Latina/x Faculty Awareness of Culturally Responsive Curricula Needed at a US Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Abstract:

Latina/x faculty underrepresentation constitutes a challenge at higher education institutions, as they become aware that a diversified student body requires better teaching approaches. Latina/x faculty participants are determined to diversify the curriculum and pedagogy that represents and reflects the diversity within the student body at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in the United States (U.S.). In doing so, Latina/x faculty are the critical piece that instills empowerment and leadership within their disciplines. This case study addresses the experiences of six Latina/x – five self-identified as women and one as a non-binary person – professors in different disciplines at an HSI at the southern U.S. border, who integrate culturally responsive curricula through values, attitudes, and beliefs. This curriculum approach makes the student learning process better situated in their personal, cultural, and social experiences. The findings reveal the necessity of innovating the curricula centered on social justice by integrating a wider variety of authors in course readings and activities. Also, implementing culturally connected and human-centered approaches in their courses was critical. The decolonization of the mainstream euro-centric patriarchal curriculum could be a step forward for HSIs to make more sense of their purpose and identity in better serving and informing students.

1. Introduction

In the United States (U.S.), institutions of higher education have federal designations according to their student demographics. For example, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are institutions with at least 25 percent of Latinx students enrolled, playing a critical role in registering two-thirds of all Latinx undergraduate students (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities [HACU], 2021). Despite HSIs and emergent HSIs having steady growth in the last decade, HSIs report 67 percent of White and 14 percent of Latinx as tenure and tenure track faculty, making evident the need to diversify the recruitment processes (Vargas et al., 2020). The vast disparity between Latinx faculty and Latinx students at HSIs contributes to Latinx faculty overwork. Particularly, in service by mentoring more students and younger minority faculty and teaching by including among other factors a more culturally appropriate curriculum (Turner et al., 2022). García Peña (2022) emphasized that instructors, who interact with students from different backgrounds and many of them share their own cultural background, "must be willing to be vulnerable and to accept individual failures and mistakes to make room for collective learning, collective freedom, and collective joy" (p. 63). Creating safe spaces in classrooms is quite important, where students feel seen, valued, and respected (Contreras Aguirre, 2023). Trust and consequently, hope must be practiced in the classroom. García Peña (2022) recognized that teaching in freedom creates a special connection in which justice and equity are practiced. Lastly, "learning is a communal practice…a practice of love" (García Peña, p. 81). By being agents of change on behalf of HSIs, students empower Latinx faculty and help shape organizational cultures which can help transform the higher education landscape (Villarreal, 2022). The study's purpose was to gain insight into the teaching approaches that Latina/x faculty use in their courses to make the curriculum and their interaction with students culturally responsive at a specific HSI. The research question that guided this study was: How are Latina/x faculty changing the content and dynamics of their courses to increase their cultural relevance?

2. Literature Review

Over the last 20 years, there has been a slow increase in Latinas occupying leadership positions. Inglebritson (2019) explained Latinas' advancement in education but not in leadership positions in higher education contexts. "Hispanic women and men each accounted for approximately four percent of the faculty in the U.S. colleges and universities between 2016 and 2021" (Mora, 2023, Para. 4). The numbers of Latinas in leadership roles in the universities were lower when they were compared to other ethnic groups (Inglebritson, 2019), but slowly increased their numbers in higher education and leadership positions (Mora, 2023). According to HACU (2020), "Hispanic science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) role models are particularly important in demonstrating that these careers are open to those who "look like me" (p. 15). Usually, academic failure has to do with the students having distinct interests and purposes from those dictated by instructors and schools (Gillen, 2014). Particularly for minority students, who from an early age are confronted with the obvious differences between their school climate and their family cultures, suffer from learning gaps and limitations because of such differences. In college and beyond, the difference between home environment and institutional contexts continues. In this sense, Covarrubias (2023) stated "When I return home from college, I often feel overwhelmed with guilt and confusion…I struggle to reconcile

my dual reality of neighborhood and poverty and university opportunity" (p. 150). Nowadays, college students are the most diverse generation and have certain characteristics that make them more aware of social justice and equality issues (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This student awareness demands more congruency and knowledge from faculty on certain topics. For instance, Cuellar et al. (2023) used a Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS) in ten HSIs to assess the knowledge and skills of the faculty in understanding culturally responsive teaching concepts and the integration of culturally responsive practices in the curricula. The sample included the following characteristics: White faculty (63%), Latinx (20%), and Asian/Asian American (8%). Faculty of color represented 34% and women (56%) of all faculty participants. In terms of disciplines, humanities accounted for (30%) and STEM (19%). The survey results indicated more awareness from non-STEM faculty and faculty of color in their comprehension of culturally responsive concepts in teaching and skills to integrate into the curricula culturally responsive practices. Furthermore, the problematic identification of HSIs in finding a meaning for "servigness" and adequately serving the student population complicates the role of HSIs and their great potential (Garcia, 2017). There is hope, however, to change this vague definition of "servigness." This is reflected by Fuller and Rivera's (2021) study at an HSI Microbiology class, where professors "allowed students to start their learning from their own place of understanding-centering students' lived experience." Professors wanted the students to interview their families and learn about the home remedies they use. Students were supposed to test if these remedies affect the growth of bacteria implicated in gastrointestinal distress or a sore throat. After all those tests, the students finished it with a final assessment by making a poster they presented in class. The results from this research had students more engaged, and confident and had a deeper understanding of the course content. Often, ethnic studies set the example of culturally responsive curricula by providing a curriculum that is closely related to students' personal, generational, and family experiences (Covarrubias, 2023; Marrun & Arnaldo, 2023). Latina faculty critically understand what a cultural mismatch means for minority students and they bring together research, teaching, and service with a communal purpose and social justice commitment (Covarrubias, 2023). In particular, this study took place at a specific HSI with selected Latina/x faculty aware that better teaching/learning approaches are needed.

3. Conceptual Framework: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

In the mid of the '90s, discussions started about how to include a stronger emphasis on equity and diversity in education. Particularly considering a focus on the intersectionality between culture and teaching. Gloria Ladson-Billings is the author of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (1995) who proposed three main elements: 1) student achievement is the academic development of students due to instruction; 2) cultural competence is the appreciation of one's culture and/or knowledge of others' culture and 3) sociological awareness is the student's capacity to apply real-world problem-solving knowledge learned in school. Numerous researchers have expanded Ladson-Billings's CRP in distinct contexts and disciplines. For example, García and Okhidoi (2015) highlighted five themes that support teaching practices at an HSI that address the whole student's needs: identity and achievement, equity and excellence, developmental appropriateness, teaching the whole student, and student-teacher relationships. A few scholars have researched HSIs efforts to implement culturally relevant curricula

indicating a low percentage of ethnocentric approaches and sporadic pedagogical practices implemented in courses (Cole, 2011; García et al. 2019).

Furthermore, Young et al. (2019) developed a definition of CRP linked to STEM as "the utilization of cultural funds of knowledge….to develop deep and meaningful connections between STEM content and the learners' lived experiences" (p. 10). Overall, CRP seeks to address pedagogical needs through asset-based approaches to teaching and learning in a diverse student body. Students come with cultural experiences that can help them learn and develop while institutions work to embrace diversity and inclusionary practices to successfully prepare and serve students. Mosley et al. (2019) realized the importance of instilling ancestral pride in individuals to help them see and highlight the strengths and contributions of both individual and collective cultural and intellectual influences of prior generations.

More recently, Ladson-Billings, (2014) switched her original CRP concept to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) arguing for more flexibility in understanding culture and critically addressing questions of equity and justice. One of her arguments is that culture is fluid and dynamic and students must be "subjects in the instructional process" (Ladson-Billings, p. 76). There are multiple elements to consider when adopting CSP including individual identities, discipline specificities, and instruction modality (e.g., hybrid and asynchronous). CSP continues to expand and evolve with the hope of addressing contemporary inequality issues. The rationale for selecting this CRP and later CSP lies in the need to identify the elements that Latina/x faculty use in their courses to disrupt status quo cycles and create culturally responsive spaces, which are explored in this study.

4. Methods

A naturalistic inquiry approach guided this study to embrace the existence of multiple realities according to participants' perceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The methodology used for this research study included a descriptive qualitative case study. According to Yin (2009), "as an empirical inquiry investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context… and in which multiple sources are used" (p. 23). The rationale for choosing a case study lies in presenting detailed and relevant information about a current situation happening in the U.S. which is the diversification of faculty and student body. A case study also considers the multiple views and struggles of individual participants. Therefore, this study captured the experiences of Latina/x faculty in their efforts to make their course curricula culturally responsive for an increasing minority student population at an HSI. Latina/x faculty who participated in this study were mentors of a Latinx mentoring program and were invited to participate. Participants represented distinct disciplines such as Education, Communication, Social Work, and Science. Most of them were junior faculty. The selection criteria to recruit participants included: 1) self-identify as Latina/x, 2) being employed as faculty, and 3) participant of the Latinx mentoring program and interested in making a change in academia. Selected Latina/x faculty participated in an hour-long individual interview during Fall 2022 or Spring 2023, where their approach to teaching as Latina/x faculty and interaction with students was discussed. In addition, the researcher documented through a journal, interactions of faculty with student mentees. The researcher attended one faculty-student meeting lasting on average 30 minutes each meeting in the Spring 2023 semester.

4.1 Data Analysis

The data analysis took the following approach. Once the researcher collected the data in the form of audio, the researcher ordered the transcripts using Rev, a company that offers online transcription services. Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis program was used to analyze the interviews and researcher documentation. The researcher selected initial coding to identify similarities and differences in the data. Due to the nature of the study and the data content, the researcher also included value coding in the analysis. Value coding identified values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2013) expressed by participants, helping understand faculty pedagogical and cultural approaches. Section 5 emphasizes relevant aspects of this research's findings.

4.2 Limitations

The method adopted has limitations in terms of that the findings of this particular case study cannot be generalized and applied to other contexts. Furthermore, there is the risk of bias related to the researcher's influence and opinion in the study design and direction.

5. Findings

The findings presented in this section include the most relevant information shared by the Latina/x faculty participants concerning their approach as it relates to the use of culturally responsive curricula and changes in their course dynamics.

5.1 Generating cultural connections

Latina/x faculty participants represented different disciplines, and this aspect influenced their attitudes and beliefs about how to make the course activities culturally relevant. It was through their own participant experiences in college and their identities that faculty created a space of trust and understanding among their students. Star from Communication Studies said, "I speak of my experiences… growing up in a low income, you know, as a first-generation Mexican student… I think makes a difference in a way, just the way that the students get impacted in hearing those experiences." Similarly, Nora, a faculty member in Social Work, added, "I'm very clear at the beginning of the semester that I am a first-generation, woman, who is, you know, a native from this area." Both participants showed empathy with students to make them feel culturally connected. And by being honest, faculty members let students know that they went through similar experiences as the ones students might be experiencing. Furthermore, language and music were other ways to connect with students. Lila, a faculty member in Communication Studies explained "In my undergrad class this semester… I speak in Spanish, and I speak in English… I always translate it… different phrases, different expressions… because in my training…throughout the education system, Spanish was a cause for punishment." This quote shows the intentionality of this faculty member in creating cultural connections through language. Especially highlighting the negative impact that being bilingual was throughout her education. Another important aspect that helps connect people even those who do not speak the language is the music. Star, went further by integrating some music into the classroom, she added, "I do try to implement culture into the class…I do play like 'rancheras' (country music) in the

intervals of lecture…, I've introduced the class to like 'Buenos dias mi gente'(Good morning, my people)… So it's another example of implementing the culture and the Spanish language." These are great examples of how participants included particular elements in the classrooms that helped them reflect who they are. They enjoy showing empathy, understanding, and honesty, and sharing their knowledge regarding language, and music.

5.2 Perceiving students holistically

Participants were vocal mentioning at different moments during the conversations the importance of treating students as they deserve, knowing them better, and providing an appropriate learning environment. It all started with acknowledging who the students were, Siba, a Bilingual Education professor, mentioned, "We're in an area where linguistically and culturally, it's very rich, whether they're are Native Americans or Hispanic students, or Latino or Mexican." On a similar quote, Jay, a faculty member in Special Education expressed, "You approach the student as a whole being mind, body, and spirit…and you also take the lived experience into account, and you don't see them as empty vessels… acknowledging who's in the classroom and learning who they are." These two quotes align with how these Latina/x faculty reflected on who the students are and the types of experiences they bring to college that could eventually inform the curriculum content. Jay also stated the importance of other forms of knowledge learned from family and community members. She noted, "Acknowledging that they have so much knowledge in themselves, in their families, and their communities, and bringing that into the classroom and making it the core of your approach to teaching and learning." And Luisa, a science faculty member revealed, "When I talk about the scientists, I talk about connections…, I try to show them science is human, you know, that it has a connection to their lives, whoever they are." Jay and Luisa considered critically perceiving students with an asset-based mindset and considering the whole student for designing a better learning environment. The more students see themselves as active learners and involved in the curricula, the more they will likely increase their engagement and motivation in classes.

5.3 Innovating the curricula, a change in the academic landscape

All Latina/x professors who participated in this study were innovating in the curricula. A participant addressed the importance of training educators with a social justice focus; hence, they can replicate it in their classes. Also, at least three participants mentioned have included a wide range of authors - beyond the traditional Eurocentric patriarchal literature- in the course-assigned readings. Siba said, "Socially justice oriented…that's what I try to promote in the classes. They're all about access and equity for students that they're going to teach so that way when they go out, they're better prepared." Also, Lila mentioned a similar idea, adding, "My graduate seminars, I'm like, all right, let's bring in other readings. Let's bring in people that are actually going through these experiences and what they're writing about and how they're writing about it." And Nora vented, "I have tried to incorporate different types of authors for readings, uh, podcasts… we try and keep it open like for LGBTQ plus, for the native or indigenous population. All three participants included course activities that considered the use of a wider number of authors and the diversification of the readings. For example, Luisa used the following approach, "Every day, every class I feature a different scientist. So, for February I only

feature Black scientists. And then for March I'm gonna do cis female and trans female… like I try to show different aspects of science." Besides including a broader number of scientists who performed important work in this field, Luisa considered it necessary to go deeper in highlighting how relevant is the work of minority scientists. She added,

> What I want to do for each topic, I want to have a cultural connection…, for example, in the atom, I talked about how an Indian philosopher thought about the atom… my goal is to have like a different connection to show them that like, these things are not only European.

In this same topic, Jay commented on the essential role of faculty in considering innovation to the curricula, for example, she said, "I think part of the pedagogy, I think at an HSI has to center the experiences and the knowledge of Latinx students and Latinx people, right?" Also important are the individuals who teach those courses. Jay added, "I also think they need to see themselves reflected, not only in the curriculum but in the people teaching in front of them, in front of the classroom." A change in the academic landscape through curriculum innovation is not an easy task for Latina/x faculty, but in some way or another, they are switching their approach to teaching on behalf of those underrepresented students.

6. Discussion

The research question framing this study asked how Latina/x faculty are changing the content and dynamics of their courses to increase their cultural relevance. Findings in this study reveal that Latina/x faculty who participated in this research were aware of the needed changes to better connect with students. In classrooms and within their courses, Latina/x faculty participants were *generating cultural connections* with students. For instance, using some Spanish and Latin music in lectures and breaks of lectures. Such a culturally relevant approach provides opportunities for students to connect personal and family experiences with college course content. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) argued that cultural competence was needed to recognize the connection between home, school, and the community. This cultural competence will help students appreciate their culture and feel proud of it. Also, Fuller and Rivera (2021) and Marrun and Arnaldo (2023) noted that when students perceived a connection between what they knew at home and new knowledge in college, they became more confident and engaged in the learning process. In this sense, García Peña (2022) highlighted that classrooms must be spaces where students practice and feel collective learning, freedom, and joy. In turn, Covarrubias (2023) noted that the role of Latina faculty was essential in fully understanding what it meant to suffer from a cultural mismatch. And more important is the Latina faculty's full commitment to addressing social justice issues and engaging in community practices (Contreras Aguirre, 2023; Covarrubias, 2023). Furthermore, as Latina/x faculty become role models, they develop a strong culturally relevant connection. For example, by using some Spanish and Latin music, Latina/x professors link some student memories back home and make them feel seen and important in the college context.

Another significant aspect was how Latina/x faculty talked about *perceiving students holistically combining the whole mind, body, and spirit of the person.* The awareness that Latina/x faculty showed about students' talents and assets is proof that they think deeply about how to better include

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information, activities, and practices that are relevant for students. In this regard, the researcher documented in her journal, the faculty's genuine interest in providing all information and knowledge needed to, for example, first-generation students (the first in their households to attend a university) navigate college and beyond. Participants perceived students as individuals with special characteristics who can bring knowledge and wisdom learned from family and the community. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) recognized the importance of acknowledging students' identities in a constant evolution of instructional formats and multidisciplinary approaches. Given the high number of Latinx students attending HSIs, and overall increased diversity in college, the leadership of Latinas/x and progress in their tenure track line are crucial to the success of minority students (HACU, 2021; Inglebritson, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Cuellar et al.' (2023) research highlighted that HSIs must be accountable for their faculty diversity. More minority faculty on campus contributes to more awareness of the knowledge and skills for culturally responsive concepts and practices. This study's findings support Cuellar et al. (2023) research in that Latina/x faculty at HSI must have better representation, support, and guidance. Particularly first-generation and STEM faculty for the need to know how to successfully navigate academia and their high underrepresentation in such disciplines.

The third and last aspect emphasized the importance of diversifying the HSIs curricula. In effect, HSIs enroll high numbers of Latinx students, and these institutions are responsible for making the curriculum meaningful and relevant for students whose experiences are not reflected in the traditional literature. Therefore, Latina faculty can be those agents of change in the lives of students who can be empowered to follow their dreams through *curriculum innovation and a change in the academic landscape* (Villarreal, 2022). Latina/x faculty participants expressed great interest and investment in transforming the course content by taking different approaches. Some of these approaches included intentionally adding a wider variety of authors to the course readings, considering students' ethnic and gender identity, and benefiting from students' cultural, family, and community experiences. In other words, such changes to the curricula will transform students' experiences and become sociologically competent. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), sociological awareness is a competence that minority students must acquire to be able to solve complex current problems with knowledge learned in courses. The more connection with familiar traditions and experiences, the more relevant and important this information would be for students. Overall, students' cultural experiences should be seen as assets and institutions must embrace inclusionary practices to better serve a diversified student population (García & Okhidoi, 2015).

7. Conclusion

The increasing number of minority students enrolled in higher education HSIs calls for implementing curricula that include more culturally relevant concepts and elements. In this study, Latina/x faculty participants showed awareness of implementing significant changes in their courses. Three of the most remarkable changes include 1) Latina/x faculty participants showed greater awareness of cultural connections in their teaching through values and attitudes in aspects such as empathy, understanding, and honesty explicitly communicated to students. The use of Spanish and music was also incorporated into courses. 2) Participants expressed beliefs in perceiving students integrally with an asset-based mindset. Implementing student-centered curricula was at the core of their

pedagogy and course activities. And 3) participants showed awareness of the importance of updating the curricula to reflect students' identities and personal, family, and community experiences. Particularly, Latina/x faculty considered a broader number and type of authors to be included in their lectures. Therefore, those changes might provoke a paradigmatic shift. Students need to find a better learning environment and feel more connected with their real-life experiences usually linked to their families and communities. Justice and equity must be happening in college classrooms both making the curricula and the relationships culturally responsive.

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