

LATINO/A STUDENTS' ETHNIC IDENTITY EXPLORATION

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“But Still, I’m Latino and I’m Proud”:
Ethnic Identity Exploration in the Context of a Collegiate Cohort Program

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Abstract

Although increasing numbers of Latino/a students are pursuing higher education, many do not persist to graduation. The disparity of Latino/a students attending and graduating from Christian colleges and universities is even more pronounced than at comparison institutions. As institutions of Christian higher education seek to increase diversity on their campuses, alignment of mission and core values with research and best practices on Latino/a student success is one strategy to increase the academic achievement of this growing group of college learners. Prior research affirms that ethnic identity exploration can be helpful as students of color navigate multiple cultures encountered in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Utilizing qualitative methods, this study examined ethnic identity exploration among 30 Latino/a students who were participants in an ethnically-rooted leadership program at a predominantly White faith-based college. For first-year students, the opportunity to explore ethnic identity prompted an awakening and led to a greater sense of pride in being Latino/a. For sophomores, attending a PWI elevated consciousness of ethnic differences, but also increased their desire to use their ethnic perspective to “give back” to various communities. Along with acceptance of ethnic identity, Juniors utilized their knowledge to actively engage with others in matters of ethnicity. Seniors demonstrated understanding of bi-cultural skills and what it means to be a bi-cultural leader. Evidence across cohorts affirmed the role that the program plays in promoting students’ growth and development in ethnic identity. As students become confident in their ethnic identity, they are better equipped to progress toward their goal of a college education