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Cultivating a Collectivist Community on a College Campus for Latinx Students

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ABSTRACT

Do inclusion, diversity, equity, and access (IDEA) courses geared toward Latinx students help create a collectivist community on a college campus? We argue that courses incorporating IDEA initiatives into their curriculum and focusing on Latinx individuals provide students the face, place, and space to create the cultural wealth required for educational success. The academic intervention described in this study focused on supporting the Latinx community and advancing our university's IDEA values. This qualitative project describes the results of forty-seven participants in ten focus groups within undergraduate courses during the Fall 2019-Spring 2021 semesters. Based on a deductive-inductive hybrid thematic analysis, our results suggest that IDEA courses at the curricular level are essential in cultivating a collectivist community on campus for students to thrive. Evidence from this study can be utilized to inform educational policy and pedagogical considerations within higher education.

KEYWORDS

IDEA courses; Latinx college students; cultural wealth model; student success

In recent decades, universities have expanded their commitments to campus inclusion, diversity, equity, and access (IDEA) initiatives, significantly contributing to the increased number of underrepresented students attending and graduating from higher education institutions. For example, from 2010 to 2018, the U.S. experienced a 35% growth in Latinx[1] individuals with a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), with admission rates steadily increasing (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Although this is a significant achievement that we should applaud, Latinx individuals have historically been below U.S. national averages in college graduation rates, and they remain disproportionally more likely not to finish college than peers of other ethnic-racial groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

For instance, 35% of Latinx students withdraw from college six years after starting their university studies without earning a degree, compared to 27% of White students (Loveland, 2018). Furthermore, within eight years after graduation from high school, Latinx first-generation students are less likely to receive their bachelor's degree than their peers in other ethnic-racial groups (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). These studies demonstrate a college degree attainment gap among Latinx students. Capers (2019) summarized this as a "paradoxical dichotomy" where some scholars view increased graduation rates as progress, while others note the lack of completion of degrees as a failure within higher education.

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[1]To be inclusive and remain gender-neutral, we utilize Latinx because our students and research participants identified as Latina, Latino, and Latinx.

Scholars have continued to participate in a national conversation regarding how academic institutions can facilitate real and productive change for Latinx students by advancing IDEA. Studies suggest that faculty incorporating initiatives at the curricular level is one of the most approachable ways institutions can address inclusivity (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). Unfortunately, only 66% of psychology departments in the U.S. offer coursework in cultural/multicultural psychology (Norcross et al., 2016).[2] Martinez-Acosta and Favero (2018, p. A252) suggest, " . . . this is not enough. We have effectively supplied the keys to the castle without acknowledging that the castle has a history and infrastructure that prohibits all who enter from thriving equally."

Student success in college is often identified as both a process of learning while building relationships and an outcome of achievements (Arellanes et al., 2022), dependent on effective integration into a college environment (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019). Latinx students identify as more collectivist and optimistic, with higher social empathy attitudes than non-Latinx peers (Segal et al., 2011). Collectivism is a desire to maintain close relationships central to social life (Burgos-Cienfuegos et al., 2015). These students' collectivist nature and values support their academic and social ambitions and can offset their lack of representation and sense of belonging on campus (Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022; Soto et al., 2012). Strayhorn (2012, p. 3) defines a student's sense of belonging as the "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared for, accepted, respected, valued by, and essential to the group." Put more simply; students believe they are part of a particular community (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020) and matter to those in the group (Luedke, 2019).

For Latinx students, an individualistic and unrepresentative college environment proposes additional challenges and hinders their sense of belonging (Llamas et al., 2018), particularly for first-generation students (Clayton et al., 2019). Latinx individuals rate among the highest first-generation college students at 47.8% compared to other ethnic-racial groups (Latino et al., 2020). Research indicates that first-generation Latinx students often face barriers, such as unawareness of the college process, feeling unprepared academically, experiencing displacement because of their ethnic-racial identity, and lacking access to social networks and educational resources (Clayton et al., 2019; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). Additionally, these students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds, have lower high school GPAs, and have less access to rigorous coursework, making it more difficult to develop strong study skills and tools for balancing academic, family, and work obligations (Vega, 2016). These social and educational factors often make the transition to college overwhelming and intimidating, leading to lower student engagement (Green & Wright, 2017) and higher dropout rates (Burke, 2019).

As such, degree attainment is more complex, especially when institutional agents make it harder for Latinx students to succeed (Bensimon et al., 2019). Thus, there remains a need for increased course offerings and specialization of IDEA courses focused on the Latinx community across departments (Norcross et al., 2016) to equip Latinx students to overcome their academic challenges. Therefore, we question the following: Do IDEA courses geared toward Latinx students help create a collectivist community on a college campus?

Researchers such as Tinto (1993), Arredondo (1996), Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005), and many others have all theorized and advocated for structural change in support of underserved students. Universities can aim to achieve increased retention and graduation rates by creating changes at various levels, particularly with classroom curricula (Capers, 2019). We believe courses focused on the Latinx community incorporating IDEA initiatives provide structural changes that offer supportive spaces for these students to develop relationships while remaining connected to their cultural identity. Bensimon and colleagues Luedke (2019) urged all faculty to provide avenues for these students to build academic skills and receive educational support that can make their degree achievement attainable. To

[2]We also conducted our study within political science undergraduate courses. To our knowledge, a similar study to Norcross et al. (2016) does not exist for political science departments. Specifically related to departments offering courses on Latin American Politics or Latino Politics in the U.S., the most similar study we could find was Kenski (1975), which surveyed political scientists teaching Latin American politics at American colleges and universities.

accomplish this, university instructors should reflect on their values and choices regarding the curriculum, classroom procedures and expectations, and their interactions with students (Raab, 2022).

Cultivating a collectivist community on a college campus

We argue that courses incorporating IDEA initiatives into their curriculum and focusing on Latinx individuals provide students the face, place, and space to create the cultural wealth to develop the collectivist community they need to succeed. The current study considers Leventhal and colleagues' (Leventhal et al., 2012) perspectives of "face," "space," and "place" when understanding students' experiences within our IDEA-specific courses. Specifically, we use "place," "face," and "space" to better understand how students can feel validated and accepted within a community, even when they are underrepresented.

Viewing communities through "place" means neighborhoods or geographical locales where organizing resources to deliver services is possible. "Face" relates to individual connections that comprise psychological associations and support systems. Representation of "Face" may also be described as viewing and having access to diverse individuals in authority positions. Finally, communities of "space" include physical characteristics like constructed spaces for living and working.

Though Leventhal et al. (2012) developed these ideals for communities outside of higher education, Chung (2012) describes their implications through the intimate connection between communities and schools. As such, we believe they remain relevant for contextualizing a collectivist community among ethnic-racial minority students on college campuses. Thus, IDEA courses focused on specific ethnic-racial groups, like the Latinx community, provide place, face, and space that develop the cultural wealth needed for a collectivist community. As such, we connect face, place, and space to Yosso's (2005) *Cultural Wealth Model*, which includes six types of capital (e.g., aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance) and offers a framework for comprehending, from a strengths-based perspective, how students of color access and experience college.

Yosso (2005) developed this model to reflect the skills, assets, and life experiences of college students from underrepresented groups. She posits that students are more likely to succeed academically when cultural wealth is acknowledged, valued, and integrated into the college experience. Students can leverage all forms of capital to empower themselves to achieve their educational goals. Through this empowerment, they gain greater control over their lives, autonomy in their decision-making processes, self-reliance, and opportunities for experiential social learning. Raab (2022) notes that aspirational, social, and navigational capital are more prevalent among Latinx students enrolled in college. Thus, we focus on these forms of capital and demonstrate how Latinx students attain them through the face, place, and space that IDEA courses provide.

In a campus environment where Latinx students find little support from the institutions' administrators, faculty, staff, and students (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019), it is likely difficult for them to remain hopeful in achieving academically (Raab, 2022). Previous research acknowledges the need for more representation amongst these groups across college settings (Espinoza et al., 2013; Storlie et al., 2016). Generally, Latinx students in universities with more representation are less likely to feel isolated and, therefore, more likely to graduate from college (Garcia, 2013; Rincón, 2020; Suwinyattichaiporn & Johnson, 2022). Yet, when the representation from faculty and administrators is limited, Latinx students may not see themselves reflected on college campuses, which may constrain their access to social capital (e.g., fewer educational resources and lack of access to mentorship), exacerbating their existing challenges (Capers, 2019). However, we believe that IDEA courses focused on the Latinx community provide the "space" for students to find their "face," providing them with the aspirational capital they need to succeed at college. Yosso (2005, p. 77) defines aspirational capital as "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers." In this context, IDEA courses provide students with a learning environment that supports their cultural identities within the classroom (Elsaesser et al., 2018) while their classmates and professors encourage them to succeed (Raab, 2022).

IDEA courses pertaining to Latinx students can serve as the "space" to build relationships with students of similar ethnic-racial backgrounds (e.g., "face"). For example, Clayton et al. (2019) and Mejia and Gushue (2017) address the role of identity by demonstrating that students form trusting relationships by having a shared background as their peers. In such instances, students help each other by exchanging knowledge (e.g., study habits) and answering any concerns about the university, including how to make friends and fit in with the community (Luedke, 2019). In turn, students typically experience a heightened sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020) as their social network grows, offering them more sources of guidance (Sánchez-Connally, 2018). Furthermore, scholars have discovered a positive connection between Latinx students' sense of belonging and academic retention (Luciano-Wong & Crowe, 2019; Romo et al., 2020). As such, students find the emotional and educational support they need to understand that they can attain their degrees despite continued barriers and obstacles (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Hence, the support they experience helps foster the aspirational capital they need to succeed academically.

Moreover, these IDEA courses are also a "space" for students to experience supportive instructors and potential mentors (e.g., "face"). As research illustrates, students with supportive professors and mentors, regardless of ethnic matching (Holloway-Friesen, 2021), form trusting relationships and have higher degrees of belonging, self-esteem, and socialization that ultimately help them succeed academically (Green & Wright, 2017; Michel & Durdella, 2018). For example, Bordes and Arredondo (2005) discovered that having a mentor positively impacted student retention and that the ethnic matching of the mentor did not significantly alter these results. An ethnically matched relationship is likely meaningful, but in instances where it is unavailable, reciprocal relationships can be formed through open discussions about each person's background (Arellanes & Hendricks, 2022; Diaz Solodukhin & Orphan, 2020). As such, faculty mentors can help students by increasing their connections to campus, resources, and networks (Bensimon et al., 2019; Capers, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2019). In such situations, these students are likelier to believe in their perceived value to the campus community (Chakraverty, 2022). In turn, these students tend to have higher levels of self-efficacy (e.g., aspirational capital), allowing them to successfully navigate their educational and social landscapes at college (Holloway-Friesen, 2021).

IDEA courses, through "space" and "face," also foster Yosso's (2005) social capital among students. Students develop or deepen their social networks through their classmates and mentors. Students' interconnections facilitate the flow of information, ideas, and resources that build their social capital (Mattessich, 2014). In turn, this social capital offers students ways to address the challenges that impact them by understanding where to seek support, guidance, and assistance (Tovar, 2015). Studies have shown that students with greater social capital are more likely to have higher retention rates, GPAs, and connections to campus (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Thus, within these spaces (e.g., IDEA courses), Latinx students build social capital, providing additional "places" on campus and within the community to access resources, networks, organizations, and information to assist their academic pursuits. In turn, they obtain navigational capital (skills to maneuver through social institutions; (Yosso, 2005)) that they can utilize outside the IDEA-specific course.

Navigational capital permits students to understand the programming, resources, and organizations in campus and community "places" that offer safe "spaces" that encourage them to thrive (Green & Wright, 2017). For instance, Dueñas and Gloria (2020) note that students involved in campus organizations have a higher sense of belonging than those not participating. By being involved, students feel less isolated. Similarly, Billingsley and Hurd (2019) found that student involvement in any campus organization, not specifically culturally based, provided students with fewer depressive symptoms and a source of support for academic success. In contrast, students who do not feel connected to their college or do not access college resources are likelier to report increased microaggressions, racism, sexism, and classism (Ramirez, 2017; Von Robertson et al., 2016). Researchers have connected these factors to lower graduation and student success rates (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Crisp et al., 2015).

The current study suggests that developing IDEA courses focused on the Latinx community can help cultivate the collectivist community Latinx students seek. They provide the "space" these students need to uplift each other and develop self-efficacy to attain their degrees (Raab, 2022). In addition, they can use these spaces to find their "face" by exploring their ethnic-racial identity while receiving additional support for academic, personal, and career development (Castillo-Montoya & Verduzco Reyes, 2020). Furthermore, these IDEA courses are a practical resource where students can find a "place" for social dialogue about obstacles they encounter at the college and within the community and how to navigate these challenges effectively. Therefore, these courses provide students with more opportunities to engage with each other and their instructors inside and outside the classroom to discuss class material and resources on campus and within the community that help foster their aspirational, social, and navigational capital. In turn, these students build a stronger sense of belonging and cultivate a collectivist community crucial to their development and success (Loveland, 2018).

Methods

Background: the community, campus, and courses

The University's Institutional Review Board (IRB 2019–554) approved this study. From Fall 2019 to Spring 2021, we conducted ten focus groups within undergraduate courses at a large state university in a peri-urban, corporate-focused county in the U.S. Midwest. According to 2020 U.S. Census data, the surrounding community of McLean County, Illinois comprises 170,954 people, with 22.3% of the population coming from an underrepresented ethnic-racial group. Among this percentage, individuals identified as Black or African American (8.8%), Hispanic or Latino (5.4%), Asian (5%), two or more races (2.6%), American Indian and Alaskan Native (.4%), and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander (.1%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

The predominately White public four-year university emphasizes teaching and is one of the leading producers of teachers in the United States (Illinois State University, 2024a). According to reports produced by the university during the Fall 2022 semester, student enrollment reached 20,683 students, with 18,055 undergraduates. About 28.6% of the entire student body comes from a traditionally underrepresented group. This rate has been on the rise over recent years. Among these underrepresented students, they identified with the following ethnic-racial groups: Hispanic (12.1%), Black or African American (10.1%), two or more selections excluding Hispanic (3.8%), Asian (2.6%), and American Indian/Alaskan Native (.1%) (Illinois State University, 2024a). Although the percentage of Hispanic students is higher on campus than in the broader community, it is still relatively small, likely making it difficult for Latinx students to find the collectivist community they seek.

Two of the authors of the current study teach courses that focus on supporting the Latinx community (broadly construed). Within our classes, we incorporated our university's IDEA values that affirm and encourage "community and a respect for differences … [that foster] an inclusive environment characterized by cultural understanding and engagement, ethical behavior, and a commitment to social justice" (Illinois State University, 2024b, "Diversity and Inclusion" section). We advanced these values within our course curricula, activities, assignments, and mentoring to give students more opportunities and connections to campus, making them feel more represented.

The courses used in this study were Latino Psychology, Psychology Senior Seminar, Latin American Politics, and Central American Politics. Students enrolled in these courses were predominantly third and fourth-year students, with some first and second-year students. After reviewing our course rosters for the Fall 2019, Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 semesters, we taught a total of 155 students, with 45.8% of them being fourth-year or greater students, 28.4% of them being third-year students, 20.7% of them being second-year students, and 5.2% of them being first-year students.

Focus group procedures and participants

Participants from this study enrolled in the IDEA classes mentioned above. Within each class, students could join two types of focus groups-one involved students who self-identified as Latinx, and the other engaged students who did not. In total, we conducted ten focus groups (e.g., five Latinx and five non-Latinx) across the four semesters in the four abovementioned courses. We distinguished separate groups because all classes, whether political science or psychology-related, focused on supporting the Latinx community. Latinx students may have different experiences within these classes than those who do not identify as Latinx. By providing Latinx students with separate focus groups, we gathered evidence highlighting specific and unique cultural differences in their development and perceptions.

Trained graduate student research facilitators conducted the focus groups. Some focus groups occured in person, but because of the challenges of COVID-19, others took place via Zoom. We ensured that the facilitators ethnically matched the participants to aid in the comfort and openness of all focus groups. Ethnic matching means students and facilitators self-identify similarly as Latinx or non-Latinx in that respective focus group (Easton-Brooks, 2019). The facilitators informed student participants that the study aimed to learn about the best teaching practices within the course and their experiences concerning available resources on campus (e.g., student organizations, peer support networks, professors, mentors) that aid their success and sense of belonging within the campus community. Before moving forward with obtaining students' informed consent, the facilitators also ensured students that 1) participation was voluntary, 2) the study would not affect their course grade, 3) their instructor would not attend the focus group sessions, 4) all data would be deidentified, and 5) any data analysis would occur after the semester ended and grades were finalized. Following each focus group, facilitators and the research staff debriefed and shared interview reflections. We used keynotes from these debriefings to inform our data analysis.

Upon completing the focus group, participants completed a short demographic survey using an anonymous Qualtrics link. We analyzed these data in SPSS. Twenty-four Latinx and twenty-three non-Latinx students completed the study for a total of forty-seven undergraduate participants. Additional participant details can be found in Table 1 below. Although we know the percentage of each grade level represented within the courses included in this study, we do not know the exact number of first, second, third, and fourth-year students included in the forty-seven focus group participants. We did not collect these data to keep the identity of our participants anonymous, and these unique identifiers could have unintentionally identified someone.

Table 1: Focus Group Demographics

	Latinx Focus Group				Non-Latinx Focus Group			
	N	%	Range	Mean	N	%	Range	Mean
Ethnicity								
Latino or Latina	22	91.7			0			
Latinx	2	8.3			0			
Non-Hispanic White	0				18	78.3		
African American	0				1	4.3		
Asian American	0				1	4.3		
Multi-racial	0				3	13.1		
Age			19-27	22			18-26	22
Gender								
Male	8	33.3			10	45.5		
Female	16	66.7			12	54.5		
Total Family Income[a]			20K-100K+	40K-50K			30K-100K+	90K-100K
U.S. Generation								
1st Generation	0				2	8.7		
2nd Generation	19	79.2			2	8.7		
3rd Generation	2	8.7			3	13.0		
3+ Generation	1	4.3			16	69.6		
First-generation college student[b]	13	54.2			6	26.1		
College Cumulative GPA			2.2-3.8	2.9			2.5-4.0	3.3

Note. [a]collected in $10k increments ranging from $0 to 100K + . [b]Reference group = Yes.

Data analysis

Using thematic analysis, we analyzed the focus group transcriptions in MAXQDA20 after each semester ended. Thematic analysis is a widely used and robust systematic qualitative data analysis method focused on identifying patterns across data concerning research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach, we incorporated elements from two established methods: a data-driven inductive approach and the deductive a priori template of codes approach. By blending these approaches, this research integrated the principles of social phenomenology into the deductive thematic analysis process while allowing for themes to emerge directly from the data through inductive coding.

The coding process in this study involved recognizing and encoding significant moments before any interpretation took place, allowing for data organization and the identification and development of themes. In addition to our inductive approach, our analysis of the text in this study also involved the utilization of a pre-defined template, in the form of codes, for organizing the text to facilitate subsequent interpretation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In this case, we developed the template beforehand based on our research question and theoretical framework (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) rather than from a preliminary scanning of the text.

We analyzed each focus group independently. Researchers then met to further the coding system and develop preliminary themes. After discussing these themes, the researchers recorded the data to focus on the initial findings. We repeated this process until we had a consensus that alleviated all discrepancies within the data and coding scheme. Braun and Clarke's (2006) model informed the construction and application of thematic analysis.

Author positionality

As we instructed the courses, bias and validity were potentially problematic to our positionality (Holmes, 2020). Positionality suggests that our social, historical, and political setting affects our orientations and that we are not isolated from the social processes we research (Malterud, 2001). As such, it is crucial to mention our positionality in this study. The psychology instructor/coauthor identifies as a White cisgender male with some Hispanic background. One of his primary foci in research is on the educational attainment of Latino families. The political science instructor/coauthor also identifies as a White cisgender male. He is fluent in Spanish, has traveled extensively throughout Latin America for service and leisure, and has lived and worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the region. His primary political science research focuses on Latin America, principally related to resource-extractive community-led protests. Both instructors have volunteered and conducted advocacy work within the Latinx community.

The third coauthor identifies as a Chinese cisgender female with limited experience working with the Latinx community. Her research focuses on the influence of quality caregiving on young children's socioemotional well-being and the impact of contextual factors (race, culture, socioeconomic status, etc.) on caregiving. She provided an outside perspective that increased the validity of the results, as she did not lead any of the classes and reviewed and coded the data separately. Foote and Gau Bartell (2011, p. 46) note, "[t]he positionality that researchers bring to their work, and the personal experiences through which positionality is shaped, may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes."

To further account for our positionality, eight undergraduate and graduate student researchers independently audited the data and the identified themes. These students had training in the basic principles of qualitative data analysis and completed a semester-long project where they coded data independently and collaborated on potential themes. They were not present for this project's data collection or the initial data analysis. We used their work to validate the themes present in the current study. First, we compared our results to theirs. Then, we shared this manuscript with them to ensure they could identify their results within it. Their analysis closely aligned with our results, adding to this

study's validity. Finally, adding to this validity, resources from this study, including course syllabi, products from the semester-long project, focus group questions, and other resources, are publicly available through OSF Materials (Arellanes & Hendricks, 2021).

Results

Based on our deductive-inductive hybrid theoretical thematic analysis, we present three themes from our data-driven inductive approach. These themes incorporated our deductive template of codes: the face, place, and space that generates the cultural wealth students need to succeed. We present the results of these themes below from our IDEA courses focused on the Latinx community.

A difficult transition to college

Transitioning from high school to college was a challenge for many participants. Many students grew up in a large, diverse city and had to move to a college town, hoping to find a community that supports their educational aspirations. However, upon arrival, they found a new community that was predominately White and differed significantly from the one where many grew up. The Latinx focus group participants noted this change more than the other participants. For instance, Latinx students often reported attending high schools with a majority Latinx student population. In college, however, that representation no longer existed. They expressed that they no longer had family nearby, a community support network, or even fellow students to confide in their experiences, making the campus feel isolating. For instance, one Latinx participant stated, "When I came here, I signed up for classes, and then after that, I was on my own. It hurt. You have to deal with all of these struggles on your own." This statement details a harsh reality that many students encounter. An essential part of student success and retention is having someone to understand and support students, especially someone from a similar background (e.g., Strayhorn, 2022).

Although students felt proud that their college shared IDEA messages with prospective and incoming students, the messages did not match their experiences once on campus. Latinx and non-Latinx students reported that they viewed college messages as an act of recruitment without the intent to create change because there was a lack of diverse students and faculty on campus. For example, one non-Latinx focus group participant who identifies as White suggested, "When I first came to visit the campus, we first noticed that the college was mostly White people. That almost deterred me from coming here. It felt like there was not a space for diversity." This quote shows that participants from the majority population also desire increased diversity on campus. The difference between perspectives was evident. While Latinx students "expected" to interact with White students, White students "sought out" to meet culturally diverse students. All students searched for a more diverse community, but only some could find it.

The IDEA courses served as a safe space for having such interactions. Participating in courses explicitly related to the Latinx community allowed students to feel included in their college community. These courses helped build a connection to others through a shared environment dedicated to learning about and supporting the Latinx community. Latinx students enrolled in these courses to learn personally relevant information (i.e., their ethnic and cultural identities) and to find a representative location amongst a predominately White community. For example, one Latinx student stated,

> Hispanic students talked a lot in class because we knew a lot about the issues. I think these courses help Hispanics come out and talk about the issues, to give them a platform. It benefits the students by empowering them and allowing them to talk about issues that are going on in their households or what their families went through.

Individuals from the non-Latinx focus groups took these courses to learn more about the Latinx community and broaden their cultural awareness. For example, one non-Latinx participant said,

> Courses like this make students feel more welcome, and it's a safe space to speak. Some students in the class said, "I didn't feel welcomed [at the University]." Not many people could relate to them and their ethnic backgrounds. Maybe these students are the first people in their family going to college, and this class is a safe space to speak about it.

Moreover, some non-Latinx students shared that they wanted to become an advocate for IDEA but did not know where to start. They saw our elective degree courses as a preliminary step. A Latinx focus group member illustrates this nicely, "I think that the difficult conversations and topics [in class] open our minds and spark more conversations. It creates more empathy for people not as exposed to diverse perspectives. I appreciated that aspect of the class." Thus, our IDEA courses provided a representative space for students that helped create connections and a feeling of belonging and inclusivity. Students even began socializing outside class and discussing course materials in their free time. Hence, the support students experienced fostered the aspirational capital they needed and increased their sense of belonging. As Strayhorn (2008) identified, interactions with diverse peers predict Hispanic students' sense of belonging.

Lack of representation at college: finding a faculty mentor

When enrolling in our courses, Latinx students initially felt deceived and underrepresented because they wanted a faculty member with a similar background. When the students learned that we did not ethnically match the course's subject matter, Latinx and non-Latinx focus group participants shared that the courses "should have been taught by individuals within [the Latinx community]." For example, a non-Latinx focus group participant said, "To be honest, I expected the professor to be Hispanic when I enrolled. I was surprised when I saw he was White." Similarly, another non-Latinx student suggested, "My first thought was that he is just [an instructor] forced to talk about Latino studies. That is the vibe you get. That this is not his thing because he does not look Latino."

Students sought ethnically matched mentors who could help them navigate the challenges of college. Latinx students shared that having Latinx faculty members demonstrated they could succeed academically. Nevertheless, students also shared that ethnic matching was not paramount in their opinions of the course or their professors. When we shared our research, volunteer work, and previous experiences working with the Latinx community throughout the semester, students realized we were qualified and dedicated to supporting the Latinx community and wanted to teach these courses. As one participant suggested, "He has taken so much time out of his life to study this that he obviously cares and is passionate about it." After a while, students recognized us as a mentoring resource. For example, a Latinx focus group participant stated:

> At the beginning of the semester, the professor said, "One of my favorite things to do is to help students go to graduate school and figure out their career plans." I haven't had a professor say anything like that in class before. Nobody ever said that they wanted me to have meetings about my plans. Immediately I thought, "This is a professor I want a good relationship with, and I will go to his office hours." I have wanted a professor as a mentor. Now I actually have one.

We must mention that ethnic matching remained a strong hesitation of five students regardless of instructors' efforts (4 = Latinx, 1 = non-Latinx). These five students detailed that faculty members who did not match the course material lacked the "true connection" to teach such classes. The lack of a true connection was identified when reviewing the Fall 2019 data. After each semester, we reviewed the focus group data and our course evaluations to understand our limitations like the one presented here. Each subsequent semester, we made deliberate efforts to address this and other student suggestions. Although we will never be able to ethnically match with Latinx students or our course content, we sought out pedagogical training and inclusive, equitable, and accessible practices on and off campus to make stronger connections with all students. As a result, we now intentionally acknowledge our privilege, strive to be aware of our biases, and recognize that our experiences and opinions may impact our teaching.

Even though we could not alleviate the ethnic-matching concern among five students from our first few focus groups in the initial semesters of this study, after the Fall of 2020, all coding related to "a true connection" was now positively worded. Our sustained commitment to including our university's IDEA values in all aspects of the course, improving our teaching, and offering our mentorship led the remaining forty-two participants to suggest that they appreciated our courses. Students reported that we were approachable, accepting, and dedicated to helping the Latinx community. These students fostered their aspirational capital because they found a representative "face" and saw us as supportive mentors, increasing their sense of belonging on campus and academic self-efficacy.

Access to campus resources

To feel valued and included as a student, one should have a sense of community, support, and inclusivity in all aspects of college life. However, when one's "face" is not represented at college, students likely need additional resources to motivate them to continue attending. Thus, resource access appears highly related to retention issues. Our data showed that half of the students felt encouraged and supported, and the other half did not feel connected to the college and/or community. Notably, the main difference between groups was not ethnicity but how students felt connected within the university. Yet these challenges may have been magnified when students struggled to find their "face" on campus or through resources created for individuals like them. As one Latinx focus group participant described,

> Many students in the class seemed to have no idea that resources and events even existed. You walk around campus and don't see flyers or people discussing different organizations to join. If we can provide more resources focusing on ethnic minorities, we can retain more diverse students.

Within our IDEA courses, students access "space" and "face" that build their social capital. We designed our courses such that students actively engaged with peers to form a better understanding of each other while promoting inclusiveness and trust. This social capital helps them discover additional "places" on campus and within the community to access more "face" through resources, networks, organizations, and information to assist them in their academic pursuits (e.g., aspirational capital). Moreover, this permits them to obtain navigational capital that they can utilize outside of the IDEA-specific course. For instance, when one Latinx student shared that they felt "there are no resources for Latinos on campus," another Latinx participant quickly replied with three examples they were personally involved in (e.g., TRIO, Association of Latinx American Students, and a student organization for first-generation students).

In sum, we considered Leventhal and colleagues' (Leventhal et al., 2012) perspectives of "face," "space," and "place" when understanding students' experiences of transitioning to college, finding a faculty mentor representative of their interests, and learning about campus resources. While our study only consists of students who volunteered at one Midwestern university and likely had unique intrinsic motivations in supporting the Latinx community (limiting replicability), our findings suggest that IDEA-related classes are crucial in easing this transition, finding supportive faculty mentors, and improving understanding of campus resources by increasing students' cultural wealth and cultivating a more collectivist community.

Latinx students' inclination toward collectivism and their held values contribute to their academic and social aspirations and can counterbalance their feelings of being underrepresented and disconnected within the campus community (Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022; Soto et al., 2012). As previous research demonstrates, promoting underrepresented minority students' sense of belonging on college campuses supports retention initiatives (Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). Thus, we suggest that IDEA-related courses can be one way of developing more collectivistic communities on campus that can likely assist in retaining and graduating Latinx students. As a Latinx focus group participant suggested,

> These courses are very, very important. Whether that's in your future job or graduate school, we all need to be more aware of different cultures and backgrounds. I really advocate for courses like this because you learn and gain more knowledge about different people. That is what we are here for at the end of the day: to learn more. Hopefully, with courses like this, we can all become more respectful and engage better with folks who may not identify similarly.

Discussion and conclusion

Individuals who identify as Latinx are the second largest ethnic-racial group in the U.S. and comprise about 18% of the population (Rodriguez et al., 2021), with predictions suggesting that this number will grow to 29% by 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Additionally, Loveland (2018) indicates that Latinx students are expected to comprise one-fifth of all college students in the U.S. by 2025. With the changing demographics in the U.S., higher education institutions must have recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation strategies that address this population shift. Our study illustrates one successful strategy universities can implement at the curricular level by working with faculty and departments to develop discipline-relevant IDEA-specific courses.

This study's evidence indicates that Latinx and non-Latinx students found a shared value in learning more about the Latinx community, as both groups demonstrated strong support and narratives regarding Latinx students. We believe that the paralleled direction of the data may demonstrate that both groups recognized the limitations to Latinx students' sense of belonging on campus while working together to make a more collectivist community that values their cultural wealth. Such cross-racial relationships that students develop in a shared space (i.e., IDEA courses focused on the Latinx community) could be an essential component of development in supporting a strengths-based perspective of Latinx students' cultural values on campus, creating a more collectivist community. However, future research is needed to better understand the impact on Latinx students' sense of belonging by having fellow students from other ethnic-racial backgrounds validate and support their cultural values.

In addition, universities need to recognize that over a third of Latinx students enrolled at higher education institutions are first-generation. This should impact how they work to support their students and their identity (Raab, 2022). First-generation students often do not have the same access to information, resources, connections, and experiences as non-first-generation students (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Universities cannot expect students to become experts in what resources are available at the college, and they must address these issues by providing additional support. According to Romo and colleagues (Romo et al., 2020), student support services increase optimism for degree attainment and impact a student's sense of belonging, leading to higher GPAs, finding additional support, and increasing persistence (Tovar, 2015). Understanding the Latinx student experience can help identify their unique characteristics.

Although we did not collect specific data, most students we invited to participate in this study were either third-year (28.4%) or fourth-year (45.8%) students. This is a limitation of the study and an opportunity for future research because we need to have IDEA courses like the ones described in this paper that target classes with a majority of students newer to the campus and community that are likely more vulnerable to the transition to college. It is possible that first and second-year students may have left the university before being able to take these courses. Future research is needed to better understand how similar IDEA courses could support Latinx students during their transition to college, especially in courses that target more vulnerable students (e.g., transfer, first-year, and second-year students).

Our university has recently implemented the Communities of Belonging and Success program for our Latinx students. Courses in this program teach students skills for community building and academic success during their first semester of college, and it seeks to engage students through content-specific topics to transform learning experiences that will better serve them during their first year in college and beyond. It takes building relationships with

students and a concerted effort like these from the entire college community to evoke a more inclusive university system. By doing so, colleges can become the "space" to create a more equitable tomorrow.

As such, we recommend that university educators examine students' perceptions of their access to resources and opportunities (representative of their identity), especially during their initial interactions on campus. It is imperative to develop early intervention initiatives to create more shared collectivist values amongst all students. In doing so, universities would likely increase student belonging on campus and, in turn, student success and retention rates, as the current study found evidence that students from all backgrounds found value in diversity and diverse perspectives (e.g., Latinx cultural values). Thus, we must examine additional ways universities can form collectivist communities, which have reciprocal benefits between students, faculty, staff, and administrators (Diaz Solodukhin & Orphan, 2020).

However, the political discourse in the U.S. may make this difficult in some states. To circumvent such issues within these states, we recommend framing this work as inclusion and belonging for all students. In such a situation, having courses that teach about cultural values can provide a necessary resource that further provides students a place to have meaningful conversations. Our study demonstrated that students (in a state without IDEA restrictions) still felt there was a need for additional resources on campus. Future research is needed to confirm if state restrictions on IDEA magnify this perception among students.

Offering IDEA courses related explicitly to the Latinx community and other ethnic-racial identities may be particularly important for developing campus belonging while offsetting political discourse against IDEA. Future studies should expand our research design to a broader population, not limited to students in courses advancing IDEA values supporting the Latinx community. For example, to what degree do students of varied ethnic-racial groups feel connected to that college? Suggestions that aid Latinx students may differ from other ethnic-racial groups or students from other marginalized backgrounds. Thus, our study should be expanded and applied to varied student identity groups.

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