

Mi Casa Is Not Exactly Like Your House

A window onto the experience of Latino students

BY VASTI TORRES

“**M**i casa es su casa,” meaning “my house is your house,” is a common expression in the Latino culture. It conveys openness toward family and friends and the importance of helping one another. Other cultures may share these values but express them in different ways, through different kinds of behavior. This means that those of us who live between two cultures must choose which behaviors to adopt. The choices I have made between the Latino and American cultures define who I am and my worldview. As a Latina, I know that my house is not exactly like your house because my choices have differed from yours. Similarly, my house differs from the houses of other Latinos because we have each made our own choices. If we are to understand how our unique homes can exist in the same neighborhood, we must peek into the windows of one another’s houses.

Such understanding is urgently needed if colleges are to be successful in attracting, retaining, and graduating Latino students. We know from the 2000 census that young people under the age of eighteen are more likely to be Latino (36 percent) than non-Latino whites (24 percent), signaling an increase in the number of potential college-age Latino students over the next generation. Yet their prospects for educational attainment are poor. Census data show that only 11 percent of Latinos have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 28 percent of non-Latino whites. Even when Latino students attend college, they tend to leave and are less likely to return to complete a bachelor's degree. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Latino students have the lowest completion rate of all college students, with only 32 percent finishing. This compares with completion rates of 34 percent for African Americans, 47 percent for Asian Americans, and 48 percent for whites.

To improve these statistics, colleges will need to evaluate their approach toward Latino students and use culturally sensitive methods to assess how well the students' needs are being met. The first task, however, is to learn about the lives of Latino students and understand what influences their decision to stay in or leave college. In my research on Latino students, I have identified three variables that provide a view through the *casa's* picture window—an insight into their lives: the relationship between identity development and cultural orientation, environmental factors, and the link between generational status and parental expectations.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL ORIENTATION

THEORISTS POSIT that identity development, primarily a process of resolving crises, is a central task for all college students. For Latino students this process has added complexity because they must constantly choose between adapting to the majority culture and maintaining their culture of origin. This creates an incredibly diverse set of choices for each student. My desire to help colleagues understand individual Latino students prompted me to investigate the construct of biculturalism.

With that aim in mind I focused on the relationship between ethnic identity and acculturation, which serves as one window illuminating the differences among Latino students. Ethnic identity is determined by an individual's choices to maintain behaviors associated with the culture of origin. Acculturation represents the extent to which the majority culture's values, mores, and customs have been adopted. By looking at both

variables together—that is, by using a bicultural lens—we can gain an understanding of the differences among Latino students. To create this bicultural lens, I validated the Bicultural Orientation Model (BOM), which I introduced in a 1999 article in the *Journal of College Student Development*. I did this by using two instruments—the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure created by Jean Phinney, and an acculturation scale created by Gerald Marin and other authors—to place students within one of four cultural orientations. The BOM model posits that students with high levels of ethnic identity and high levels of acculturation have a *bicultural orientation*, indicating equal preference for both cultures. Those with high levels of ethnic identity but low levels of acculturation have a *Latino orientation*, indicating a preference for the Latino culture. Those with low levels of ethnic identity and high levels of acculturation have an *Anglo orientation*, indicating a preference for the Anglo (American) culture. Finally, those with low levels of both ethnic identity and acculturation have a *marginal orientation*, indicating some conflict with both cultures.

I found that biculturally oriented students were likely to be born in the United States, most likely to be bilingual, most likely to attend the comprehensive universities included in the study, and most likely to have parents who spoke both English and Spanish. Latino-oriented students were more likely to have been born outside the United States and most likely to attend the community colleges in the study. Anglo-oriented students were the most likely to be born in the United States and most likely to have congruence between their chosen cultural description and their BOM placement. Finally, the small number of marginally oriented students were most likely to have been born outside of the United States, least likely to have parents who spoke both English and Spanish, and likely to live in a geographic area with many Latinos.

While the BOM is a valuable tool for helping us see how Latino students may differ in their relationships to Anglo culture, it cannot explain why the students choose between the two cultures as they do. When we can understand the process students use to make these choices, we will better understand their expectations and needs in the college environment.

THE EFFECT OF COLLEGE ENVIRONMENTS

NOT MUCH IS KNOWN about the effect that college environments have on decisions by Latinos to stay in college or not. To help close this gap, I have conducted two studies that con-

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sider environmental influences. In one I collaborated with Roger B. Winston Jr. and Diane Cooper on a study described in a forthcoming issue of the *NASPA Journal*. We compared the experiences of students who live in geographic areas where Latinos represent a critical mass (at least 30 percent of the population) to the experiences of those who live in areas where Latino students do not represent a critical mass. This study sought to test whether Latino students lose their sense of ethnic identity when they are in environments where there are few Latinos. In the second study—part of an ongoing longitudinal, qualitative study—I am interviewing students annually to learn about the choices they make concerning college. These environmental findings serve as another window into the *casa* of Latino students.

In the first study, we found that students in non-critical-mass areas have higher levels of acculturation but levels of ethnic pride similar to those of the critical mass group. This suggests that although these students may have adopted many of the norms of the majority culture, they still value, experience, and take pride in their Latino identity. Such a finding falls in line with other research findings that ethnicity is more important to minority students than it is to white students. In an article in the *Journal of Adolescence*, Jean Phinney and Linda Alpuria report that students of color rated their ethnicity as important as religion and more important than political orientation. By contrast, white students rated occupation and sex roles as the most important areas.

The findings of the second study illustrate how Latino students' sense of self affects how they perceive, and adjust to, the college environment. The students described how their adjustment to college life was influenced by whether or not they grew up around other Latino students. For many of them, the environment

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where they grew up greatly influenced the issues they faced when arriving on campus. One student who came to college from an area where Latinos are a critical mass articulated his experiences in this way:

Now I come [to college] and I have to say my name differently. Instead of saying [Spanish pronunciation], I say [Americanized pronunciation], because everybody is like, what did you say? You know . . . I have to educate people about who I am, where I am from, what the reality of my life is in contrast to what they think it is.

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Students in a predominantly white college environment who come from places where Latinos are a critical mass focus on finding others who share their values and culture, while those who come from areas where there is no critical mass of Latinos or who have mixed backgrounds strive to be around other Latinos but feel left out if they do not speak the Spanish language. Language has always been a salient variable in identifying level of ethnicity, and these students confirm that speaking the language continues to be important. A student who has one Latino parent described her experiences in college:

I feel that I'm more segregated now because when I was in high school there weren't many Hispanics, and so I would be neat, like yes, I am [Hispanic]. Here there are so many Hispanics, but most of them have grown up with two Hispanic parents or in a Hispanic neighborhood or in a Hispanic country, and so they are very, very cultural, and I am like half and half, so sometimes I feel like a bit of

an outsider in the Hispanic group. I don't want to be an outsider because that is my culture, but I don't speak fluent Spanish anymore.

Language is so important to this student that she decided to spend a year in Latin America in order to become fluent in Spanish. The desire to be fluent in another language has become part of her search for identity and has influenced her college experience.

These findings provide two insights that educators must consider when dealing with Latino students. First, just because Latino students blend into the campus culture does not mean they have forgotten their own culture of origin. Second, assessing the needs of Latino students should include looking at the environment they came from, because this will influence their reaction to the campus environment. If educators are sincere in creating learning environments where all students are valued, they must reflect on how their campus environments convey this message of value in both overt and subtle ways. For example, Latino art, Latino speakers, and opportunities to express the Latino culture express this value. Moreover, assuming that Latino students are content because they have not demanded changes creates an environment responsive only to demands. There is a simple way to test your own assumptions about how Latino students feel about the campus: ask some of these students (not just the one who hangs out in your office) how they would like to see their culture expressed on campus.

GENERATIONAL STATUS AND PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

GENERATIONAL STATUS, our third window on the *casa*, is a way to measure how long students and their families have lived in the United States. Not surprisingly, the expectations of Latino students' parents vary depending on the length of time the parents have been in this country.

In higher education, "first generation" usually refers to students whose parents have not attended college; that is, the student is in the first generation of that family to attend college. For the Latino population, however, I have assigned another meaning to "first generation": immigrant students who were born outside the United States and have foreign-born parents. These students can be naturalized citizens, like myself, or have resident status. They also represent a large proportion of the Latino population, as documented by the National Center for Education Statistics: in 1997, 42 percent of Latinos between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four were born outside the fifty states. Second-generation students were born in the United States but their parents were born outside the country. Third-generation (and beyond) students were born in the United States, as were their parents.

Although many educators like to think that Latino students who lack an accent have been in the United States their entire lives, the reality is that many of these students are actually immigrants. On many campuses they are the invisible immigrants—they speak English like natives and fit into the campus life. But they confront issues others may not understand.

Each generation of Latino students experiences different expectations from their parents. First-generation (immigrant) students are more likely to experience conflict between their choices and the choices their parents want them to make. Immigrant Latino parents may not understand the campus lifestyle and may not want their children to adopt too many of the American norms. This parental expectation is especially true for Latinas (females), who are often expected to maintain a more protected lifestyle than males—a remnant of the machismo culture in many Latino countries. For example, as I prepared to attend college, one of the issues I had to negotiate with my parents was whether I could go away to school. In traditional Latino homes, children, especially females, are expected to live at home until they marry. Having found the American value of going away to college attractive, I began negotiating with my

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parents two years before I graduated from high school. As it worked out, I had to stay at home one year before I could transfer and live away from home.

For some Latino students the desire to please their parents is connected to their acknowledgment of how much their parents have sacrificed to send them to college. In my qualitative study one immigrant student reflected on the conflicts she was experiencing because she was trying to draw the line between what her parents think is appropriate for a Latina and what the norm is on the campus. She expressed the cultural conflict like this: “That is one thing I don’t like about my roots, because my parents are so strict. That is how their parents grew up.”

Most students experience conflicts in trying to please their parents, have parents who sacrifice to send them to college, and find campus life different from their home life. But relatively few students have parents

whose expectations reflect another culture. Students whose parents come from another culture experience these conflicts more intensely because they want to maintain a connection to their culture of origin even while living in the majority culture. Language differences and other issues resulting from varying levels of acculturation inside students’ families can also magnify these conflicts. As Latino students work through these issues, their definitions of autonomy, independence, and interdependence differ from the definitions accepted within the majority white culture. For example, one student in the qualitative study said that she thought her American friends would think she was crazy if they knew the issues she had to deal with. She had several parentally defined behavioral restrictions, and her mother called daily with the expectation that her daughter be in her residence hall to receive the phone call. Freedom to do as she pleased was seen by her

How to Help Latino College Students Stay the Course

AS WE LATINOS choose between our own culture and the majority culture, we are trying to make meaning of who we are as Latinos. Educators can help Latino college students in this process—and as a result help them complete college—by following these guidelines:

- *Let go of the myth that Latinos do not value education.* This is a myth brought on by the fact that many Latino parents do not know how to support their sons and daughters in college. Like many first-generation college students, Latino students have to explain to their parents why they have less time to do what they did in high school—for example, work for pay or help with siblings. Providing culturally sensitive orientations for parents will help Latino students with this aspect of their adjustment.

- *Recognize that even policies based on retention research may not be culturally sensitive.* For example, many colleges require first-year students to live on campus because research shows that students who live on campus do better academically and are more likely to continue to graduation. This finding may not apply to immigrant Latino students, however, and

may actually be a deterrent. Much more culturally sensitive assessment is needed to make sure that student success is truly facilitated.

- *Make sure that Latino students (and all diverse populations) are aware of the educational and social support services your institution provides.* Under the philosophy that we treat all students the same, institutions hold activity fairs to introduce students to available resources and student groups. But the concept of organized student activities is a very American concept. An immigrant Latino student may not fully understand the purpose of these fairs and may not recognize the benefits that student groups provide.

- *Seek to understand issues that are culturally sensitive.* Telling immigrant Latino students to “cut the cord” from their parents is interpreted as saying that they need to cut the cord from their culture. Though this is not intended, it is the feeling that these kinds of messages can send.

- *Create supportive environments.* Students who are trying to find others like them or working to better their Spanish language skills need environments where these activities are valued and visible. For example, the fear of not understanding what was being said prompted a previous boss of mine to restrict my speaking Spanish with the office support staff. I sense that these types of situations continue to be experienced by students and educators throughout the country.

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immigrant parents as an undesirable—that is, American—value. In order to meet her parents’ expectations, this student felt she had to transfer to a school closer to home. Her choices about college were heavily influenced by her parents’ expectations and strictness.

Another parental issue has to do with the difference between being supportive of students in college and understanding what it is like to be in college. In my qualitative study, almost all students say that their parents are supportive of them being in college. When I follow up and ask them if their parents understand what it is like for them in college, the majority of first-generation students say no, their parents do not understand. In explaining this lack of understanding, students often point to their parents’ expectation that they will take time out of their studies to help out around the house or contribute financially to the household. All of these expectations are embedded in the feeling that students must contribute to the household, and many first-generation parents do not understand why, in addition to attending class, students must also dedicate much time to studying. This creates additional pressures for Latino students, who must balance doing their school work with meeting familial obligations.

The findings shared in this article illustrate that Latino students are often faced with additional choices that may not be plainly evident. As students work out the choices they must make about the diversity of their friendships or about their parents’ expectations, they also make choices about whether or not they will stay in college. Gaining a better understanding of these out-of-class issues is critical to helping Latino students surpass both the internal and the external barriers that are part of the developmental experiences of Latino students in college.

I hope that sharing this information about the lives of Latino students will help you see through the windows of *mi casa* and better understand how the choices made between two cultures can influence Latino students’ sense of being. As a Latina researcher who spe-

cializes in these issues, it is not uncommon for me to hear parts of my own story in the stories of these students. As we consider the many choices we must make about our own culture and the majority culture, we must try to make meaning of who we are as Latinos. My wish is to help you be more comfortable in opening new windows as you seek to understand the *casa* of Latino students on your campus. Perhaps together we can build a new, shared house on campus where we can all feel at home.

NOTES

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