Democracy's College

Episode 24: The Lived Experiences of Immigrant, Migrant, and Multicultural Populations in Postsecondary Education

Heather Fox: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Heather Fox at OCCRL talks with Dr. Elvira Abrica, assistant professor of higher education and organizational change at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, about the lived experiences of immigrant, migrant, and multicultural populations in postsecondary education.

Your research focuses on underserved student populations including immigrant, migrant, and multicultural populations in post-secondary education, with an emphasis on Latina and Latino students. I'd like to start by spending some time talking about what you have learned about these underserved populations, and what you see as a potential means to improve outcomes for these students.

Can you talk about why you studied the postsecondary experiences of underserved populations and highlight some of the themes you see in postsecondary experiences of Latina and Latino and immigrant students?

Elivra Abrica: Sure. I focused my research on Latina and Latino students specifically around issues of race, ethnicity, and immigrant background. First, it's important to recognize that Latinos are not all immigrants. I think sometimes in the higher education discourse, we talk about Latinos as if they're inherently all undocumented or all foreign born, and that's just not the case. We know that since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that Mexicans in particular have been in the U.S. since parts of it were Mexico. So California, Texas, these were Mexico, and they became U.S. states. There's some endogeneity around the Latino population that often doesn't get looked at. Latinos is a *broad* term, it's a broad category that we use to sort of capture both the immigrant experience as well as those who are later-generation Mexican-American, later-generation folks of other ethnicities.

In my work I try to kind of tease out the salience or the significance of immigrant background, particularly as it shapes how people are racialized in the U.S. and how they respond to that racialization. My research has focused a lot on the intersection of race and ethnicity and immigrant background. Initially, I started doing research on later-generation Mexican-Americans. That's how I identify, as a later generation Mexican-American woman, so I centered my research on those folks and seeing what are some of the educational experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans.

In doing research in California, I learned that a lot of the college student populations are actually children of immigrant parents. Those would be referred to as second-generation, predominantly Mexican. That's not to say that ... I don't mean to equate Latinos with Mexicans, but Mexicans are the largest ethnic group, particularly in places like California. So in learning that most college students are second-generation children of Mexican immigrant parents, I started to observe sort of differences in how these participants talked about race and the salience of race and their experience.

I started to kind of explore, wanted to explore more deeply, how immigrant background or the proximity to an immigrant experience kind of informs how you think about yourself as a racialized individual and how you respond to racializing and racializing experiences. Really, I think there's no way to kind of, for brevity I wish I could say I study Latino students, but I think in essence I study the nuances of ethnicity, immigrant background, and race, how race is experienced among Latino students in higher ed. And I think the significance of this in higher education is to understand how those experiences, being a child of an immigrant parent, for example, or being a later-generation Latino student, how individuals, those individual experiences sort of shape how we engage with the institutions we attend.

That's where my research centers, is wanting to see what are the nuances of the Latino college student experience, either in community colleges or four-year institutions, and how does the proximity to an immigrant background, ethnic identity, and one's perception of themselves as racialized, how do those things kind of coalesce to inform how they engage with postsecondary institutions.

Heather Fox: I really love how in that description you talk about the error we make in associating Latinos and immigrants as being kind of equivalent population, as one on one, and how not all Latinos are immigrants or indigenous in a lot of areas in our country, and they maybe children of

immigrants as well. So you're really talking about three different populations.

I just want to flip it and highlight the fact that obviously not all immigrants are Latinos either. I think a lot of times in our country, when we talk about immigrants, we make the assumption that we're talking about the Latino population, or even more specifically the Mexican population, but while they're the largest population of immigrants, they're certainly not the holistic idea of the population of immigrants. So I just wanted to flip that in there. I think that we make two errors in our assumption in making that connection which is not to ...

Elivra Abrica: Absolutely, absolutely. So much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric is racist in nature, it's anti-Mexican, it's anti-brown, it's anti-people of color, it's anti-Muslim, it's inherently intertwined. So I think that is the crux of my work, is to try entangle and unpack how these various identities and experiences in the U.S. inform how individuals are able to navigate postsecondary institutions, really thinking about how identities intersect with social institutions and how the institution is receiving those identities and racializing these individuals.

But then also, individuals have agency, and so how are the individuals then, based on how they're treated in those environments, how do they respond to those, as I said, racializing experiences? I think that's really the heart of what I'm trying to study in my work, is to get out the interaction between the institution and the individuals with regard to the construction of marginalized identities such as a racialized status, the ways in which immigrant background is constructed as something negative, and inherently something that's beneath others. Those are kind of the ways in which I approach my research in higher education.

Heather Fox: Your research is grounded in higher education, or the setting for your research is in higher education, so I'm wondering about that racialized experience, specifically in terms of campus climate and how institutions either create or dissuade populations from succeeding on their campus. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the role of campus climate.

Elivra Abrica: Sure. We know that the campus environment is not perceived in the same ways by all individuals. Students of color often perceive a more negative or hostile campus environment. What I've tried to do in my research is try to see how one's identity sort of impacts how students perceive that climate. In my latest research I've looked at how different dimensions of the campus climate, trying to measure different dimensions of the campus climate, and trying to see how students'

various social identities form the perceptions of a negative climate one way or another, so looking at LGBQ status, looking at race, looking at gender, kind of seeing how these intersections of one's identity inform how they view the climate and different dimensions of the climate.

So I think, inherently, higher education institutions are, their very nature, their climate is so much informed by historical legacy of racial discrimination and exclusion of people of color that a priori the climate is going to be a *highly* racialized context. As students of colors enter these contexts, they are met with experiences that people might often describe as racial microaggressions. This is a growing term that's sort of thrown around, which has been positive and developed by critical race theorists to name the experiences of students of color on college campuses.

So I would say racial microaggressions definitely we know often characterize, unfortunately, the experiences of students of color within campus environments, and we know that those campus environments are very much shaped as I said by historical legacy of racial discrimination and exclusion.

I think in my work I try to kind of see how students make it through, so that we're not just telling a story about the climate is bad, this place is racist, and we don't make it. We know that people make it in spite of and because of those experiences. In my work, I've been looking a lot about how, as I kind of talked about, how students perception of their racialized status, how that informs their engagement with particular resources. For example, my dissertation study focused on Latino males and engineering, and I looked specifically about how they understand race as a construct, as an identity, and how they respond to racism in the context of engineering.

What I found was that students, often Latino, these were Latino male students, they often were without the language to describe their experience. They didn't have any sort of context for saying this was a racial microaggression, but that's indeed what it sounded like to me, and so they were often placed into Latino-based programs or attended things that were specific for Latinos, but without any understanding or retort when people approached them and said, "Why are you in that program? Why do you get unfair advantages? Why do you get tutoring?" These sort of microaggressions; these assumptions that you're getting this unfair advantage. The students were without any recourse to explain why they are beneficiaries in some way of this additional support.

So I think that's where the complicatedness, the complicated nature of race really informs how students engage with support and experience the climate on a college campus.

Heather Fox: I'm wondering, you've studied specifically in engineering, which is part of STEM. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how this racialized climate and the expectations around race impact students' pathways into, and the resistance and resilience in, STEM fields in particular, since there's such a move to try to increase underrepresented populations or underserved populations engagement in STEM. How are their experiences different?

Elivra Abrica: Right. Well, in STEM right now, what we have is *so* much push and so much emphasis on increasing the number of students of color in STEM fields. Arguably, a critical race theory perspective might posit that this is indeed an example of interest convergence of this idea that we only need students of color now because it suits our economic interest; there's a lack of highly skilled labor force and, therefore, we need these populations that are growing in number to actually fill these spots.

I've heard the argument that this period of pushing for students of color in STEM, this has been a problem for a very long time, but is only now gaining prominence because of the economic benefit to the U.S., to the U.S. national global imperialism, the economic standing of the U.S., only now are students of color being talked as being underrepresented in these fields.

I think first off, that's sort of the lens that I approach STEM with, is this idea that a lot of the talk about students of colors in STEM is arguably very superficial. It's about increasing numbers. It's about increasing the amount of. It's about wanting more black people, more brown people in these seats and these degrees. But I don't hear as much talk about what will these students do with their degrees. Is there a pipeline to get them into whatever area or profession that they're interested in, either postbaccalaureate education or an employment area? I don't know that there's a lot of support postbaccalaureate degree for students of color that really would suggest we're truly invested in their transitioning into a STEM career. That's one thing.

Secondly, I would say this superficial inclusion, this counting, I think it doesn't account for the racialized experiences that students have in these contexts. When we talk about increasing the numbers of students of color in STEM, when we talk about needing more Latino students in STEM, that's great, I agree, but the concern I have is with the

superficiality of counting and quantifying the number of Latinos rather than *truly* investing in their learning and actually thinking about the forms of wealth, the forms of capital that Latino students have and that they could bring to STEM fields.

As a Latino population, are there ways in which our experiences could be leveraged to *inform* the field? Are there ways in which the experiences of being underrepresented, of being racially marginalized, are there ways in which are very downtrodden in this, for a lack of a better term, is there ways in which that could be not exploited and not included as a way to seem like we are diverse, but could it be that we actually leverage our forms of community cultural wealth and could there be more meaningful inclusion? So I guess that's the rub I have with that area of research, is kind of those two things; this sort of interest convergence and this superficial inclusion that I see.

Heather Fox: Kind of along those same lines, colleges often employee universal improvements, meant to "lift all tides." Do you think that this approach will reduce equity gaps seen by immigrant students or by Latina and Latino students? And if not, what approach would you advocate for?

Elivra Abrica: Well, when we talk about universal approaches, when we talk about things benefiting *all* students, I think we have to be very clear that those indeed benefit white middle class students; that when we talk about something as being universal, there's just no such thing. By default, there is a white normative standard that universities sort of cater to, and so when we talk about there being some universal program that's for *everybody*, it in fact is usually catering in some way to ... by default it is catering to the student population who has been traditionally well served by postsecondary institutions.

I would say definitely this language of universal support, I think we have to be really honest and address who's in that universe, because it's certainly not the students that are in need of tailored support. I would say certainly there can't be ... a university cannot make every individual happy at all times, in all contexts, in all circumstances, especially with diminishing state and federal resources, so I think definitely there is that tension there that institutions cannot accommodate every single group or every single constituency. But at the same time, I think with sort of talk about things being for all, we have to really be explicit about who benefits from those supposedly universal initiatives, and be very honest that they are not for certain populations.

So I would advocate for something, models of support that include some recognition of the historical legacy of racial discrimination and exclusion upon which colleges and universities are founded. That I think has to be central, is sort of thinking about the historical legacy of the institutions that we're talking about, and then sort of understanding what is within our means to do; to what extent can we tailor supports for different populations. Because to suggest that all supports are for all people just doesn't seem true. So I think being explicit about targeted efforts to support diverse student populations is where we need to be.

Heather Fox: Much of your research is situated in community college context. Would you share what the significance of a community college setting is to your work and the populations that you study?

Elivra Abrica: Well, I think community colleges are *so* important. I mean, in graduate degree programs, I don't know that they get enough air time in the classrooms, and in our curriculum, and certainly after I graduated from my doctoral program, I went to work at a community college. It's from that experience of working at a community college, I really saw the significance of these institutions beyond the few books or articles I had read, and I just completely traded what was perhaps a four-year-centric research agenda to an agenda that very much highlights the community college because, how could I not? These are such a significant sector of higher education. They enroll more students of color, more low-income students, what we often refer to as nontraditional students. So this is where, if we are talking about equity and opportunity for students of color or historically marginalized populations, we *have* to include community colleges in that conversation.

Oftentimes when we talk about access and equity, we talk about access to four-year institutions, the most elite places, and certainly there should be equitable opportunity to access those places. But most of our students are at community colleges, and for a number of compelling reasons. They're affordable. Well, I shouldn't say that. They're more affordable than four-year options. I think more and more students are choosing community colleges than the four-year institution.

I'll share with you this: I am currently conducting a study that's funded by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges. As part of this grant study, I am looking at all Nebraska community colleges and looking specifically at immigrant and migrant populations. And in interviewing a number of the students, some whom are immigrants, some of them are children of immigrants, all of them fall under the categories of either

themselves or their parents born outside the U.S. from countries like Latin America or Africa. They're just nonwhite basically.

In doing this research with immigrant students in Nebraska community colleges, what I heard one participant say just this past week was, "The four year model is obsolete. It is not a model that I want to be a part of." And he had actually transferred from our four-year flagship institution, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, to the local community college. More and more, I'm hearing the students in my study talk about the ineffectiveness of the four-year institution and how the community college is where they can do what they want to do, get the education they want, and get out without incurring so much debt.

They talk about the four-year model becoming more and more obsolete and all of these hustles that they have like, "I need to work these many jobs and I'm doing this and I'm a YouTube star and I'm doing all these different things," and they just seem to have such a, sort of like an economic mind. They're brilliant in the way they talk about economics, in the way they *perceive* economics of things, and just kind of thinking about the economy and the sort of opportunities that maybe a four-year can't even provide anymore. They've really convinced me that community colleges are *the* most significant institutional type in postsecondary education because of what they're able to provide to the masses.

Are there problems with community colleges? Absolutely. We know this, that they too have their inefficiencies. But the more and more I talk to immigrant students in Nebraska, the more I hear about how it's just the most viable option for *so* many reasons and it just makes more sense. Certainly I think community colleges are incredibly important and they should be studied more in higher education. And they definitely are due a place of prominence on the national kind of political conversation or political realm.

Heather Fox: Awesome. So given the significance of community colleges to the populations that you research, I'm wondering about the need to engage and train Latina and Latino community college faculty and community college leadership.

Elivra Abrica: Well, I think I would say to that question, one thing I would encourage us to think about is not just the leadership or the faculty in community colleges, but also the institutional researchers. Somehow I found myself at UCLA, I worked in the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, and so for many years throughout my doctoral training I worked in this

sort of assessment IR office. So after I finished my doctorate, I went to a community college and worked in IR, so I just saw from the inside how significant these units are on community colleges. I think part of my agenda, almost not strategically and almost not even on purpose, has really focused on the role that institutional research offices play in the community college landscape.

Most recently, I wrote a testimonial borrowing from critical race theory and methods within critical race theory. I wrote a testimonial as an IR professional and I argued in that testimonial, well, first I shared my experience as a IR professional, as a woman of color, and then I talked about how we often talk about faculty administrators. But IR stands to play a *critically* important role in promoting equity on community college campuses, and they're not often thought about.

We often think about faculty, we often think about administrators, but I would argue that IR, Institutional Research offices, are key to advancing the equity agenda in community colleges. I say that because they're the holders and keepers of data, and they're able to demonstrate what outcomes we're looking at and where do we want to be. How can we move the needle? And they're most equipped to be able to dictate, or what's the word, they're most in a position to be able to say which groups need targeted intervention or which groups are disproportionately impacted and to what extent are those Latino colleagues being supported in their equity efforts.

So I would say there needs to be some training and development around how to support Latino colleagues, how to engage in that work, how to be an ally, and how to really disrupt these systems that supposedly are invested in success of all students but really perpetuate the status quo or continue business as usual.

I'll say, for example, with institutional research, Patrick Terenzini has written a lot about the competencies required of IR professionals. He talks about how it's very important as an IR professional that you be seen as objective and neutral because you're the holder of all of the data, and so if you're seen as having a political agenda on a community college campus, that's a problem for people in how they view you.

In my testimonial about IR, as being an IR woman of color, I talk about how those competencies were not useful to me. Maybe it's okay that we're not seen as neutral. Maybe it's okay to be both an IR professional and an equity-minded practitioner. Because when we talk about equity mindedness, that conversation often centers on faculty, equity-minded

faculty, equity-minded administrators, and that's great, but I think there's room to explore further. And my latest publications really kind of center on IR and community colleges and how we can become equity-minded IR professionals, which goes against the very socialization that Terenzini talks about that others have upheld as this pillar of neutrality.

Heather Fox: Last question: Do you have a call to action for those who want to promote equitable outcomes for the populations of students you serve?

Elivra Abrica: I would say that for the Latino population, I think we're often excluded from the discourse around opportunity. Nationally, when we talk about race and racism, it's often presented in this black-white binary. I would say the call to action I have is that Latinos need to be represented and need to be part of those conversations around the relationship between education, opportunity, social mobility, and they need to be inserted and disrupt that black-white binary that often informs conversations around race.

I would say my call to action is just to *insert* Latinos in the rhetorical landscape around race, racism, and educational opportunity. That would be my call to action, is to say that though we are not black, not white, certainly there's rhetoric that is targeting Latino folks. And it's not about culture. It's about race. It's about ... We talked about the anti-immigrant sentiment. It's not just anti-immigrant. It's anti-Mexican immigrant.

I think we're already part of this racial landscape, but we're not part of the discourse around race and racism, and there's no political power to say we're here, and we're not going to be marginalized even within the discussion about how to not marginalize people. I think that's my call to action, is to really advocate for the insertion of Latinos within the rhetorical landscape around race and educational opportunity.

Heather Fox: That's awesome. Well, thank you so much.

Elivra Abrica: Thank you. This was fun.

Heather Fox: Tune in next month when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher talks with Dr. David Stovall, a professor of African-American Studies and Education Policy Studies at University of Illinois at Chicago, about the influence of race in urban education, community development, and housing. Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.