"Too Many to Count": Experiences of Microaggressions for Latinx Students at a Predominantly White Institution in the Age of Trump

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ABOUT CURRENTS

The National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) Currents publication connects scholarship in diversity, equity, and inclusion to practice and public discourse. Currents is a scholarship to practice journal that translates cutting-edge research into concise, accessible discussions to inform researchers, practitioners, leaders, policymakers, and the broader public conversation. All papers undergo a two part review process including a review by content experts and review for public accessibility.

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CITATION

I worked so hard, overcame so many hurdles
But here I experience
Unusual stares.
I'm asked where I'm really from
Asked what I am before even being asked my name.

I'm told I'm playing the "race card"
Told to go back to where I came from
Told I'm taking people's jobs
Told to reconsider my decision to apply for a PhD.

Some doubt my abilities
Give me dirty looks
Confuse Colombia for Mexico.

Too many negative experiences.
Every day. Too many days to list.
Where can I start...it is simply too much.

You get used to it and get stronger.

I am American. I am Latinx.[1]

— Amanda Rodriguez-Newhall[2]

People of Latin American descent (Latinx) currently compose 15% of the U.S. population, yet they remain underrepresented in higher education. As of 2015, approximately 36.2% of non-Hispanic Whites ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher. In contrast, only about 15.5% of Hispanics ages 25 and older have attained a bachelor's degree or higher (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The Latinx population is also a young one, with the largest group of Latinx under the age of

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1. In this study, we follow the contemporary use of the word "Latinx" to refer to people of Latin American descent living in the United States.
2. Special thanks to Amanda Rodriguez-Newhall who composed this poem based on the responses of our study participants.

18. This demonstrates the need to improve the educational pipeline for Latinx. If Latinx adolescents and young adults are successful in completing postsecondary education, they have more options for future careers. With our project we sought to achieve three goals: (a) to give voice to Latinx in higher education, an often neglected topic of research; (b) to situate our study within the current political climate of the "age of Trump"; and (c) to provide universities with policy recommendations based on our findings.

For Latinx, lower rates of participation in higher education have been associated with lack of economic, educational, and social resources; low educational attainment of parents; negative relationships between Hispanic students and their non-Hispanic teachers; lack of academic guidance pertaining to course selection and college choice; and negative teacher perception of students' abilities (Hatch, Uman, & Garcia, 2016). Previous research has found that Latinx students are most likely to attend Hispanic serving institutions (HSI) or institutions in regions with large Latinx populations. Latinx students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWI) are at greater risk of experiencing a less supportive campus climate, which can contribute to less successful academic experiences (Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007).

The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) model is one model that can guide the types of research questions and methodologies necessary to investigate how to best support Latinx students and promote positive long-term outcomes. The model, developed by Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999), sought to (a) make perceptions of campus climate tangible, (b) highlight the unique experiences of students of color, and (c) provide research-based evidence for what it means to have diversity in higher education (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012). The multicontextual DLE model is an extension of the original model (Hurtado et al., 1999) and identifies how different internal and external conditions can impact the success of underrepresented students in higher education (Hurtado et al., 2012). The new model allows for a methodological examination of the role of climate on students of color success in higher education. Furthermore, the multicontextual DLE model allows us to take into account the broader political context that exists outside of institution but influences the climate of the institution. The 2016 U.S. presidential election was a significant event for all Latinx. The Trump administration has engaged in negative discourse toward Latinx groups and has carried out policies targeting Latinx such as suspension of the Deferred

Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and increased immigration raids and detention (Pew Research Center, 2018). These hostile events can contribute to Latinx students viewing their campus climate as less supportive, which may interfere with their academic success as well as their future economic and social mobility.

Method

Procedure

An online survey was sent to 2,000 randomly selected self-identified Latinx students at the University of Michigan, from a total 2,597 enrolled and identified by the registrar's office. Of those contacted, 244 Latinx undergraduates and graduates responded to the Latinx Student Experiences Survey. To increase survey participation, the direct survey solicitation emails were followed up by outreach from Latinx student organizations who shared recruitment flyers with their members. The participants were able to click a link on the flyer that directed them to the online survey.

Measures

Our survey included items that were used in a similar Latinx campus climate survey administered by a team of students in 2014 (Asadizoudegani et al., 2016). In addition to these items, we added questions to reflect the current political climate and issues raised by Latinx student activists (La Casa, 2018) and additional standardized measures. Our survey also included open-ended questions that asked students to describe specific instances of discrimination in detail.

The racial and ethnic microaggressions scale (REMS) was used to examine everyday instances of discrimination related to one's race or ethnicity (Nadal, 2011). We utilized three of the five subscales that most resonated with student experiences. For the REMS, participants were given items that described everyday instances of discrimination and then asked to rate their experiences on a scale from 1 ("I have not experienced this event in the past six months") to 6 ("I have experienced this event more than five times in the past six months").

Results

For the purposes of this paper, the selected results will focus on student experiences with discrimination and microaggressions and issues of Latinx representation on college campuses.

Student experiences. The majority of Latinx students indicated they have faced discriminatory experiences while at the university. Most students (60%) reported they have faced three or more discriminatory experiences (Figure 1). Notably, graduate students were more likely than undergraduate students to report that they had experienced some form of discrimination on campus (69% of undergraduate and 80% of graduate students) including microaggressions, exclusion, discrimination, and racism. As illustrated in Figure 2, the types of experiences students encountered most often on campus are microaggressions (47% of students) and exclusion (40% of students). Students recounted being exposed to statements such as "I have people make fun of my accent in a very unkind way" and "I've been told that many students of color unfairly benefit from affirmative action and therefore aren't really smart enough for [university] PhD work."
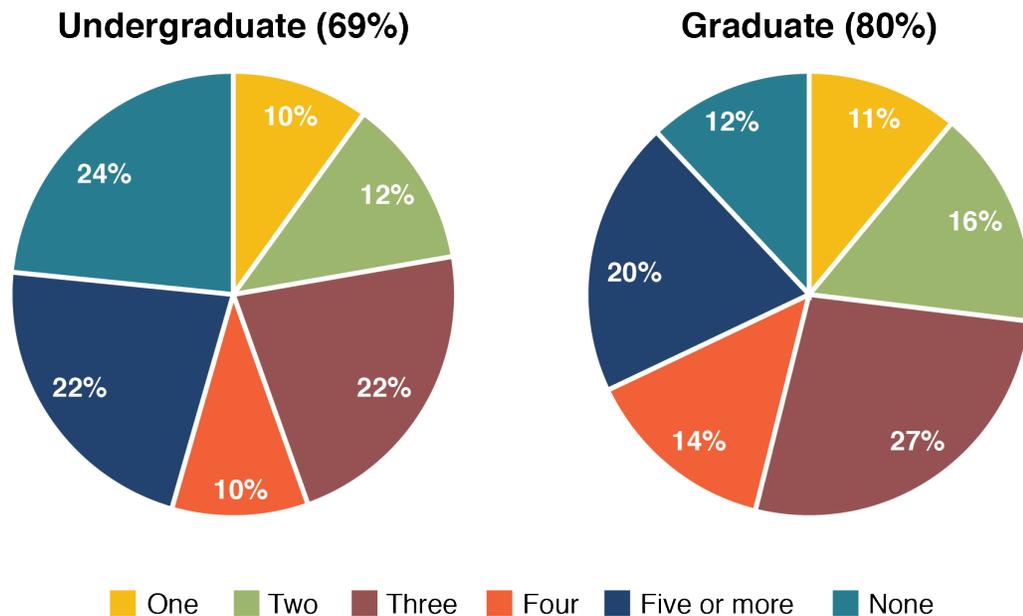

Figure 1. The number of discriminatory experiences Latinx students have faced while at the University of Michigan.

Microaggressions	115 (47%)
Exclusion	98 (40%)
Discrimination	69 (28%)
Oppression	69 (28%)
Racism	67 (28%)
Segregation	41 (17%)

Figure 2. Latinx students' experiences at U-M.

Based on quantitative data, our results indicate that Latinx undergraduate and graduate students experienced some form of racial or ethnic microaggressions approximately twice in the past six months. To better explore the microaggressions experienced by participants, we coded qualitative descriptions of such negative experiences for actors (the role or relationship of the person described who committed the microaggression). Nearly 60% of respondents did not specify the actor when describing their negative campus experience. Of those who did, approximately 42% named a faculty or staff member as the perpetrator of a discriminatory act.

Latinx representation. Other significant codes that surfaced were less based on interpersonal interactions and more indicative of structural issues that impact overall campus climate. Thirty-five percent of students expressed difficulty finding a Latinx community on campus given the small Latinx student population and therefore felt excluded from the university. Approximately 38% of Latinx students described negative experiences resulting from a lack of representation of Latinx faculty and staff. Similarly, of 148 recommendations made by students, 14% explicitly requested increased faculty mentorship and representation. As one respondent expressed:

> Diversity initiatives, hiring, and other support tend to not be directed to my community. Lack of faculty and other mentors that understand my experience and/or come from my own background. Issues in my community are ignored and I become further marginalized at the University.

From Research to Action

Our results present numerous ways to effectively work toward campus-wide goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We have structured our policy recommendations around two of the key strategies in our home institution's diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI) strategic plan: creating an inclus*ive & equitable campus climate and recruiting, retaining, & developing a diverse community.*

Create Inclusive and Equitable Campus Climate

More than 60% of Latinx students have experienced three or more types of discrimination (most commonly microaggressions). Frequently, these experiences of discrimination are perpetrated by other members of the campus community, including faculty and graduate student instructors. To work toward diminishing these high rates of discrimination, we recommend the following:

Include evaluative measures related to an instructor's ability to address issues of diversity and oppression at the end of course evaluations.

Incorporate diversity criteria into the hiring and tenure decision-making processes. Such statements could provide useful information when determining whether applicants and faculty seeking tenure would contribute meaningfully to and commit to working toward a more inclusive and equitable campus.

Consider a structure for potential training for the campus community, supported by institutional research. Information collected via climate surveys can provide useful information about the particular needs of different colleges and universities. Training could, for instance, ensure that all students, staff, and faculty understand the definitions related to bias and the structures that are in place to report and address instances of bias—information that our climate survey indicated was not widely known. Alternatively, training could target particular campus populations (such as all students or all faculty) to intentionally provide development for certain contexts (such as in the classroom or residence halls).

Recruit, Retain, and Develop a Diverse Community

Our results demonstrate the need for more Latinx representation across both student and faculty populations. Quantitative data tell us that over one-third of

Latinx students experience exclusion on campus, while qualitative data describe this exclusion as stemming from a small Latinx student population. Additionally, students identify a lack of Latinx faculty and express an interest in more mentorship and networking opportunities with Latinx faculty.

With regards to recruiting more Latinx faculty, we recommend:

Standardize the utilization of best practices known to promote the hiring of faculty from underrepresented groups, including (a) posting job descriptions that explicitly engage diversity at the department of subfield level, (b) utilizing institutional "special hire" strategies (such as search waivers, target of opportunity hire programs, or spousal hires), and (c) conducting faculty searches by an ethnically/racially diverse search committee (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004).

Streamline, collect data about, and communicate transparently information regarding institutional "special hire" programs. In the case of the University of Michigan, the target of opportunity hire program that created significant gains in diversifying the faculty under the Michigan Mandate is no longer legal. However, the targeted hire program that still exists could be used more strategically. We recommend requiring schools and departments to report whether they requested funding for (and received funding for) a targeted hire at the end of each year so that the institution can track the efficacy and equity of the program.

Dedicate a budget to diversifying the faculty. Earlier this year, the University of California committed $7 million annually to expanding existing programs and creating new programs to ensure the faculty more accurately reflects the diversity of the state (University of California, 2018).

With regards to recruiting more Latinx students, we recommend:

Consider legal action to reverse the state bans on affirmative action. In the first extensive and up-to-date review of alternative paths for racial diversity, leading scholars explore the most popular alternatives to affirmative action (top percentage programs, socioeconomic status as a proxy for race, and targeted pre-college training and recruitment outreach programs) and found, "that the alternatives are inefficient, cumbersome, and costly and that they do not accomplish the goal" (Orfield, 2017). We encourage the University of Michigan, and other leaders in the

higher education community, to consider taking on a leadership role in this civil rights issue by being more active and overturning alternative systems that are ineffective.

Improve the financial aid process in ways tailored to the Latinx community. This could be done by providing a user-friendly and bilingual resource/information hub for Latinx applicants and current students; increasing work-study opportunities for low-income and underrepresented minority students; and providing clearer information on how to locate work-study positions.

With regards to retaining and developing both Latinx students and faculty, we recommend:

Increase opportunities for and development of mentorship and connections between Latinx students and faculty. Faculty mentors should be supported by receiving training regarding mental health and well-being resources for students so that they can help mentees to mitigate the impact of experiences of discrimination. Providing a physical space for such mentorship and community building could also provide a healthy counter to what students described as an isolating campus climate.

Broad recommendations to achieve many of the above:

Endorse the Seal of Excelencia and work to develop and implement a comprehensive and systematic approach to supporting Latinx student success. Excelencia in Education recently launched the Seal of Excelencia, an initiative that seeks to significantly increase the number of Latinx students who persist and attain degrees by 2030. More than 60 leaders of institutions of higher education have already endorsed the seal, which involves:
  » demonstrating robust and accurate data systems (that track Latinx enrollment, retention, financial support, graduation rates, and representation among student, faculty, and staff);
  » consistent, transparent use of evidence-based practices; and
  » strong, committed leadership.

Increasingly, colleges and universities across the country are highlighting the importance of campus climate by developing strategic diversity initiatives. For instance, the University of Michigan is making many efforts through the strategic

DEI initiative. What would help the Latinx community most, and what could be achieved through endorsement of the Seal of Excelencia, would be developing a unique and data-driven approach to a population whose needs differ from other groups.

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