas/os specifically attend the largest and most racially segregated high schools in the country (Fry, 2003). These historical and policy-driven conditions contribute to perpetuating an undereducated polity that has detrimental effects for the United States, especially among Latinas/os who not only are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the country but constitute a majority of all school-aged children in states such as California and Texas (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Despite the demographic significance of Latinos in the United States and its public schools specifically, who constitute nearly a one-fourth of all K-12 students nationally, it is clear that any undereducated community is not only far less likely to compete globally and promote economic growth for local communities, but is also less likely to participate in conventional politics (i.e., voting), less likely to have access to fair wages, health care, and healthy homes and communities (Anyon, 1997; Anyon, 2005; Giroux, 2009).

In higher education, Latinas/os continue to face issues of access, remediation, financial aid challenges, retention, (low) expectations, and mentorship options from faculty and other leadership who recognize their specific challenges, strengths, and potential to thrive as college-level students. These challenges, among many, directly impact the opportunity landscape available to Latina/o students and suggest the need for a major transformation in the ways in which Latinas/os are served not only in higher education, but across the educational pipeline (Rodriguez, Mosqueda, Nava, & Conchas, 2013).

But rather than focus on the on-going crisis facing Latinas/os in education, the purpose of this article aims to focus on matters that educators, leadership, policymakers, and researchers have some control over: institutional culture. What remains particularly fascinating about the ongoing trends in educational research in the K-12 and higher education domains is the seemingly underemphasis on institutional culture as a culprit for failure and more importantly, as a facilitator of student success. For instance, important voices in the K-12 reform history that have mentioned or implicated the role of institutional culture have largely fallen on deaf ears (Elmore, 1995; Payne, 1996; Sarason, 1972). Similarly in higher education, it can be argued that discussions of institutional culture largely lie in the context of programming that aims to create necessary yet narrow strides in student success so that critical facilitators of success, such as student-faculty mentoring relationships, occur in isolation rather than becoming an institutional norm. Before institutional culture can be defined for the purposes of this article, the authors will set a foundation for discussing the hopes and possibilities for Latinas/os across the educational pipeline.

It is within the aforementioned context that this article is written. The first goal is to provide a context that challenges a research and conceptual approach that has been

historically deficit-driven, particularly when addressing the condition of Latina/o students across the educational pipeline. The second goal is to define institutional culture as a mechanism that either serves to further marginalize Latina/o students or engage them in pathways for academic and personal success. Thirdly, a seven-pronged conceptual framework is proposed that is rooted in previous best practice research and that all have a particular emphasis on institutional culture. In particular, the framework is informed by three projects in three distinct regions across the United States, which specifically inform the K-12 implications in this article. Finally, this article concludes with a series of implications and conclusions for K-12 and higher education policy and practice, particularly for those concerned with wellbeing of Latina/o students. The overall intention of this article is to provide a conceptual foundation for scholars, researchers, leaders, and practitioners concerned with leading their institutions with a spirit of efficacy and possibility rather than deficit, indifference, and stagnation.

Denouncing Deficit, Announcing Possibility

Before articulating the definition of institutional culture, it is vital that the authors define their perspective on Latina/o students across the educational pipeline. Before the late philosopher and educator Paulo Freire died in the late 1990s, he articulated the following, "...before you announce, you must denounce." Thus, the authors are denouncing the blaming and "othering" that often occurs with Latina/o students, particularly undocumented students who continue to struggle for their right to an education in the United States. The authors are also denouncing deficit perspectives that continue to characterize the realities facing Latinas/os at the K-12 and higher education systems (Flores, Cousins, & Diaz, 1991). Many of these deficits emerge through the language of practice of low expectations or

through the ideology of cultural or intellectual inferiority (i.e., these students just can't handle rigorous work). The authors are also denouncing the "Test Prep Pedagogy" culture (Rodriguez, 2011) that emerged directly out of the No Child Left Behind movement for the better part of the first decade of the 21st century. This Test Prep Pedagogy has created a test-centric culture that denies the humanizing nature of teaching and learning and the power of relationships and has reduced learning to testing. The authors are also denouncing the ahistorical remnant of U.S. culture that suggests that poor children, children of color, English learners, immigrant students, undocumented students, and others, are more likely to fail than succeed, which then informs the policies, practices, and procedures that Latina/o students end up facing in schools and higher education systems. Finally, the authors are denouncing the pervasive "failing" public institution narrative that has seductively misled the public, some policymakers, and many antipublic school stakeholders into believing that all things "public" are bad and are failing. This narrative attempts to undermine the very nature of public institutions—K-12 and higher education systems specifically—to the point that society and the power brokers begin to disinvest in these institutions, which in turn directly impact those who rely on these systems: Latinas/os and other historically marginalized groups.

Conversely and in line with Freire's teaching, the authors are also announcing a series of wealth-driven (Yosso, 2005) perspectives when devising a new framework and pathway for Latina/o student success across the educational pipeline. They are announcing that leadership matters. Leadership at all levels sets the tone for the institution, steers its values and belief systems, and helps define the institutional agenda. The authors are announcing that quality teachers/faculty matters. Research in the K-12 system has articulated that high-quality teachers can often diminish the effects of poverty, especially when students are

exposed to such teachers year after year. The role of mentors and meaningful connections between students and faculty in colleges and universities often demonstrate that same thing. They are also announcing that community cultural wealth matters (Yosso, 2005). Students across the educational pipeline bring rich experiences from their home and community experiences that often get overlooked within the classroom/school/institutional walls. The authors of the article believe that deliberate efforts at recognizing these various forms of wealth can contribute to the transformation of opportunities and outcomes for Latinas/os across the educational pipeline.

Similarly, the authors are also announcing that recognition matters (Rodriguez, 2012). In his proposed Praxis of Recognition, Rodriguez (2012) articulates various ways Latina/o students can be recognized through relationships, curriculum, pedagogy, context, and ultimately through transformation. These practices of recognition help contribute to an institutional culture that values, respects, and sees the possibilities in Latina/o students across the educational pipeline. Finally, they are announcing that equity-driven and social justice outcomes must be deliberate. If equity, opportunity, and justice are left to chance, our country will never get there. It never has been that way and will likely never be that way. Institutions must make deliberate and concerted efforts when working for just outcomes for Latina/o students.

Thus, as the authors move forward with articulating the best strategies, it is vital that they begin with the perspective that institutions have deep responsibilities, capabilities, and have the potential to create endless possibilities for responding to and serving Latina/o students. The authors hope to articulate a set of tools, strategies, and responses for Latina/o student success across the educational pipeline based on our collective research.

What Is Institutional Culture?

As previously stated and particularly within the K-12 reform literature, there has been sparse yet important perspectives put forward about the significance of institutional culture. For instance, some have argued that any kind of reform or policy effort will fail unless school culture is centered as a powerful player in the educational dynamic (Payne, 2008; Sarason, 1972). Yet, despite these perspectives, most efforts at “reforming” the education system overlook or ignore this perspective only to result in the same old reality that was there to begin with. Within higher education environments, nearly two decades of empirical research established that institutional culture and climate significantly impacts student experiences and often times negatively for racial and ethnic students who experience prejudice and discrimination from peers, faculty, administrators, and staff (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Thus, this article aims to center institutional culture as a thread across the K-12 and higher education system as it pertains to Latina/o student success from an additive perspective.

Institutional culture refers to the values, beliefs, and processes that characterize institutional life (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). Institutional culture across the educational pipeline can refer to the social climate within the institution (i.e., social groupings, affinity groups, who has access to the opportunity structure), the normative beliefs and practices across the institution (i.e., presence or absence of student voice, the normative beliefs about who ‘deserves’ to succeed), and the modes of communication and interactions among the various people within an institution (i.e., whether teachers/faculty believe it is their job to motivate students or not. Brown and Rodriguez (2008) defined institutional culture as the place where identities are forged, where meaning is negotiated, and most simply, “how things get done.”

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For the purposes of this article, institutional culture is centralized because it is one of the forces at play that stakeholders have a direct role in shaping. While top-down policies, funding formulas, and the political climate are vital to any institution's culture, it is the actions, beliefs, and norms of the stakeholders that directly shape the limitations or possibilities for students, and in this case, Latina/o students who typically rely on the institution as a beacon of hope and possibility to meet their individual (and collective) goals. In addition to defining institutional culture, it is equally important to understand the role that race, class, gender, power and knowledge, language, immigration status, and the purpose of schooling play as well (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In fact, there are likely intersections between conventional definitions of institutional culture (i.e., normative beliefs) and issues of power, race, and economic status. When considering the condition of Latina/o students across the educational pipeline, it is also vital to consider critical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory and LatCrit as they provide a framework for understanding how race, racism, language, immigration status, and identity inform the opportunities and outcomes of Latina/o students (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Solorzano and Delgado (2001) state, "LatCrit is a theory that elucidates Latinas/Latinos' multidimensional identities and can address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression" (p. 312). In addition, critical research perspectives from Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy are also informative to deepening an understanding of Latina/o students' experiences in school by allowing for critical perspectives to emerge (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; de los Reyes & Gozempa, 2001; Lauria & Miron, 2005). The proposed framework below consists of lessons learned from a compilation of research findings and experiences across three major K-12 systems that serve

a significant Latina/o student population, and the second section will focus on key lessons learned from higher education scholarship focusing on Latina/o student success.

Seven Principles for Latina/o Student Success: An Institutional Culture Approach

The following section outlines seven research-based dimensions to institutional culture that can significantly transform how educators, policymakers, and researchers examine, understand, and respond to the Latina/o education crisis facing the United States. To that end, the authors propose an emerging yet incomplete framework that guides how stakeholders respond with due will and urgency. The framework is based on a compilation of lessons learned from research conducted on institutional culture in three high poverty urban communities in the Northeast, Southeast, and most recently in the Southwest (Rodriguez, 2004; 2008; 2010; 2014) but possibly have far-reaching implications for regions and schools across the United States. In this work, centralizing institutional culture contributes to a conceptualization of Latina/o student engagement and disengagement and hopefully informs policies, practices, and further research on Latina/o student success across the United States. Each principle is also applied to the postsecondary education environment. The authors highlight empirical research from the literature that maps well onto the seven principles to better demonstrate institutional culture interventions across the educational pipeline (see Fig. 1).

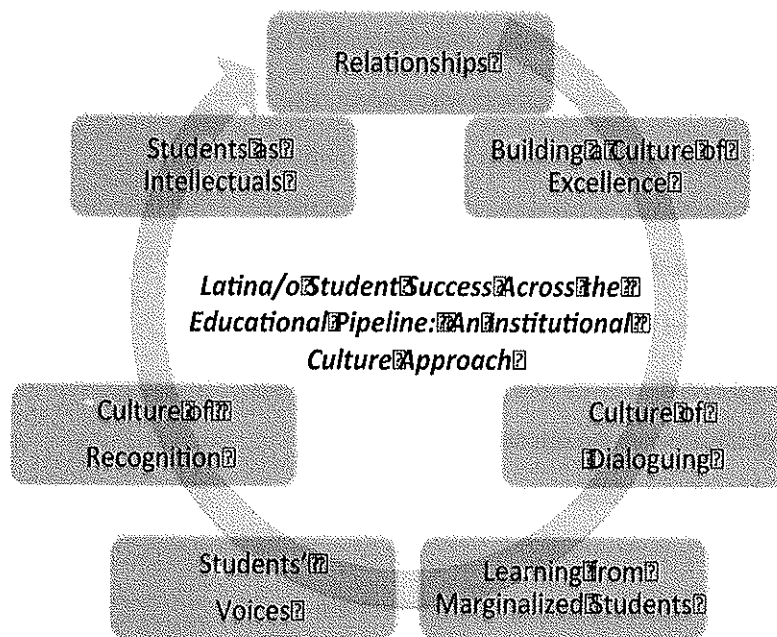


Figure 1. The Seven research-based dimensions to institutional culture.

Relationships as the “X” Factor

At least 15 years of empirical research has shown that student-adult relationships in schools matter, especially for Latina/o students (Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002; Rodriguez, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). It is frequently baffling to know that most reform efforts and schools for that matter sidestep the importance of student-teacher relationships, especially as a mediating factor in student achievement. Research has shown that authentic relationships and caring are vital in shaping student engagement with school (Noddings, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). Research also shows that students’ relationships and interactions with adults in school may be one of the only sources of social capital that open pathways to college and career options, especially among Mexican-origin youth

(Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Further, research has shown that basic forms of “knowing” and “talking” are vital to developing the basic foundations of student-teacher relationships in school (Rodriguez, 2003). Others have found that relationships with school adults, also known as “institutional agents” can facilitate processes of resistance and identity formation that are vital for historically marginalized youth, such as Latinas/os (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Findings across the three regions that inform the proposed framework in this article suggest that the conventional teaching and learning dynamic be disrupted with regard to the ways that relationships are forged in schools. For instance, the dominant perspective suggests that students and teachers forge relationships through the academic content. However, the current research has suggested that the relationship precedes teaching and learning (Rodriguez, 2005).

Educational policy efforts, such as No Child Left Behind, have created a narrow definition of a qualified teacher. For Latina/o youth in the three region findings, a college degree, a credential, and knowledge of subject area are not enough. Teachers need to recognize, inspire, motivate, and support them (Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010). Trust also has also been shown to matter significantly (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). New teachers need to know the impact that relationships have on student engagement and disengagement with school and in-service teachers need to continuously “reinvent” themselves to promote meaningful relationships with students (Freire, 1970). Within the context of Latina/o student success, relationships are a vital dimension to institutional culture particularly among Latina/o students who often find themselves in struggling schools with inadequate opportunities to learn. Institutions need to learn from those practices and policies that produce relational success and start from that point forward.

Relationships between students and other adults are also extended into the postsecondary context. Researchers consistently report that the academic performance of Latina/o college students is enhanced by the quality of their interactions with faculty (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Cole, 2008; Cole & Espinoza, 2008; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Similar to quality relationships in secondary school noted in the paragraphs above, Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) have reported that quality student-faculty relationships in college consists of faculty who are approachable, understanding, and encouraging of students. Other notable relationships include the role of mentoring as mentoring facilitates the transition into college and success throughout the undergraduate years and beyond. Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) have defined effective mentoring as that which “challenges the protégé to aspire to certain goals, teaches him or her how to cope with the challenges that lie ahead, helps him or her develop the requisite skills, provides moral support, and sometimes transmits or negotiates the transmission of key resources and opportunities” (p. 235). Scholars have asserted that mentoring not only enhances academic performance but is critical to the college adjustment and success of Latina/o students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Phinney, Torres Campos, Padilla Kallemeyn, & Kim, 2011; Santos & Reigadas, 2002).

Forge a Culture of Dialoguing

Another dimension to institutional culture involves the nature of dialogues that occur across the institution. Unfortunately, during the height of No Child Left Behind era, dialoguing about meaningful issues became a revolutionary act given the ways that this movement steered many schools off course. According to Freire (1970), the act of dialoguing is an act of liberatory pedagogy where students and teachers engage in problem-posing efforts to create knowledge, exercise voice, and reframe power in any educational

space. Dialoguing is also critical when the testing climate is more likely to socialize students into passivity and authority dependence rather than critical and reflective thinkers (Shor, 1993).

An institutional culture that promotes dialogues about critically meaningful content areas such as relationships will require persistence, support, and courage, especially among teachers/faculty and leadership. A far more transformative action would include students in the dialogue. However, stimulating and facilitating critical dialogue is no easy task. As a result of the No Child Left Behind era (Meier & Wood, 2005), many students arrive in high school or college and were socialized to be passive in the classroom and rely on authority, in part due to the testing climate they were born into (Shor, 1993). Students have largely been socialized into a culture that values silence, waiting for the affirmation from the teacher for the right answer, and where creativity and critical thinking is stifled.

It is within this policy and cultural context where educators are faced with the reality of students disengaging, self-silencing or acting out, and all together drop out physically or intellectually. Yet study after study demonstrates that classrooms, schools, and other educational spaces that are rooted in a commitment to dialoguing between students, teachers, and other students are quite promising. For example, when students are asked about quality teachers and learning environments, they yearn for the opportunity to be heard, to teach others, and to listen to others (Hooks, 1994; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Research also shows that students are heard when authentic relationships are a fundamental aspect of the cultural fabric of schools and classrooms, particularly for low-income youth of color (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Yet, the act of dialoguing is a complex undertaking. Most educators steer away from dialoguing, because of the fear of losing control of the dialogue. But educational leaders need to take bold steps in raising issues like expectations and relationships, the experiences of English learners versus U.S. born Latinos, and institutional accountability for student learning. It is only through the work of courageous educators will the relevant issues and causes of Latina/o student engagement and disengagement be addressed.

Extending dialoguing to postsecondary education settings can occur in multiple settings. The authors highlight here the value of institutionalizing dialogue on college campuses via such efforts as ethnic studies curriculum, intergroup dialogue, and cultural centers on campus. Ortiz and Santos (2009) found that co-curricular spaces can provide opportunities for Latinas/os to maintain strong ethnic identities and engage in supportive communities. Other resources campus facilitators can access include centers responsible for creating intergroup dialogue. Gurin and Nagda (2006) have provided a model for intergroup dialogue or the intentional confrontation of similarity and difference between and among groups on campus in order to expand student, staff, and faculty understandings of others. Beyond the K-12 and higher education context, dialoguing with community has also revealed to be a transformation action for meaningful change (see Rodriguez, 2013).

Create Forums for Students' Voices

Over a decade of student-centered, student-driven research has demonstrated that creating deliberate spaces for knowledge-creation and critical school and community engagement are vital for engaging the nation's most marginalized students (Cammarota & Romero, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrel, 2008; Irizarry, 2011). Ten years of research in the Northeast, Southeast, and the Southwest demonstrates that structured spaces to listen and

learn from students' voices and experiences are missing from most schools and districts. Yet, in these same schools, students often share concerns about a lack of space, forum, or vehicle to share feedback, suggestions, or highlights of their educational experiences (Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010). While the creation of this type of space is first and foremost structural in nature, it is also a reflection of the cultural norms or values held at the school or district level. What is more telling is what the institution does with the information, how students' voices and perspectives are received, and the degree to which educators and other stakeholders value the information. These institutional responses, all together, say something vitally important about that institution's culture.

Previous research across three major regions across the United States demonstrates that allowing students to not only share their experiences, but have a critically engaged role in transforming their schooling experiences is vital on multiple levels (Rodriguez, 2014). Not only does such spaces for student voice serve a practical function for educators who are genuinely interested in learning from the student experience, but such opportunities also provide students with a platform to share their expertise, which often results in higher levels of student engagement with school, especially those who have been on the margins. Finally, participating in forums for student voice serves as a vital skill-development experience whereby students learn public speaking, group facilitation skills, group process, and general collaborative engagement.

Policymakers, institutional leaders, and teachers/faculty need to tap into the voices and lived experiences of a vital group of stakeholders if they are truly concerned with educational opportunity, quality, and outcomes. Forums for students' voices open the doors to new curriculum ideas, share the institutional power with students, and provide

opportunities for youth to be the public intellectuals (focus of next section). Denying these voices is a perpetuation of racial inequality (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal; 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Conversely, deliberately creating spaces for students' voices can be a push forward by creating a receptive institutional culture where stakeholders can determine the degree to which institutions, research, and policy consider the cultural wealth and "funds of knowledge" that many Latina/o youth bring to the institution (Moll, 1995; Yosso, 2005). Within the PRAXIS Project, a series of public forums were created that allowed school alumni, community elders, and other vital community stakeholders a space to engage, share their experiences, and teach the community (Rodriguez, 2014).

In extending the concept of the creation of forums for student voices, the authors suggest an examination of the provision of safe spaces and counterspaces on college campuses for Latina/o students. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) have defined counterspaces as "sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established" (p.70). Safe spaces have been defined within a classroom as a "climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express views, and share knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors...it refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm" (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50). Nunez (2011) also established that Chicano studies courses could serve as these important counterspaces where Latinas/os could manage the negative stereotypes and isolation they experienced on predominantly White campuses. These spaces can be created in offices, within a classroom, or organizations designed to serve student groups and are important for individuals to be protected against psychological or emotional attacks often experienced by marginalized communities on college campuses (Patton, 2006).

Students as Public Intellectuals

The role of students in the process of educational change has been the topic of inquiry over the last decade, particularly using Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cammarota & Romero, 2008; Rodriguez, 2014). In PAR-related projects, the role of youth shifts from objects to active subjects within the research process (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). In such initiatives, youth are encouraged to raise their consciousness about the world in which they function (Freire, 1973), and in many studies, the school and community becomes the research laboratory (Rodriguez, 2014). Through the research process students learn about identifying and framing issues and problems in their context, developing research questions and design options, learning data analysis, and producing final products (presentations) to be shared with relevant stakeholders. Along the way, youth learn to question and dialogue (Solorzano, 1989) and begin to recognize their role as critical and intellectual beings particularly in institutions that have historically marginalized these students (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2007; Torre & Fine, 2006).

Reframing students, especially Latina/o youth as public intellectuals is a major paradigm shift for policy, research, and practitioners on the ground. The existing culture in reference to the potential or actual role of students typically operates through a paternalistic arrogance that subtracts any knowledge, experiences, or skills that the students may already harbor as a direct result of life experiences. So, many students, especially low-income students of color, enter educational institutions where these life experiences are automatically subtracted, diminished, or ignored. These realities say something really important about the institution's culture. While all institutions cannot be characterized in such a way, it is

important to note that most institutions do not operate in this manner and transforming the existing culture will require a significant amount of work at all levels (Rodriguez, 2014).

Based on research in three regions across the United States serving significant numbers of Latina/o students, the power of highlighting students' roles as intellectuals is informative (Rodriguez, 2014). In the Northeast, a group of student researchers used Freireian-driven pedagogical approaches to understand and curtail what they identified as a "culture of low expectations" in their school. Their work resulted in a series of public presentations to students, faculty, and administrators, which became a defining moment that convinced so many of the presenters and audience members that not only did students' experiences matter, people realized students were capable of embodying the role of "intellectual," and that they could actually impact school policy and practice.

In the project in the Southeastern United States, students decided to research and define a "quality teacher" (Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010). Not only did they devise a structured research design but aimed to deliver a series of professional development sessions to pre-service teachers at a local university. The students realized that their involvement with the research, especially in dialogue with a university audience on a university campus skyrocketed their self-esteem and confidence to pursue college. One youth researcher extended the work and used the findings to inform her work on local city initiative, only later to win a prestigious award for her involvement. This speaks to the transformative possibilities when institutions are able to reframe students as the intellectuals they have the potential to rise to in the institutional setting.

Finally, in the Southwestern U.S. project, students took a broad look at their institution's culture with a particular interest in the high dropout rate facing their school

(Rodriguez, 2014). They created several research work groups and used their school as a laboratory for research. They then delivered presentations to teachers, counselors, school leaders, alumni, community members, policymakers, and a national audience of researchers. In the process, the students felt empowered, their voices were heard, and contributed to real policy and practical changes at the local, district, and regional levels.

These student-driven and student-led examples demonstrate the possibilities when institutions are willing and receptive to creating such opportunities. Through such opportunities students have the potential to reframe themselves into public intellectuals as they begin to transform their identities as actors within the process of positive social and educational change (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). For the Latina/o students in these initiatives, the opportunity to share one's experiences and receive support, validation, and "recognition" (Rodriguez, 2012) (focus of next section) from teachers and an educational community serve as a vehicle to transform institutional culture.

In invoking youth as public intellectuals, this concept can be expanded to young adults on college campuses and the provision of service-learning, civic engagement and leadership programs for Latina/o students. Service-learning requires structured curricula, which incorporate personal reflection regarding experiences, how these experiences can be connected to the curriculum, and how then students may apply education to experiences. Service-learning curriculum proves to have thought-provoking and in-depth discussions and reflections. In order for service-learning to be effective and developmental, reflection activities should include challenging discussion examples such as issues of power, privilege, and oppression, and hidden biases and assumptions of race, class, and gender (Cipolle, 2010, p. 5). Service-learning not only been found to benefit students' personal development, critical

thinking skills, and clarity of values, but also serves as a way to form a sense of community on campus, which aids in student success and retention and a commitment by students to ensure others have the same opportunities and options (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Other scholars have also found that participation that facilitates interactions with Latina/o students' home communities can increase sense of belonging and university engagement (Ortiz & Santos, 2009; Perez II, 2009; Yosso, 2006).

Building a Culture of Recognition

Across all three initiatives, there was one common factor: Latina/o students were by and large being served in huge high schools with significant enrollment patterns, which has been the trend according to demographic analyses at the national levels, particularly among low-income students of color. Within these high schools, there was a common and distributing pattern. Many students and Latina/o students specifically, often went through a typical school day without any meaningful interactions with any school adults. While the structure of the school has its limitations (Elmore, 1995), a prevalent dynamic of institutional culture began to emerge. That is, while schools in these studies typically espoused to create personalized student experiences, for all intents and purposes, it was just not happening (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2005). In fact, just the opposite was true.

But recognition of a person's existence was only a surface-level dimension, later becoming Relational Recognition. There were curricular, pedagogical, contextual, and transformational dimensions as well (Rodriguez, 2012). These realities facing students led to a series of assumptions, especially in the context of institutional culture, that need to be called into question across the educational pipeline.

For instance, it should not be assumed that Latina/o students are acknowledged in school. It should not be assumed that Latina/o students are greeted in school or that adults know their name. It should not be assumed Latina/o students' voices and experiences are validated within the institutional context. It should not be assumed that Latina/o students leave their communities behind when they enter the classroom. It should not be assumed that all educators understand that the promises and possibilities offered by a free public education are often the last social safety net for most low-income Latina/o students, both in the K-12 and higher education systems. Thus, the Praxis of Recognition was created to curtail many of these assumptions (Rodriguez, 2012).

The first is *Relational Recognition* and demonstrates that within rigid climates of accountability, standards, and testing, student-teacher/faculty relationships are critical and must be hyper-emphasized, especially when the research has shown they are so relevant to Latina/o student success (Valenzuela, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). The second is *Curricular Recognition* and pushes institutions to prioritize the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and voices and experiences they bring to the institutional context. The third is *Contextualizing Recognition* and urges an understanding of the critical role that the social, political, economic, cultural, and historic context plays in shaping the opportunity structure, quality of education, and student experience. The fourth is *Pedagogical Recognition* and is exercised through a deliberate creation and inclusion of courageous pedagogies that incorporate students' experiences in schools and the community, legitimize their knowledge bases, and repositions the students from learner to teacher. Finally, *Transformative Recognition* urges educators and researchers to ask, recognition and education for what

purpose? Do leaders and teachers/faculty understand their role in the lives of students? Are these practitioners willing to dialogue about these matters?

All together, the *Praxis of Recognition* has the potential to transform institutional culture when educators, leaders, and communities unite to make recognition a priority. Putting recognition into practice (and policy) requires zero financial resources. However, what is required is the political will from leadership and other supportive stakeholders to be committed enough to create a culture of recognition. This concept applies equally well to postsecondary practice. Rendon (1994) in her often cited Validation Theory, has shown how first-generation and underrepresented students are especially responsive to institutional agents' expressions of interest and confidence in their potential. The provision of validation and positive mentoring experiences as well as how students perceive the campus climate also influence their decisions to remain enrolled in college. Validating students' culture and ethnicity extends beyond incorporating diverse perspectives in programs and curricula to incorporating such perspectives in institutional artifacts, mascots, and symbols and how these might affect inclusion and safety physically and psychologically.

Learning from Marginalized Students

Motivated, engaged, and academically driven students are typically the most visible and recognized group of students in any educational setting, even in instances where poverty and community challenges are present. In such situations, leadership and teachers/faculty may turn to those exceptions and say, "you see it is possible." In fact, this may not necessarily be a bad thing. However, what also is likely to happen is to overlook and deny the reality facing the students that are struggling. These are the academically or socially marginalized students or the students who just "get by" because they fail to cause behavioral

disruptions. Yet, these may also be the students who are outwardly critical of school and who often find themselves on a fast track out of school through disciplinary action (Brown, 2007; Fine, 1987; Rodriguez & Brown, 2008). But these are precisely the students that institutions need to recognize and learn from in order to transform the institution's culture.

Research has shown that these students can often be the most insightful sources of knowledge and solutions for school improvement and promoting student engagement (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010). Nevertheless, listening and learning from this particular group of students needs to be accepted as a worthwhile endeavor to the leadership and the institution. In the initiatives mentioned in this article, there was a deliberate effort at making sure lower-achieving students were included in the selection criteria as a way to learn from their experiences. Otherwise who else can speak to their experiences? Other students? School adults?

Listening to marginalized students also extends to the postsecondary sector. In his telling books on marginalized students, many of whom were Latinas/os attending southern California community colleges, Rose (2012) has highlighted the voices of students working hard to make lives for themselves through education. He has illustrated how institutions who value all the students who walk through their doors do listen and respond to the variety of student needs present in the classroom. Drawing upon other scholars and practitioners who work to include students who have limited opportunities and access to postsecondary institutions, Rose (2012) issues a call to policymakers about ways to truly serve marginalized students well.

If institutions fail to listen and learn from this segment of the student population, they are likely to fail at finding ways to improve its policies and practices. All students deserve the opportunity to share, reflect, and critique their experiences in school, and have the potential to inform the work educators, leaders, and policymakers are charged to deliver. Once institutions commit to this student population, they put themselves on a pathway of transforming institutional culture for Latina/o student success.

Building a Culture of Excellence

Students, educators, leaders, and other stakeholders are engaged in meaningful and amazing work every single day across the country, even in some of the most challenging conditions (Schultz, 2007). Yet the “Test-Prep Pedagogy” era (Rodriguez, 2008) triggered by the No Child Left Behind movement and the constant “failing” public school narrative mentioned earlier in this article would suggest otherwise. In fact, some research continues to point out positive practices and policies that work, even in high poverty and pervasively low performing schools serving low-income, students of color, and immigrant students (Noguera, 1996; Noguera, 2003). But the fact that schools across the educational pipeline fall short at celebrating and recognizing success and excellence more frequently has more to do with the culture of education generally. Thus, in the Southwestern U.S. initiative, a series of Excellence Campaigns were launched to define, celebrate, and learn from local models of excellence (Rodriguez, forthcoming). These models are typically characterized by those who reflect the demographics of the students, originate from the local community, earned a higher education, and returned to serve their community.

This work represents another paradigmatic shift in the way educational institutions perform. Rather than continuing to harp on the shortcomings and deficits of the institutions and the people within them, a culture of excellence aims to redirect the conversation into one that encourages the institutions to look inward for practices and policies of excellence. These evolving habits begin to create a culture that not only celebrates those that are thriving, but in the process creates opportunities to define what excellence means for that particular institution and even more revolutionary, encourage local stakeholders to learn from these models.

Working from the idea that communities must be aware and proud of their own cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), the work of Excellence Campaigns is meant to highlight people who serve their communities in powerful ways (Rodriguez, forthcoming). During an assembly of hundreds of students, the author highlighted local professionals who originated directly from the community and shared their educational trajectories that led them to academic and personal success (Rodriguez, forthcoming). In another initiative, they developed large posters with the models of excellence and shared with policy makers, educators, students, parents, and other community stakeholders. Across all initiatives, the authors reiterated the point that excellence involves returning to one's community and community service.

Applying a culture of excellence to the postsecondary sector, the authors posit, can involve at least two areas on college campuses; the provision of undergraduate research opportunities for Latina/o students and greater access to honors colleges. Several empirical studies demonstrate the positive effect of undergraduate research experiences on Latina/o students and other underrepresented students' academic success at both predominantly White

institutions and Hispanic Serving Institutions (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rogers, Kranz, & Ferguson, 2012). Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, Hippel, and Lerner (1998) found stronger retention rates for undergraduate research participants than nonparticipants even after controlling for ability and interest in research. Locks and Gregerman (2008) have found that these undergraduate research programs provide opportunities for historically underserved students to interact with faculty around shared intellectual issues and allow students to more deeply engage in their own learning experiences. These experiences foster an institutional culture of excellence for students who traditionally are not included in research programs. A second way of establishing a culture of excellence is the provision and access to honors colleges. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) have shown that students enrolled in honors colleges were most likely to complete college even when pre-entry characteristics were controlled. They posit it is because of the personal, small class attention that students receive. While the aforementioned study included students attending selective public universities, other scholars studying honors colleges housed within the community college sector arrive at similar conclusions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). That is, the high academic expectations and the personal attention result in better than expected academic outcomes of students who participate. There is little reason to not establish these same high expectations for success for all students.

Given the challenges facing education, schools, at both the K-12 and postsecondary level, cannot do this work alone. Historically struggling schools and colleges, particularly those that are pervasively ridiculed for their failure often have very little time to add another “thing” to their plate. This is where leadership must get creative at harnessing resources, such as students, to help engage in the work. Such opportunities can facilitate leadership skill

development for students when leading such initiatives. It is similarly vital to include teachers/faculty, parents, counselors, and other local stakeholders in efforts to build a culture of excellence. Inclusion of multiple stakeholders creates buy-in and momentum to transform the culture of the institution. The authors are finding that building a culture of excellence through Excellence Campaigns is a potentially powerful vehicle to transform the institutional culture to one of excellence for Latina/o student success.

Implications

There is a reason why matters related to institutional culture, such as relationships, are such a challenge to scholars, leaders, and other critical practitioners genuinely concerned with Latina/o student success: it is difficult work. For example, leading an institution in building a culture that values, believes, invests, practices, and assesses for the effectiveness of faculty/teacher-student relationships is transformative yet very challenging work. This is precisely why it is often easier to engage this work in piecemeal approaches (i.e., through specific and often temporary programs). The difficulty associated with this work also likely explains why it's easier to create programs with well-defined structural components (i.e., cohorts of 20 students) versus outlining the cultural commitments of the program such as building, sustaining, and evaluating itself based on the quality of relationships created in the program, as a facilitator for student success. Thus, to say that embracing a framework that is centrally focused on transforming an institution's culture to more effectively serve Latina/o students will not come without its challenges.

Institutional leaders must know that such work cannot and should not be tackled alone. The leader should set the agenda and ensure that the key players are involved in the

process, but the leader must communicate that matters such as relationships, student voices, and building a culture of recognition are non-negotiable values that the institution will carry forward. In order to do this work, faculty must buy-in to the endeavor and the process. Many experienced faculty/teachers may truly believe in their own effectiveness, yet may be challenged with embracing the title of “mentor,” especially to Latina/o students who may be first generation students. Such an identity shift is necessary because Latina/o students, and other first generation students, will be challenged to learn complex theoretical and applied subject matter in any given content area, and must be made aware of the “culture of power” as discussed by Dr. Lisa Delpit. Faculty can help students decipher these institutions and faculty who decide to embrace the identity as a “mentor” will take time, multiple dialogues, and ongoing opportunities to reflect on their practice. Such work will require resources, support, and consistency on the part of leadership from the executive to the classroom level.

Policymakers also need to be involved in the conversations as they often determine which resources will be allocated for particular initiatives. While many policymakers were once career educators, many are not and will require a healthy degree of information and education about the critical nature of institutional culture and its relationship with Latina/o student success. Just as faculty/teachers and local leadership will be required to go “all in” with this work, we should expect policymakers to do the same. Like anyone else, the learning curve will be steep and facilitators who assist with the process should capitalize on participants’ experiences as a way to personally engage participants. For instance, a conversation starter may be, think back to your own K-12 experiences and identify a mentor who helped influence your academic/personal success. Such an approach may be a way to engage everyone in the conversation.

In the end, institutional leadership will play a critical role when engaging their institutional stakeholders in a paradigmatic shift that explicitly focuses on matters related to institutional culture. Each challenge must be embraced as an opportunity and initiators must approach the work delicately, politically, and with a healthy dose of emotional intelligence. If such skills and commitments are missing, then the leader should surround his/herself with those that do.

Conclusion

Without deliberate and strategic research, policy, and practical implications from this article, Latina/o students will continue to struggle across the educational pipeline. Thus, for the sake of the nation and the Latina/o community specifically, it is in the country's best interest—economically, socially, and politically—that any effort to respond to needs and challenges of Latina/o students give considerable attention toward institutional culture. The premise of this article suggests, and in the parlance of Elmore (1996), that educational reform will continue to have major limitations, particularly in the scope of the Latina/o dropout crisis, unless there is a commitment to transforming institutional culture.

Teachers and university faculty, school, district, and executive university leaders, and local and state education policymakers need to centralize the aforementioned dimensions of institutional culture that can inform all aspects of the student experience from curriculum and pedagogical approaches to assessment and progressive policy directions for schools and colleges and universities. Imagine if students and teachers/faculty co-constructed expectations around the nature of student-teacher relationships in schools? Imagine if policymakers instituted policies, monitoring mechanisms, and support structures to ensure

that students are given opportunities to serve as public intellectuals and educators are committed to centralizing recognition in their daily work?

Finally, researchers interested in the areas of Latina/o student success, institutional culture, and educational policy can incorporate the dimensions proposed in this article as a potential conceptual framework in approaching academic research on the matter. For instance, when examining retention or student success rates, particularly among Latinas/os, researchers can consider the ways in which spaces (i.e., classrooms) in institutions help promote student engagement. Similarly, the degree to which students are engaged in classroom or institutional initiatives that position students as intellectuals can be another analytical frame to consider when understanding student engagement and disengagement. Further, the recent attention on undocumented students, particularly in colleges and universities, can be a timely opportunity for institutions to qualitatively examine how they are responding to the specific needs of this population, and from varied perspectives (i.e., student affairs, financial aid, academic support, etc.). Merging an emphasis on institutional culture and Latina/o student success will hopefully move the nation forward in researching, understanding, and responding to their needs more efficiently, effectively, and deliberately.

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