

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE TOOLS

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Institute for Latino Educational Achievement | Goshen College



“I’m Latino and I’m Proud”: The Power of Valuing Students’ Ethnic Identity

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Latino/a students are attending college at increasing rates, but they lag behind other students in graduation rates (Fry, 2011; Kelly, Schneider & Carey, 2010). At Christian colleges and universities, this disparity is even more pronounced (Reyes & Case, 2011). Institutions are urged to develop learning environments that are inclusive, supportive, and convey value and honor for the identity of students of color (Tierney, 1999; 2000). This study explored an intentional process of ethnic identity exploration among 30 Latino/a students who participated in an ethnically-rooted leadership program. Findings revealed that at each level of the model, students demonstrated increasing ability to articulate and live-out their identity as Latino/a students at a predominantly White campus.

Who am I? Where am I from? How do I think and feel about my ethnic group?

The theoretical work of Phinney (1992) and Torres (1999) was used to explore ethnic identity among Latino/a students.

Multiethnic Model focuses on three stages (Phinney, 1992):

- **Unexamined Ethnic Identity**—ethnicity has not been probed and there is acceptance of the dominant culture
- **Ethnic Identity Search**—an event forces ethnic examination
- **Ethnic Identity Achievement**—individuals are confident of their sense of ethnicity

Bicultural Orientation Model (Torres, 1999)

Measures for **acculturation** and **ethnic identity** intersect to form a four-quadrant model:

- **Bicultural**—comfortable in both Latino and Anglo cultures
- **Latino/Hispanic**—more comfortable in Latino culture
- **Anglo Orientation**—more comfortable in the majority culture
- **Marginal Orientation**—not comfortable in either culture

“...a positive ethnic identity provides a sense of belonging that can act as a buffer against perceived discrimination and negative stereotypes.”

(Syed, Azmitia & Phinney, 2007, p. 157)

Research questions

- 1) What progress do Latino/a students make in their identity exploration in the college years?
- 2) What contribution does participation in a cohort program make to the ethnic identity development of Latino/a students?

Method | Qualitative

interviews and focus group

30 Latino/a students

7 first-year students | 8 sophomores

9 juniors | 6 seniors

20 women | 10 men

first-generation college students (26)

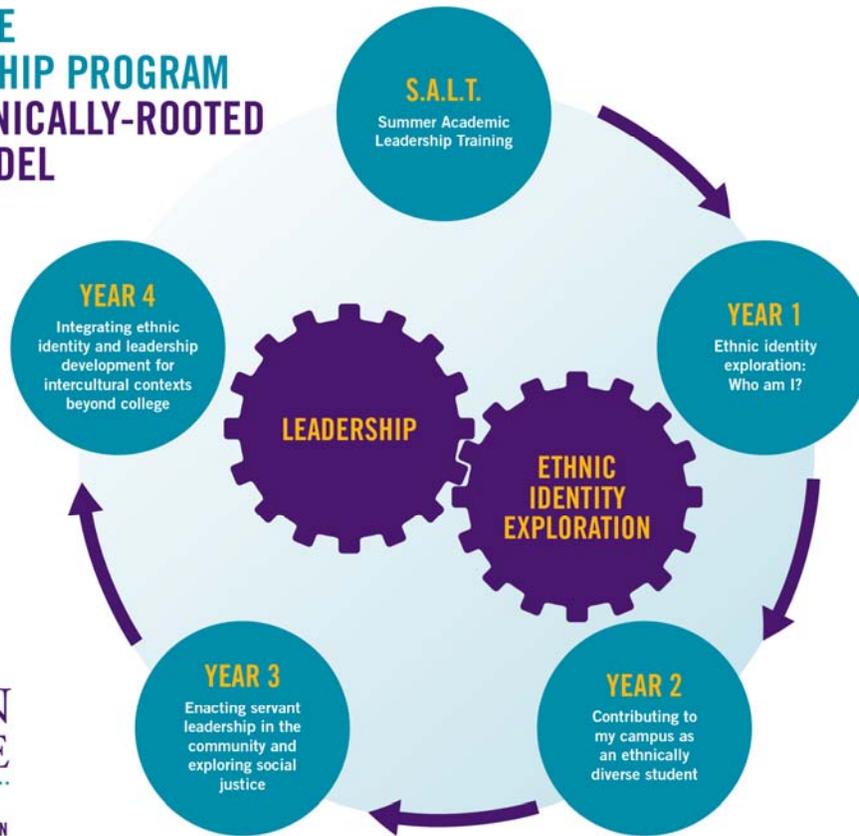
Country of family origin, Mexico (24)

first-generation US immigrants (26)



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GOSHEN COLLEGE LATINO LEADERSHIP PROGRAM FOUR-YEAR ETHNICALLY-ROOTED LEADERSHIP MODEL



Students in the study were involved in the **Latino Leadership Program**. This model depicts the four years of the **ethnically-rooted leadership program**, along with a distinct emphasis for each year. Through an intentional **process**, the college offers Latino students a **guided experience of exploration**, communicating to students that they are valued members of the campus community. As students gain added confidence in ethnic identity, they are better equipped to achieve their goal of a college education.

Student Voices | Ethnic Identity Exploration

First-year students

Awakening

Students credited their involvement in the leadership program as instrumental in awakening them to their “Latino side.”

Cassandra: *I’ve thought about ethnic identity more....We do talk about it in CITL meetings. We actually think about our culture... I didn’t used to really think about my culture and how important that is to me, and now I do...I’m starting to think more about it.*

Roberto: *I think I kind of took being bi-cultural for granted before coming to college.... So, I feel like I’ve been way more conscious of ethnic identity since I’ve been at college.*

Ethnic Pride

Students expressed growing appreciation and pride in their ethnic heritage. Being Latino was something to celebrate.

Jorge: *...back then when I started college like oh, “I’m Latino, just Latino.” But now I don’t feel like I’m just Latino. Since I’ve talked to everybody I feel like I’m Latino, yeah, but feel like I can be open to everybody else, I can fit in with whoever I’m with. But still, I’m Latino and I’m proud.*

Affirmation

Students acknowledged that program leaders, guest speakers and peers were sources of affirmation for their ethnic identity.

Ema: *I think it’s been encouraging and I don’t have to be embarrassed because other people think you’re weird or something....[A CITL program leader] is showing me that everybody is different, I guess, to be proud of your culture...hearing other people say that they’re not ashamed either.*

Isabel: *I feel like I have been closer to my heritage or culture more than I was back at the beginning of the year. Being in CITL has helped me realize that it’s okay to be different, like you know racially, from other people and embrace it and to also help people in your community who are like that too.*



Second-Year Students

Elevated Ethnic Consciousness

Sophomores talked about the reality of being a Latino/a student on a predominantly White campus. Many probed more deeply into their ethnic heritage.

Enrique: *I didn't think about ethnic identity as much until I went to college....When you're around the same group of people your whole life you don't think about other ethnicities, cause it's just the norm. But here, you kind of have to think about it because everybody is just so different.*

Valuing Others' Ethnicity

Second-year students moved beyond valuing their own ethnicity to valuing the ethnicity of those around them.

Marta: *At first you kinda look just in your Latino group, but this year I've been trying to get out more, getting to know more people, not keeping yourself in your own bubble. There might be times where you're not so comfortable, but you're also learning. You're doing other things which would benefit you. So I've been trying to do more of that.*

Enrique: *A lot of change is just growing up as a person, realizing who you are....You come in here, and you don't know who you are, unless you're around different people and seeing different things and you really find out who you are.*

Giving Back

Sophomores realized the value of their ethnicity and the unique contributions they can make to groups based on their perspective as Latinos.

Lucia: *I was involved in Los Posadas because that was one way I could contribute my knowledge and my culture to the campus community.*

Rosa: *...I feel like it will be easier for me to tell other Latinos and just encourage them... "You can go to college....It's not easy, but it's not impossible....It's hard, but it's not impossible."*



Third-Year Students

Acceptance

Third-year students expressed resolve, acceptance, and the ability to live with the ambiguity and confusing nature of ethnic identity.

Julieta: *Ever since I've been in high school I was the only Latina in my classes, and I think I've always been aware that I am the minority. And so I have to step it up and prove that I can be here....You know, I'm probably going to be a minority in college too....It was just how it is, and I have already accepted that there's probably not going to be a lot of people similar like me wherever I go.*

Beatriz: *I've been more willing to accept ethnic identity and be more proud of my background. I've always been proud of my background, but at the same time it's not like I've ever been very expressive about it....I think that CITL has helped in the sense that we have activities where we talk about where we're from and the things that have shaped us into who we are and how our Latino-ness has kind of created the person that we have become.*

From Knowledge to Engagement

In the third year, less direct instruction is devoted to ethnic identity. Students moved from learning about ethnic identity to experientially engaging with others on matters of ethnic identity.

Patricia: *...we've definitely had discussions about the stigma that is placed on Hispanics, Latinos....I've had Caucasian doctors come up to me and say, "You speak Spanish, right?" without asking... if I spoke Spanish. They assumed it. So talking about those things and then experiencing them you're like wow, this happens every day to a lot of Latinos...or maybe you think about how you would deal with that.*

Fourth-Year Students

Contributions of the Program

Seniors affirmed that the program helped them embrace bi-cultural leadership.

Alberto: *CITL has always talked about us being leaders, especially as Latinos how we have to raise our standards high....They always were like, "You're Latino, you're at an advantage of being bi-cultural, of being bilingual, of bringing all those different experiences that other people might not have." That's something they kept telling us on and on, and I think I believe it. That there are all those different backgrounds, different experiences, different skills that we have, that we bring. We can make a difference and be good leaders.*

Embracing Bi-Cultural Leadership

Seniors reflected on readiness to lead in bi-cultural contexts. Bridge-building and moving between cultures were expressions of their leadership skills.

Sergio: *I feel like I could do a good job with that since I'm Latino. Going back and forth to different cultures per se with Latinos and White Americans, it's easy for me to bounce back and forth without having to change much of my style. So I'd be able to relate to both sides....*

Key Findings

- Increased pride in ethnic identity and a willingness to “give back” exemplify the power of participation in a structured ethnically-rooted leadership program.
 - The cohort program offered a space for students’ ethnic identity to be stretched, celebrated, and affirmed.
 - In a cohort setting, students experienced a safe environment where they learned to articulate experiences and make meaning of their ethnic identity.
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- Akin to Phinney’s (1992) Ethnic Identity Search stage, sophomores faced the realities of attending a PWI which caused them to more deeply reflect on their Latino/a identity.
 - Growth was evident as students expressed an ability to value their own Latino/a ethnic identity along with the ethnicity of others.
 - Ethnic awareness led to deeper contemplation. This foundational work assisted students in understanding the unique contributions they can make to the campus community and helped them find a sense of belonging within the larger campus context.
 - Juniors drew on ethnicity identity exploration experiences within their cohort context to engage more productively in situations that brought ethnic identity to the forefront.
 - Seniors were empowered to talk about their contributions as bi-cultural leaders using language that demonstrated an understanding of bi-cultural leadership skills. Bridge building, relating to multiple cultures, and educating cross-culturally were some of the skills identified.

Ethnic Identity Exploration | Implications for Practice

- **Utilize research and best practices.** Careful review of the literature for serving diverse populations is a critical first step in developing a program. Tailor the content to align with students’ ethnic group and generational status.
- **Context matters.** Understanding institutional mission is critical to success. Building a program in line with the context of the college provides a natural bridge between student groups and the larger campus community. For example, the initiative represented in this study provided an opportunity to develop a program that links ethnic identity exploration with the college’s ethos of service and justice.
- **Anchor ethnic identity exploration into campus culture.** Seek to anchor ethnic identity exploration into the culture of the institution. The college where the study occurred built the general education curriculum around personal identity exploration, intercultural skill development, and a cross-cultural study-service term. All students, not just students of color, are invited to explore identity and to value the ethnic identity of others.
- **Labor intensive, but rewarding.** The process of ethnic identity is a lifelong process that can be messy at times. Program leaders are encouraged to reinforce these ideas as students progress through their journey of ethnic identity exploration.

References & Resources

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