

Democracy's College

Episode 12: Retention, success, and identity development of Latina/Latino college students and the role of Hispanic-Serving Institutions

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 occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher from OCCRL talks with Dr. Gina A. Garcia, an assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thank you so much. We are here with Dr. Gina A. Garcia. Dr. Garcia is an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh, where she teaches in the Higher Education Management Program. Her research centers on issues of diversity in higher education with an emphasis on Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI) and Latina/o students. Dr. Garcia herself is also a proud graduate of an HSI. Welcome this afternoon, Dr. Garcia.

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: Thank you.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: We really appreciate you joining us on Democracy's College for OCCRL. Dr. Garcia, much of your work argues that context matters. What do you consider the central components of institutional culture that are necessary to enhance the success of students of color?

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: There is a lot of work out there that says that the curriculum that we offer to students and the co-curricular aspects of a college experience are important for all students. My work digs in a little bit deeper in that I am looking specifically at not only racialized students, but also racialized context. Does this look different in an HSI, or an emerging HSI, or any type of minority-serving institution than it would at a predominantly White institution? What I am finding is that those spaces continue to matter, and those spaces include Greek organizations, ethnic student organizations, diversity training workshops, [and] internship programs that students participate in. Those types of things have been coming out as significant spaces and contexts for students, particularly students of color. Those kinds of spaces contribute to their leadership development; they are able to develop as leaders and start to see leadership as more complex than just positional, based on those experiences. Also, I have done some work with one of my graduate students, Oscar Patron. We have looked at how those type of spaces help students get through difficult situations, [which are] often oppressive situations, situations where they enact their resilience. Those kind of spaces allow them to be who they are or explore who they are, whether it be racially, or their sexual orientation, or their immigration status. They find those spaces to be super important. I think as far as thinking more specifically about HSIs, or emerging HSIs versus PWIs, predominantly White institutions, in doing some comparative work and having two different samples in my study on Latino male leadership, it definitely became important that HSIs seem to have those spaces more often. [In] the HSI and the emerging HSI, in my study, there were a lot more spaces for students to explore. There were a lot more sources in the curriculum, where they could take ethnic study programs or they could participate in ethnic student organizations than we found at the predominantly White institutions. That was really powerful for us, to be like, well in the empirical research we were saying these spaces matter, but are institutions actually offering these

spaces? Not to say that predominantly White institutions cannot and do not offer those spaces, because they do; but in my particular study they weren't offering those, so students were struggling to find those spaces because they weren't there. I think to put back the onus on these institutions you've got to provide these spaces. We can't continue to bring in minoritized students and expect them to succeed without actually thinking about the things that they need.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I want to piggyback on when you mentioned the differences in terms of HSIs in contrast to emerging HSIs as well as non-HSIs. When you think about the spaces and that they are more readily available where students can find face and place to see themselves reflected not just in the curriculum but also in that which is co-curricular at HSIs and emerging HSIs, how does that translate into student outcomes?

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: If I think about my research trajectory and where I started with thinking about HSIs and to where it is now, that was really an early question that I had. To be an HSI means that you enroll at least 25% or more Latino students; therefore, just the percentages matter, that all that matters is that certain a percentage is there, and maybe it leads to different outcomes. The early work that I did along those lines, quantitative work to really look at outcomes and graduation rates at four-year HSIs, emerging HSIs, and non-HSIs, basically showed that it didn't matter. The percentage of Latino students on a college campus doesn't predict whether more students will graduate. The strongest predictors were those that we know, which are institutional selectivity and institutional resources. When I think about that and the importance of us having bigger conversations particularly at the federal level and state level, if we know that those variables predict outcomes, then how do we support institutions? How do we make sure that we continue to support HSIs? And even more because we know that we have to account for the fact that they are maybe under-resourced or less selective institutions and they need the support. Thinking about HSIs not just as a percentage of Latino students or Latino faculty and staff on campus, but [rather] how do we come to support them no matter what the percentages? It is bigger, right? There are bigger issues and institutional-level factors that we have to think about.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: One of the things I would like to spend some time exploring with you is the consideration of organizational identity. How do HSIs further the matriculation for Latina/Latino students and students of color in general? On one hand you have minority-serving institutions that, say for instance tribal colleges or HBCUs, that organic in the mission and origination of those institutions was embedded a vision of value, a mission of advancing equitable student outcomes for those particular student groups, whereas with predominately-Black institutions or HSIs they are much more enrollment driven as opposed to mission driven. What type of cultural congruence would you say in terms of your work have you seen? Is there a greater person environment fit for Latino students or students of color in general at HSIs?

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: I am really grappling with this question right now with my current study. I am working on a multiple case study. I have three institutions in the same city in Chicago, Illinois. They are all HSIs on paper, but they function very differently. They look very different, and institutionally they are different as far as size, public versus private, and how much they fund students versus not, and so they are very different institutions [despite] the fact that they enroll at least 25% Latino students. It is interesting because I am finding so many different things as far as what does it actually mean to be an HSI. I think about HSI identity like the salience: How salient is it to people? I have one institution that is very salient. They have been thinking about it for over 20 years. That they are actually an HSI and they

have a good number of these different contexts that I have mentioned. They have a Latino resource center, and they have an off-site campus that particularly caters to the Latino community in the area, and so they are very much aware of it and they are doing all these things, but their outcomes are probably the lowest of the three. Whereas the institution at the opposite end, where their salience is very low, they have not thought of themselves as an HSI at all. I think my presence might be bringing it to their consciousness more than anything. They have very high outcomes for students. With that institution, it's not that they're not thinking about that population, they are. When I dig in deeper, they are a private institution, and they are funding students in important ways. In important ways they're making sure that students, who are maybe low income or undocumented, are getting funding, and they are finding different sources of funding for that. They see funding as a really important thing for this population. They're not doing it because they're an HSI; they're doing it because they recognize the need of this population. It becomes this conundrum: Well does that mean they are serving this population well? Whether or not they actually accept the Federal designation or the Federal designation is salient to them does not mean they are serving students more or less, that they are serving the population and they recognize that the population is there, but they just do it because they recognize it, as opposed to because of them being an HSI. Talking to students at that particular site was interesting, because they also don't even realize that they don't have the contexts. That they don't have a Latino resource center, that they don't have Chicano studies in the curriculum and those sorts of things they actually don't even realize that they are missing it because it is just not there. In talking with them they start to think like: Actually that would be kind of cool. I would kind of like that. They just haven't had exposure to it, because they just haven't. The institution hasn't offered it. I think I stand by the research in that saying those students [who] do have it, right, those students might have a whole different experience, and they are going to graduate. There is a part of me that really truly believes that creating critical consciousness in students, and helping them to find their identity, and explore their racial and ethnic identity and other identities, while in college is important. That maybe graduating students in high numbers isn't enough. That HSIs should bring other things, which goes back to your point about the mission. That should be a mission. There should be a conversation about the fact that we are serving these different populations: How does that become part of our mission? How do we actually move toward being a minority-serving institution or Hispanic-serving institution?

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: You were talking about the three case studies and them all being embedded in Chicago. The home for OCCRL is in Champaign at our flagship campus at the University of Illinois, but we also have offices in Chicago, and some of the work that we have done is in the Chicago area. If we were to release a video of this transcription, I would show up as a bobble head. There is a lot of case in points in terms of some of the examples where we have interviewed and have surveyed faculty and they didn't realize that they were at a minority-serving institution. Students didn't realize that, and so on. These are institutions that meet the federal designation but don't necessarily ascribe to being one openly, and then others that wear it on their sleeve and are very much so in the tradition of advancing and sharing very explicitly that we are an HSI two-year institution. Some of your recent work has underscored what you call Latinized institutions. You coined this term Latinized institutions and have talked about the utilities of counter-storytelling in describing such institutions. Could you share with our listeners a little bit more about this concept of Latinized institutions?

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: Yes, the idea of the Latinized institutions, I am not going to take credit for coining that. I have a friend in Pittsburgh. Her name is Tara Sherry-Torres, and she wrote about what if

Pittsburgh was Latinized. And I thought, if a place where there are only 2% Latino people, and where I feel is not Latinized at all, and where they don't even see me as a person as a Latina, could in our alternative world actually get to that space, why couldn't any institution get there as well? I was really moved. It was like a blog that she wrote. I was moved by her blog to think what that would look like for any space, any institution of higher education to be Latinized. So what I did with that, for a policy brief that I wrote for the Center for Minority Serving Institutions, was use empirical data to write this alternative world. That's this idea of counter-storytelling, that you actually use empirical data, so it is not made up; the story isn't fully fictional, but it is in some ways, because it's still storytelling. It's a story, but it's based on real data. So I was able at two of the three sites in my current study (I haven't collected data from all three yet) to write about what does this alternative world look like? It was fun to write because I was able to pull from the two institutions and mesh them into one, because I felt like one was very Latinized in one way and the other was very Latinized in another way. A lot of that had to do with culture and the way people felt and the use of language, and in particular the Spanish language. Counter-storytelling allowed me the opportunity to do that. It is grounded in Critical Race Theory. So a quick little plug, I am actually writing a book, and the book will be written as counter-stories. So all three institutions in the study will actually be featured. I am telling counter-stories about the three institutions. It is based on the empirical data, but it will highlight the really important aspects of each of the institutions that make them Latinized, and those are very different things; for each institution it looks very, very different.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: In thinking about some of your thoughts as it relates to the different pathways that HSIs provide underrepresented students of color, particularly from purview at OCCRL, we consider the pipeline of two-year institutions that are MSIs as well. Can you share some of your thoughts about how community colleges can be used as conduits to advance Latino/a completion?

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: It is something that I am thinking a lot about right now, particularly as I am working on my book. I'm thinking about postsecondary institutions as a population, all postsecondary institutions together, and I'm thinking a lot and writing about how we value only certain institutions. In research and policy and practice, there are a handful of institutions, and they are the most elite institutions in the country, the ones on the top of the lists of best colleges and universities in the country. If I walk outside and ask 10 people, probably all 10 people will name at least 10 of the same in their top 50, at least 10, like Harvard, University of Virginia, University of Illinois. We all think about these institutions and value these institutions. HSIs are not those institutions, and community colleges are not those institutions, and therefore we don't value them in the same sort of way that we value those institutions. I've been thinking a lot about the importance, and in line with this idea of counter-storytelling, that all institutions don't have to be Harvard, or whatever. Not all institutions have to be large research institutions, or get grant money from the federal government for doing big research, or recruit the top faculty in their fields to come in and be scholars and do important things, or recruit students with the highest SAT or ACT scores. That is not what all institutions are about. The more I spend time with HSIs the more I realize that those institutions actually don't want to be those institutions. They are like, that is not what we do. We don't do those things. We don't even have a tenure process, and that's okay because we value teaching and we value producing graduates that immediately get to go out into these high-skills high-demand high-wage jobs. Two of my institutions are actually that. Two of the three in my current study, that is what they do. They are focused on hospitality management. They are focused on nursing programs. And healthcare is big, particularly for Latino populations and bilingual students. There is a

huge demand for people who can go out into the healthcare industry, and not doctors, [but] people who can go out immediately, two years, and get a degree, like pharmaceutical techs. Immediately, two years later, can go out and get a good job in a high-demand area. Social work is a big one. And some of these institutions they are like, we need to get out and support our communities, people who are willing to go out and take action in our communities and help our communities, and to do it in a culturally relevant way. That they understand the population and they speak the language of the population that they are working with. I'm learning a lot from those two institutions. Those two institutions are like, we don't care about, they don't actually say they don't care about being Harvard or they don't want to be Harvard, but they do. Without saying it they do. They are like, we are really good at these things. We are graduating students, and they are going out and they are working with their communities and they are uplifting their communities at the same time. One of my institutions talks about intergenerational educational uplift. One person comes to the institution. Then they get the aunt, then they get the cousin, then they get the daughter, and then all of a sudden the whole family is there, and now they are uplifting the entire community and the entire family. That's valuable to them. I think that it's something for us to ponder as researchers, policy makers, legislators, to think about what value do we place on community colleges and other broad access institutions. Because they bring so much value.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: So as our time is wrapping up here, I want to ask what advice would you provide, if there was a call to action you would offer to those listening that want to take an equity-minded approach to broadening participation, that are considering how to foster pathways to and from HSIs and bolster students outcomes? What advice would you share?

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: It goes along with the last thing that I was thinking about, rethinking our values, as a system and as a society, that in general we value very White-normative, hetero-normative ways of being. That is problematic because a lot of us don't fall in line with those values or those ways of knowing or being. I think we have to take a critical look at ourselves. I recently wrote about the idea of decolonizing HSIs. That has been powerful. I have presented that idea at several conferences, and people came up to me like, wow I have never thought of it like this and this is my life. I'm a director of Title V at my HSI and this is so powerful for me to think about, getting rid of all the layers of elitism and all the things we value in postsecondary education, and just getting to the core at what we can be good at, which is serving minoritized populations and really understanding them and caring about their outcomes beyond just academic outcomes. There are other things that are important. That would be my call to action. To really think about how do we decolonize, for those familiar with the idea of decolonizing, embracing indigenous ways of knowing and not valuing colonized ways of knowing, which are the normative ways of knowing and being. Thinking about that. What would that actually look like? Again it is an alternative world, this Latinized world. It would be a different space. It would be a very different space, and it would require everybody to be on board with that. If you think at an institutional level, how do you get an entire institution on board with that? It's going to take time. It's definitely going to take time. But I've got people now, after giving these talks, asking me, how do we do it? We do want to do it. We have people committed to doing this. We have administrators committed to doing this. We have faculty committed to doing it. I think that is my call to action. Let's think about decolonizing institutions of higher education.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: With that said, I thank you so much for your time and we wish you a wonderful rest of your day.

Dr. Gina A. Garcia: Thank you!

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thank you!

Closing: For more information about the retention, success, and identity development of Latina/o college students we recommend that you visit Dr. Garcia's faculty profile. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrillinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @occril. Tune in next month when HyeJin Yeo from OCCRL talks with the author of *Illegal: Reflections of an Undocumented Immigrant*, José Ángel N., about his experiences as an undocumented immigrant navigating into and through higher education. 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.