

STRATEGIES FOR FACULTY-STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY ENGAGE LATINO¹ STUDENTS*

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ABSTRACT

Student-faculty engagement has been identified as the best predictor of Latino student persistence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This study explores the strategies that community college faculty employ to engage Latino students. Findings indicate that knowledge, appreciation, and sensitivity to Hispanic cultures and an understanding of the preferred learning styles of Latino students are important considerations to establishing classroom environments that engage Latino students and, thus, facilitate their retention and academic success.

INTRODUCTION

The community college has been described as the pipeline for Latinos in higher education (Laden, 1992, 2001; Rendon & Nora, 1989). In Fall 2004, 59% of

¹We use the terms Latino and Hispanic interchangeably in this article. Participants in this study also used the terms Chicano and Mexican-American.

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Hispanic undergraduate enrollment in the United States was at 2-year institutions (Cook & Cordova, 2007). Community colleges, however, have struggled to improve overall retention, degree or certificate completion, and transfer rates (Bailey, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2006) and Latino community college students have historically had the lowest retention rates and highest transfer losses (Harvey, 2002; Rendon & Garza, 1996).

Student-faculty engagement has been identified as the best predictor of Latino student persistence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The Quality Education for Minorities Network (1997) found that among the institutions graduating the greatest numbers of minority students in mathematics, engineering, and science, most were able to identify a number of faculty members who were engaged with minority students outside of class and beyond their regular office hours. Other studies have found that faculty-student interaction positively influenced Latino students' degree aspirations and academic success (Colorado State Advisory Committee, 1995) or played an important role in the decision to transfer to a 4-year institution (Brawer, 1995; Britt & Hirt, 1999).

Ewell (1997) argued for additional research on institutional and faculty practices that promote student learning in order to improve student learning. From this call, a number of studies have focused on self-reported student engagement behaviors. This line of inquiry has drawn from previous models of student persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993), principles of good practice (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Education Commission of the States, 1995), and studies of predictors of student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Stage & Hossler, 2000). From these efforts, two related initiatives have emerged. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was established in 1998 and focuses on 4-year colleges and universities. Recognizing the unique mission and student populations of 2-year institutions, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) was launched in 2001. Each of these initiatives has also begun to measure faculty expectations for student engagement, NSSE conducted a faculty survey in 2003 and CCSSE launched a faculty survey in 2008. From the initial NSSE faculty survey, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that the educational contexts that faculty created resulted in a positive effect on student learning and engagement and proposed five classroom practices that promote student success. These practices are briefly described in the following paragraph.

The first identified practice involves course-related interactions, faculty and students interacting in the classroom about matters and content related to the course. A positive relationship was also found between student learning and active and collaborative learning techniques. Involving students in their learning has contributed to their success in the classroom. The third practice, academic challenge, means more than simply requiring a significant amount of homework. Rather, the term refers to establishing standards for achievement that are, in part, consistent with prior academic preparation, but also provide a gentle push for students to achieve more than they think they can accomplish. Emphasizing

higher-order cognitive activities also contributes to student success. Examples of higher-order activities include the use of course content, the application of theories or concepts, or a synthesis of materials from different courses to address issues directly related to students' interests and lives. The fifth practice, enriching educational activities, includes co-curricular involvement such as community service or service learning as well as practica, internships, and other culminating experiences.

As mentioned above, NSSE focuses on 4-year institutions. Thus, there is a gap in the existing knowledge concerning the educational context established by community college faculty. The initial faculty survey conducted in conjunction with CCSSE (CCFSSE) included questions that provided the faculty perspective on student engagement. This perspective, however, is based on *what* occurs in the class. One of the CCFSSSE questions is, "How often do students in your selected course section ask questions or contribute to class discussions?" A different perspective is *how* faculty draws students into active participation in the class. This different perspective asks, "What strategies do you use to elicit questions from students or to encourage their contributions to class discussions?" Given the importance of student-faculty engagement on the persistence of Latino students, our primary purpose in this study was to explore the strategies that community college faculty employ to engage Latino students in the classroom. A corollary purpose was to examine whether community college faculty use the same strategies identified by Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) to create an educational context that promotes student engagement.

METHODOLOGY

This study was developed around two guiding questions:

1. What strategies do community college faculty use to engage Latino students in the classroom and thus facilitate their academic success?
2. Do community college faculty use the same strategies as 4-year faculty to create classroom environments that promote student engagement?

We incorporated a multiple case study design to examine how community college faculty members created an educational context that facilitated the academic success of Latino students. Creswell (2008) indicated that although qualitative researchers usually are reluctant to generalize their results to other cases, multiple cases do allow for the researchers to make modest claims of generalizable results when they ". . . identify findings that are common to all cases using cross-case analysis" (p. 490).

To gain a broader perspective, we sought participating institutions on the basis of the three primary categories of community colleges: rural, suburban, and urban. In addition, the participating institutions have differing levels of Latino enrollments. These institutions are profiled below.

Rural Community College

Rural Community College (RCC) is a multi-campus community college serving 25 counties—an area of approximately 14,000 square miles with a population of more than 300,000. RCC describes itself as having three full-service campuses, three limited-service educational centers, and providing additional credit and non-credit educational opportunities throughout its service area through a variety of distance learning technologies. In the last decade, the Hispanic population in the RCC region has more than doubled. This fall, the kindergarten class in the public school system of the largest city with a full-service campus is almost 50% Hispanic. RCC is also beginning to see increased Latino enrollment. In the fall of 2006, 7% of the credit student population identified themselves as Hispanic representing a 100% increase over the past 5 years.

RCC offers 33 career and technical education programs requiring 2 years or less to complete. In 2005-06 RCC awarded 1,516 degrees, diplomas, and certificates in these career and technical programs. RCC also offers an academic transfer program, granting slightly more than 100 transfer degrees in 2005-06. In 2005-06, a non-duplicated headcount of slightly more than 13,500 students enrolled in credit courses, resulting in an FTE (based on 30 semester hours) of slightly more than 3,750.

Suburban Community College

Suburban Community College (SCC) is one of five comprehensive community colleges in a community college district that serves 1,400 square miles in two suburban counties of a major metropolitan statistical area. The main campus of SCC is in an unincorporated suburban area, the college has two additional educational centers and also provides online and hybrid distance education offerings. The vast majority of students at SCC are from a county that between the years 2000 and 2005 experienced an 11% increase in the Hispanic population. SCC is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). In the fall of 2006, 31% of the student population at SCC was Hispanic, slightly less than the 37.5% Hispanic population in the primary county the institution serves.

SCC offers 23 career and technical education programs leading to 26 AAS degrees and 79 certificates and a university transfer program. In 2005-06, SCC awarded 610 associates degrees and 444 certificates. Based on a non-duplicated headcount of slightly more than 10,000, the FTE (based on 30 semester hours) in 2006-07 was slightly less than 4,900. The majority (60%) of SCC students are traditional aged (18-24) and more than two-thirds (68%) attend classes during the day.

Urban Community College

Urban Community College (UCC) is located in one of the largest metropolitan statistical areas in the United States, the fastest growing MSA in its state. UCC

describes itself as having a main campus, three education centers, and also offers courses via the internet. Between 1990 and 2004, the Hispanic population of the MSA has increased by approximately 80%. UCC is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Currently the student population at UCC is 42% Hispanic, which is representative of the Hispanic population in the MSA.

The overwhelming majority (90%) of UCC students enter the institution with the intent to transfer to a baccalaureate institution. Transcripts reveal, however, that almost 60% of the degree recipients have completed some vocational courses. In 2006-07, UCC awarded 1,371 degrees and 643 certificates. Based on a non-duplicated headcount of slightly more than 19,850, the FTE (based on 30 semester hours) in 2006-07 was slightly more than 14,000. As the locations on the campus and centers are in close proximity to each other, students often attend multiple locations of UCC. Among the 2006-07 student population, 87.8% enrolled on the main campus, 29.3% enrolled at one of the three centers, and 12.5% completed courses via the internet.

To assist in the logistical aspects of the study, we established a relationship with an institutional contact, an instructional administrator, at each of the three community colleges. We described the research project to the institutional contact, assuring the anonymity of the faculty who would participate in interviews and the steps we would take to also protect the identity of the institution. These institutional contacts helped us communicate with the college president to determine if the college was willing to participate in the study. We approached four community colleges, with three agreeing to participate. After the institution agreed to participate, we asked the institutional contacts to identify and provide contact information for 15 faculty members who were considered “effective” in engaging Latino students in the classroom, thus facilitating their academic success; but we allowed each institution to establish their definition of effective. We asked the institutional contact to seek nominations from a variety of constituencies: students, staff members, faculty, and administrators at the college. After receiving the nominations, we sent each possible participant a letter asking if he/she was willing to be interviewed as part of this project and providing the necessary information to RSVP to the researchers. Individuals who agreed to be interviewed received a packet of information concerning this project that included: an introductory letter, a consent form that fully informed them of the purpose and the process of the research, and sample questions similar to those used during the interview. Our goal was to conduct a minimum of 12 interviews at each respective community college. We completed a total of 41 interviews, 14 at RCC and UCC respectively and 13 at SCC.

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were asked to provide some basic information concerning their involvement on their college campus. As shown in Table 1, 37 of the 41 (90%) individuals we interviewed held faculty positions and one person held a combined faculty/professional staff position. Each of the three administrators we interviewed previously held faculty positions

Table 1. Interviewee Demographics

	Rural college	Suburban college	Urban college	Total
Position				
Faculty/Instructor	13	10	14	37
Administrator/Staff	1	2		3
Faculty/Staff		1		1
Faculty Status				
Full-time	13	10	13	36
Part-time	1	3	1	5
Length of Service				
1-5	7	2	4	13
6-10	3	3	6	12
11-15	2	3	0	5
16-20	1	1		2
21-25	1	1	1	3
26+		3	3	6

and was nominated based on experiences. In terms of faculty status, the individuals we interviewed overwhelmingly held or had held a full-time faculty appointment (35 out of 41, 88%) but four current full-time faculty indicated that their initial employment had been as an adjunct with subsequent full-time employment. The length of service presented in the table represents the years of service at the participating colleges. In many cases, the participants had additional years of experience at other educational institutions.

We also asked faculty to identify the number of sections in the respective disciplines they were teaching during the semester of the interview. As shown in Table 2, a breadth in courses and disciplines was represented among the participants. While many of the faculty members taught multiple sections of the same class, others taught three to five different courses.

We were also interested in determining if the respondents had opportunities to interact with students outside of the classroom by serving as an advisor or the sponsor of a club or organization. Three of the respondents at RCC, eight of the respondents at SCC, and five of the respondents at UCC indicated that they were currently serving as sponsors of clubs or organizations. Eight of these individuals were sponsoring organizations related to cultural identity and five individuals were sponsoring organizations related to academic disciplines.

Prior to the scheduled campus visits, the participants were contacted via e-mail to arrange a time to conduct the interview. The interviews were conducted

Table 2. Instructional Areas of Interviewees

Discipline	RCC	SCC	UCC
Math/Science	4	3	—
Social Science	4	1	5
Career/Vocational	5	1	3
Fine Arts/Humanities	2	5	8
Developmental	5	7	3

one-on-one in an office or conference room provided by the institution or in the interviewees' offices. At the beginning of the interviews the participants were asked if they had read the consent form, offered the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and then were asked to sign the consent form. The interviews were conducted over a span of 7 months during the 2007-2008 academic year. All interviews were audio recorded and coupled with field notes as supplementary information.

The interviews were conducted using a structured interview guide as well as probes for each of the questions. Interview questions were developed from the NSSE and CCSSE faculty surveys and followed the guiding questions of the study. The probes could either be a further explanation of the question asked or a request for further explanation. To protect the anonymity of participants, we assigned each interviewee a code and identified them only by that code. We conducted one focus group session with 11 individuals to pilot the interview questions and made slight modifications to questions that were not clear or did not illicit the information the question was intended to gather.

A professional transcriptionist converted the audio recordings to written transcripts. We started the analysis process by independently coding eight transcripts and then met to compare our findings. We coded the remaining transcripts independently and held subsequent sessions to discuss and reach consensus regarding the analyses. Creswell (2008) explained the coding process as the step where researchers:

. . . make sense out of text data, divide it into text or image segments, label the segments with codes, examine the codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes. Also in this process you will select specific data to use and disregard other data that do not specifically provide evidence for your themes. (p. 251)

The researchers used both *in vivo* codes as well as lean coding. *In vivo* coding uses words or phrases directly taken from the transcripts. For lean coding, the researcher only assigns a few codes to large amounts of material (p. 252).

According to Creswell (2008) “describing and developing themes from the data consists of answering the major research questions and forming an in-depth understanding of the central phenomena through description and thematic development” (p. 254). We first describe cultural aspects of Latino students and their preferred learning styles. Common themes regarding the classroom environment that emerged from our analyses are provided and we conclude with consideration of whether the community college setting is similar to the activities described by Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005).

CULTURE MATTERS

The three participating community colleges are in geographic areas that have experienced significant growth in Hispanic populations. Although each respective community college indicated attempts to increase Latino representation among the administration, faculty, and staff, the majority of faculty are white non-Hispanic. The community college faculty we interviewed stressed that “culture matters,” and pointed to knowledge, appreciation, and sensitivity to Hispanic culture as the key component to successfully engaging Latino students. As Torres (2006) pointed out, “students do not leave their cultural values at the door” (p. 316).

Family commitment is a characteristic common to most Hispanic cultures (Griggs & Dunn, 1996) and the responsibility to both immediate and extended family was evident in the stories that were shared with us. In explaining the importance of the family in Latino culture, Rendon and Valadez (1993) illustrated that financial support is a primary aspect of commitment to family. In analyzing the transcripts of interviews, we found an “order of importance” with the family considered as most important, employment as next important, and participating in post-secondary education a distant third. In other words, the majority of faculty indicated that Latino students are reluctant to place education over family and work. We were struck by the number of comments about Latino males who had demonstrated the ability to be successful in college, but left because of the need to provide financial support for their extended family. In addition, males at RCC and UCC tended to pursue vocational programs, based on the need for employment and income. The examples we heard matched previous research regarding the selection of fields of study (McGlynn, 2004; Rendon & Valadez, 1993) and challenges to persistence and transfer to 4-year institutions (Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004; Rendon, Justiz, & Resta, 1988).

A second cultural aspect that emerged from the transcripts was that of community—helpfulness, cooperation, and collaboration. Faculty participants explained that they often found Latino students would turn to each other for help rather than approach the instructor. Agencies that work with immigrant Hispanic populations have found that prior negative experiences in the country of origin often leave Hispanics wary of authority figures (McMahon, 2002). A number of faculty members at RCC and SCC, areas with higher numbers of

immigrant Latino families, spoke of the importance of earning the trust of Latino students as a prerequisite before students would take the step of asking for assistance.

These two cultural aspects lead to an important point—in order to successfully engage the Latino student population, community college faculty reported that they must often move outside of the classroom and, possibly, even off the campus. A previous study (Mina et al., 2004) supports this contention, contending that the successful Latino collegiate experience must also include the family and community. At RCC and UCC, faculty shared individual and institutional efforts to extend the college into the community. At both institutions, field trips and course assignments are commonly used to take students into the greater Latino community. RCC is engaged with the community through its commitment to provide learning centers that focus language skills in a major workplace in one community and in public libraries in two additional communities. UCC faculty are actively involved in off-campus student recruitment activities in the Latino community and administrators and faculty have taken leadership roles with community agencies such as food banks and Habit for Humanity. Participation in the broader Latino community was described as “expected” and “part of what we do” by the faculty at UCC.

SCC had developed a series of activities (e.g., speakers, art exhibits, cultural celebrations) to occur on their campus, but the participants indicated that the events had not drawn large numbers and very few non-students came to the campus for these events. There were a number of SCC faculty who pointed to the philosophy of an “if you offer it they will come” attitude, and these individuals expressed the opinion that this was one reason why the institution had not had greater academic success with Latino students. One faculty member stressed, “I think that if we call ourselves a community college we need to be actively engaged in helping the community address pertinent issues . . . and as a whole, the college is not involved with the Hispanic community.”

THE HISPANIC STUDENT AS A LEARNER

There is consensus that a relationship exists between the culture a student lives in and preferred ways of learning (Guild, 1994). Intertwined with the statements of cultural importance were descriptions of how the culture impacted learning styles. Sanchez (1996) incorporated Curry’s Theoretical Model of Learning Style Components and Effects (1991) to analyze the learning preferences of adult Hispanic learners at three levels: motivational maintenance, task engagement, and cognitive strategies. We used the levels of this model to describe the observations of community college faculty regarding the learning preferences of the Latino students they had experienced.

The motivational maintenance level of Curry’s model (1991) considers the preferred method of interacting with faculty members and peers, the willingness

to work on a task and persist through completion of the task, and the level of need that the student brings to the classroom. The task engagement level of Curry's model involves the interaction between the motivation of the learner and the processing work required by the learning task. The cognitive strategies level of Curry's model involves the processes by which students' receive and retain information.

Motivational Maintenance

The faculty we interviewed described Latino students as social learners. One faculty member indicated, "What I see particularly before and after class in those critical 10 to 15 minutes (is a) high level of interaction (among Hispanic students). And what they're doing is build(ing) relationships and a support network. A teacher can either encourage that by being flexible with time, or destroy it by forcing students to (start) right on time."

The faculty have observed that Latino students prefer to sit together in class and to work in small groups rather than as individuals. On field trips they often prefer to travel in groups so that they can share the experience. If they have a class assignment that requires them to interact with individuals or organizations, they prefer to do so in twos or threes rather than by themselves. In short, Latino students have demonstrated a preference for cooperation and collaboration rather than individualism and competition.

Latino students have appreciated a high level of formative feedback and appreciate receiving feedback in a manner that is constructive and encouraging. The manner in which they receive feedback is also important, as a number of faculty have had Latino students explain that they prefer not to receive individual feedback from a professor in front of their classmates. In terms of summative evaluation, Latino students have valued professors who find reasons to recognize the accomplishments of the class as a whole. Even small celebrations are reported as highly effective motivational tools.

Task Engagement

Latino students show a greater interest in learning when they are able to connect the class materials to their personal experiences. A number of faculty indicated that they used journals as a way to encourage students to relate course material to their personal lives. Journaling activities have been well received by Latino students and sharing information from their journals with each other serves as a mechanism to encourage active participation in the class.

The faculty observed that Latino students prefer a building block approach to processing material. Many of the faculty members shared that they begin the class by reviewing concepts and materials from the previous class session before they introduce new material. Others have observed that Hispanic students

may need time to reflect on information before they are ready to ask questions. They have often used a “reflection assignment” approach—“Your assignment is to come to the next class with two questions about the material we covered today.” Others indicated that Latino students prefer to process abstract concepts or theories in a step-by-step rather than holistic approach.

Cognitive Strategies

When discussing higher-order cognitive processing, faculty stressed the preference of Latino students to active approaches to learning. In this regard, developing the means to demonstrate that information had been received and retained was the most common instructional technique. The interviewees were quick to point out that while Latino students, in general, do not respond well to competition, they have thrived in classes where active learning techniques are followed by active evaluation strategies.

A second active learning strategy employed is assignments requiring students to find additional information on a topic and to share that information with the class. This strategy requires the student to make judgments. The faculty also observed that Latino students prefer application in a “real world” setting. A number of faculty incorporate simulations, a capstone assignment, or field trips so that students can either demonstrate or view the application of the classroom to work or life situations.

It is important that we point out that none of the individuals we interviewed specifically design instruction or assignments to meet the preferred learning styles of Latino students and that they pointed to the wide variations in preferences among the Hispanic population. A number of faculty stressed that Latino students can and have adapted to different instructional approaches.

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

In their investigation of faculty in 4-year institutions, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) concluded that “The educational context created by faculty behaviors and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement” (p. 180). Sanchez (2000) found that creating a classroom environment that considers the learning preferences of Latino students is crucial to improving student learning and, thus, persistence. As with learning style preferences, the community college faculty we interviewed emphasized that they did not tailor the classroom environment specifically for Latino students. We identified three themes that illustrate how these faculty members create an environment that incorporates the preferences of Latino students while providing the opportunity for all students to be academically successful.

Develop Relationships with Students

In order to engage students in the classroom, some community college faculty have developed a student-faculty relationship to overcome the fact that some Latinos are wary of authority. One faculty member indicated, “I try to learn one thing about the life of each student and I find that if I share something from my life with them, they are more willing to share with me.” Another commented, “It is important to earn the trust of Latino students. To do that I try to establish a learning community within my classroom and adopt a role as a member of the community rather than as the authority figure.”

Others spoke of engaging the student outside of the classroom in casual conversation or developing relationships by attending social or cultural activities and then extending that relationship into the classroom and academic matters. Latino students have responded positively to personal attention and, once a relationship is developed, value one-on-one time with faculty.

Classroom Learning Communities

Tinto (1997) described the classroom as the crossroads of academic and social integration. He argued that, for commuter students or those with additional obligations, it may be the only place where students interact with faculty or with each other. The faculty we spoke with, in large part, agreed with that statement, again stressing that creating a learning community facilitates the academic success of all students. How have the individuals we interviewed created such environments? They have been patient, used humor, and let the students know that mistakes were okay. As many community college students have a low level of self-esteem, they have worked to build their confidence through frequent feedback and encouragement.

Creating a supportive learning community does not mean that faculty must lower standards or expectations. Rather, many of the faculty related that they have initiated learning communities through frank discussions that emphasize standards and expectations. Through this initial discussion, faculty were able to provide information on available academic support services, to outline their willingness and availability to work with students outside of class, and often allowed time so that study groups could be organized. “It is important for the class to understand that the goal is for everyone to accomplish the desired outcomes at a level that is acceptable for a college class and to realize that I won’t lower my standards or expectations just so everyone receives a passing grade,” explained one faculty member. At the same time, the interviewees also indicated the importance of maintaining standards without discouraging students. A number of faculty pointed to using the step-by-step approach described in the previous section as a strategy to promote success by evaluating progress in much smaller segments. Most have used multiple formative evaluations to prepare

the student for a summative evaluation and often allow a student to submit work for the formative evaluation stage numerous times.

In terms of Latino students, a number of faculty members emphasized the importance of being flexible with time in order to create learning communities. As quoted earlier in the article, one faculty member pointed to flexibility at the beginning and end of class periods. Other interviews also indicated that faculty provide opportunities for students to interact with each other at the beginning, during, or at the end of the class session. These individuals indicate that such practice provides for the Latino cultural aspect of turning to each other for help, but also provides the opportunity for a group to ask the faculty member a question. Once the “ice is broken” and one group begins to engage the faculty member others soon follow and then individuals become more willing to be active participants in the class. Another opportunity of allowing for informal group interaction is for the faculty member to “float” throughout the room and listen in on the topics of conversation, often pointing to potential difficulties that some are encountering. The faculty member can then bring the entire class together with a statement such as, “It seems that a number of you have questions about. . . . Let’s go back and make sure that everyone understands before we move on.” A few faculty spoke of extending the class time by starting earlier or staying later—allowing students to attend the time segment that best fits their schedules and needs.

Faculty also expressed a great deal of attention to creating learning communities that focus on success. They have been careful to not call on Latino students in class if they have perceived that doing so makes them uncomfortable. They have been nonconfrontational in evaluating student work, focusing on suggestions for improvement rather than elaborating on shortcomings. If language is a problem, they have utilized interpreters. Several reported exhaustively searching for texts and other learning resources in the native language of the student and allowing them to speak or write in their primary language. Many have incorporated peer tutoring or study groups to provide supplementary instruction.

SCC has developed learning communities by enrolling the same group of students in two courses. Student feedback at SCC revealed frustration with the applicability of assignments in developmental courses. To address this concern, a number of SCC faculty have developed “paired” courses, one developmental and the other for college credit. For example, a developmental writing course may be paired with an academic course that focuses on written assignments. Preliminary results indicate that this strategy has increased both retention and success and resulted in greater levels of student satisfaction.

Developing an Appreciation of Culture

Community college faculty who have facilitated the academic success of Latino students point to the importance of gaining some knowledge and sensitivity

to Hispanic cultures. Some faculty sponsored student clubs or organizations or attended and celebrated Hispanic events with the students. Many encouraged students to share their culture in classroom assignments and discussion. When warranted, they stressed cultural relevance to the course content. Recognizing that Latinos value the community rather than the individual, a significant number of faculty have also incorporated community issues or focus on matters of social justice to apply abstract theory and classroom learning to practical real-life and work applications.

A point emphasized by the faculty at each location was that there was not a single Latino culture in existence on their respective campuses. One faculty member recounted,

The first semester I taught here I had three Latino males in my class. I put them together for a group project, thinking that they would have commonalities. What a mistake I made. . . . One had immigrated from Mexico the year before with family, one was of Brazilian descent, and the other was the third generation of his family to be born in the U.S.—in fact he didn't even speak a word of Spanish. I learned that it is important for me to learn about the individual cultures of Latinos and not to make assumptions.

A common strategy is to have students compare their culture to others as a way to engage students in class discussion and to promote questioning. A number of faculty use popular media to explore other cultures: newspapers and magazines, television, movies, and popular music were referenced as ways to expand cultural awareness.

Equally important is introducing the student to the culture of college. Faculty relayed that many Latino students do not understand the academy. Stanton-Salazar (1997) has used the concept of social capital to illustrate that Latinos are often the first in their families to attend college, and thus lack a network of family and other individuals to provide guidance about the college-going process. Faculty indicated the importance of having information on academic support programs, financial aid, and other common student needs (child care, transportation) in order to fill this gap.

We experienced groups of faculty committed to student success at each of the respective institutions we visited. One institution, however, stood out for an organizational approach to welcoming students and instilling a sense of belonging. UCC can be described as an institution that practices celebratory socialization (Tierney, 1997) by valuing and recognizing the distinctiveness of the students' culture and building on their socialization into the college culture through a variety of academic and student support programs.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We found faculty members participating in formal and informal groups, striving to understand the cultures of underrepresented populations on their respective

campuses, working to improve their instruction and to create environments that facilitate student success. While some of the commitment can be attributed to administrative leadership, it is evident that faculty leadership has greatly contributed to developing and sustaining efforts to facilitate student success.

Virtually all of the faculty we spoke with share the perception that new faculty hires need to be aware of the nature of the community college, the students that attend the institution, and Hispanic culture. At UCC we found a model, year-long faculty orientation program that includes information on the student population, instruction on learning styles, and exposure to the various resources available to faculty and to the students on their campus. In addition, there were continuing professional development activities for returning faculty that also focused on student success. At RCC and SCC, smaller groups of faculty were beginning to meet to discuss ways to improve the academic success of first generation Hispanics. At each respective institution, the faculty we interviewed displayed a keen interest in “what was working” for other faculty members at their institution and for faculty at the other institutions in our study.

Although faculty leadership is important, faculty working alone will not be able to sustain an ongoing professional development agenda. Community colleges that have an interest in student engagement and success need to develop a culture of caring and support on their campus. It is important for the administration to work with faculty to develop a series of structured professional development seminars that help faculty and student affairs professionals better understand the cultures of historically underrepresented students and how culture impacts preferred learning styles. In addition, seminars can be conducted that help faculty improve their classroom process, pedagogy, and approach to students. For campuses with multiple sites, communication becomes even more important. Encouraging faculty and student affairs professionals to learn new approaches and to share “what works” and “lessons learned” lays the groundwork to develop a broader culture of student learning and success.

A genuine passion and philosophy of the community college as an “opportunity college” was prevalent among the faculty we interviewed. It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of individuals we interviewed were full-time faculty, and that each of these institutions employs significant numbers of adjunct faculty. Our field notes and debriefings after each visit focused on the amount of time these individuals dedicate to crafting quality educational environments for such a diverse student population. The faculty we interviewed were united in announcing that, for the Latino population, developing a personal relationship with the students was the initial step to effectively engaging students in the classroom. Additional research is needed to explore the question of how adjunct faculty members are able to develop relationships and handle the time commitment necessary to “take the classroom” to the community and to develop classroom environments that engage Latino learners.

As this study bears out, culture matters when working with Latino students. The greater the amount of time and effort faculty dedicate to learning and appreciating Latino culture, the better able they will be to help Latino students adapt and progress through the academic rigors of their campus. Part of this cultural aspect is the need for the college to be seen as an active agent in the community. Two of the three institutions we visited had obviously made institutional commitments toward this goal. Many faculty, however, spoke of much smaller, initial steps—shopping at local Latino businesses, attending cultural events, and so on—always with the mindset of representing the community college. One faculty member stressed, “We aren’t recruiting individual Latino students, we are recruiting the entire Latino community.” In one word, we describe the faculty we interviewed as passionate as not one complained about the necessary time commitment or the responsibility of community outreach. Most certainly, institutions that developed appropriate support and reward mechanisms would seem more likely to be able to develop faculty “buy-in” for such actions.

DO COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY USE THE SAME STRATEGIES AS 4-YEAR FACULTY?

A corollary purpose of this study was to examine whether community college faculty use the same strategies as 4-year college and university faculty to create an educational context that promotes student engagement. Community college faculty who were identified as facilitating the academic success of Latino students reported that they do not do anything “different,” specifically for Latino students. They have, however, recognized that students enrolled in their classes will have a variety of cultural experiences and learning style preferences. Moreover, they have worked hard to incorporate these experiences and preferences into the classroom. Community college faculty do incorporate course-related interactions, active and collaborative learning techniques, academic challenge, higher-order cognitive activities, and academic enrichment activities as strategies that promote student engagement. As one faculty member stressed, “If I am able to engage a student in the class, to move them from being a passive to an active learner, then I feel that I have contributed to their academic success. At the community college engagement is the key to success.”

Based on the responses from the interviews, and drawing from the work of Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), we propose 10 strategies to promote greater engagement between community college faculty and Latino students.

- Learn about, and become involved with the Latino community(ies) served by your community college.
- Develop personal relationships with students—learn something personal about each student and share something personal about yourself.

- Encourage small group interaction focusing on course content at the beginning and end of each class or during class as “check points” before moving to new material.
- Create a learning community within the class that emphasizes success.
- Emphasize active learning strategies and incorporate cooperative learning.
- Connect class materials to personal, work, or real-life experiences and encourage students to share their experiences in class presentations and discussion.
- Present material in a step-by-step or building block approach, connecting new learning to previous material.
- Establish and maintain high standards and discuss expectations in your class.
- Provide frequent formative feedback in a constructive and encouraging manner.
- Recognize the accomplishments of the class as a whole.

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