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**Examining Latine Belonging, Motivation, and Student Organization Involvement in Higher  
Education**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Marie-Anne Suizzo, Supervisor

Stephanie Cawthon

**Examining Latine Belonging, Motivation, and Student Organization Involvement in Higher  
Education**

**by**

**Ryan A. Mata**

**Report**

**Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**in Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements**

**for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**December 2022**

## **Abstract**

# **Examining Latine Belonging, Motivation, and Student Organization Involvement in Higher Education**

Ryan A. Mata, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2022

Supervisor: Marie-Anne Suizzo

As Latine undergraduate enrollment rates rise within the United States, retention continues to be a key issue affecting the academic achievement of these students. A key mechanism for ensuring student retention has to do with the academic and social experiences of students, which foster institutional commitment, sense of belonging, and academic persistence. In this report, I review the literature on the examination of factors affecting Latine student success, retention, and sense of belonging across a variety of domains. Involvement in student organizations is emphasized as a potential context and experience that facilitates sense of belonging and motivation for academic persistence. Relying on Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), I propose a phenomenological study to explore how student organization involvement impacts sense of belonging and motivation to persist academically for Latine students at a large, Hispanic-Serving Institution in the southwest United States.

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## Introduction

When college students first arrive on campus, they are forced to navigate a new environment that can be much different from their previous social and academic worlds. For some students, college is seen as intimidating, unaligned with their values, and populated with a student body that feels unrepresentative of their identities. Although some campuses such as HSIs<sup>1</sup> (Hispanic serving institutions) strive to best accommodate Latine students, these issues are present on many campuses, some of which are largely or historically white (PWIs or “Predominately White Institutions,” and HWIs or “Historically White institutions”). A crucial component of finding one’s way on campus has to do with a sense of belonging or relatedness that a student feels to their peers and to their idea of a “college student” (Tinto, 1975). A mismatch between one’s sense of self and what Latine students see around them on campus inevitably affects the belonging felt while attending university, which has shown to have detrimental effects on Latine student success (Strayhorn, 2012). Ultimately these negative experiences may weigh on a student to the point of leaving their university, making cohesion to one’s university a key component of student retention (Tinto, 1975). While the proportion of Latine students enrolled in undergraduate programs is growing into the largest proportion of underrepresented people in US colleges, college retention rates are outranked by their white peers, who tend to complete their degree at higher rates (33% to 35% for two-year institutions, and 63% to 51% at four-year institutions; Excelencia in Education, 2020). Many factors have been examined to diagnose issues of Latine academic persistence, with many showing that a

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<sup>1</sup> Hispanic-serving institutions, or “HSIs” are designated by being defined as an “eligible institution” by the federal government in addition to having at least 25% of its full-time undergraduate students identify as Hispanic (US Department of Education). Eligible institutions are given additional funding by the Department of Education to bolster programming and resources to elevate Latine and underrepresented student success (US Department of Education, n.d.).

sense of belonging or relatedness proves to be an integral factor of motivation to persist through school. Ultimately, the forces that can shape students' sense of belonging involve experiences with faculty, coursework, and affiliation with the university community.

In this proposed study I examine the role of student organization involvement—particularly those groups that focus their activity around the celebration and affirmation of Latine cultures—on undergraduates' sense of belonging, and the resulting effects on academic motivation and persistence through degree completion. In order to interpret the effect of belonging, or relatedness, on academic motivation, I will be employing the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as outlined by Ryan and Deci (2000) which includes relatedness as a key psychological component of fostering intrinsic motivation.

First, I will review the current literature on factors affecting Latine student belonging in university to provide details into the type of experiences, interactions, and contexts that facilitate student relatedness. Then, I will highlight current literature on Latine student organization involvement and its impact on sense of belonging, an individual construct. Lastly, I will introduce the SDT framework and include definitions of the core theory's psychological components of nurturing intrinsic motivation (autonomy, relatedness, and competence). In Part Two of this report, I will propose a qualitative study that attempts to garner an in-depth intersectional analysis of Latine undergraduate experiences with ethnic student organizations, attempting to connect their lived experiences to the constructs of belonging/relatedness and subsequent motivation in school.

## Review of Literature

### Latine Student Growth

The Hispanic or Latine<sup>2</sup> population in the United States has been growing at a rate of 23% (from 50.5 million to 62.1 million) from the 2010 Census to the 2020 Census, while the non-Latine population has expanded by about 4.3% (Jones et al., 2021). The growth in Latine populations accounted for over half of the total US population growth between decades—leading to larger representation in US institutions, the workforce, and education system. The Latine population has a lower median age of 30 years compared to 44 for non-Latine White people. This could be due to a number of factors including Latines having a high birth rate and lifespan, while contributing to a significant portion of the immigrants who have entered the US (Saenz, 2010). By 2030, it is expected that the Latine population within the US will grow by as much as 25 percent (Excelencia in Education, n.d.). As this development continues to trend upward, it becomes imperative to examine factors which can ensure Latine success in colleges and universities.

A larger share in the population has not guaranteed higher levels of educational attainment for Latine students. Despite the increase in number, Latines face persistent challenges with college retention, degree completion, and overall academic persistence. What makes this an issue of college *retention* is that—when isolated—enrollment rates in higher education seem to be growing at an accelerating rate for Latine students when compared to their White, Black, and Asian counterparts (Pew, 2014). In fact, Latine students have begun to surpass college

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<sup>2</sup> Use of the inclusive term “Latine” will be adopted for this report rather than “Hispanic,” Chicano/a/@/x,” or “Latino/a/@/x”. Opting for “e” instead of “x” ensures that I can accommodate Spanish pronunciation while maintaining a gender-inclusive suffix. As of 2018 there were 78 registered HSIs in the state of Texas (US Department of Education, 2018) and the University of Texas at Austin notably surpassed the 25% threshold for identification as an HSI according to a press release in the fall semester of 2020 and was subsequently designated as an HSI by the US Department of Education (Figueroa-Nieves, 2020; Gamboa, 2021).



enrollment rates of their White peers in institutions of higher learning. The Pew Research Center estimates that in 2012, 49% of Latine high school graduates aged 18 to 24 years compared to 47% of White adults enrolled in colleges including both two-year and four-year institutions (Krogstad & Fry, 2014), capping a period of immense growth (240%) in enrollment rates for Latines between 1996-2012 and instantiating the first time ever that Latines enrolled at higher proportions than Whites. This includes 69% of Latine high school graduates enrolling directly in higher education after 12<sup>th</sup> grade compared to 67% of White high school seniors (Pew, 2013a). Furthermore, there has been an accompanying auspicious decrease in high school dropout rates that has trended downward since the 1970s (yet more dramatically since the mid 1990s).

Enrollment and presence in educational institutions by younger Latine students is on the rise, creating a strong pipeline for college enrollment (Pew, 2013b). However, fully picturing college enrollment includes taking into account non-traditional student profiles (broadly defined as students over the age of 24; US Dept of Education n.d.b.). *Excelencia in Education*, a national organization that has been advancing and recognizing Latine success in US higher education for over fifteen years, created a report that presents a fuller picture of Latine involvement in college. They estimate that for a wider demographic (adults aged 18-34 years) post-secondary enrollment favors White non-Latines at a rate of 24% to 21%. Consideration of this age group encompasses non-traditional students that can account for as much as a third of all enrolled undergraduates (Hanson, 2022). Additionally, Latine students trail their White counterparts in terms of enrollment rates in four-year institutions (56% to 72%) and so-called “selective” colleges<sup>3</sup>, full-

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<sup>3</sup> Definition for selectivity based on ACT-equivalent scores of first-year students. Selective colleges refers to both highly selective and moderately selective 4-year institutions. “Highly selective” is defined as corresponding to ACT scores above 21; “Moderately selective” corresponds to ACT-equivalent scores between 18-21 (Bozick & Lauff, 2007).

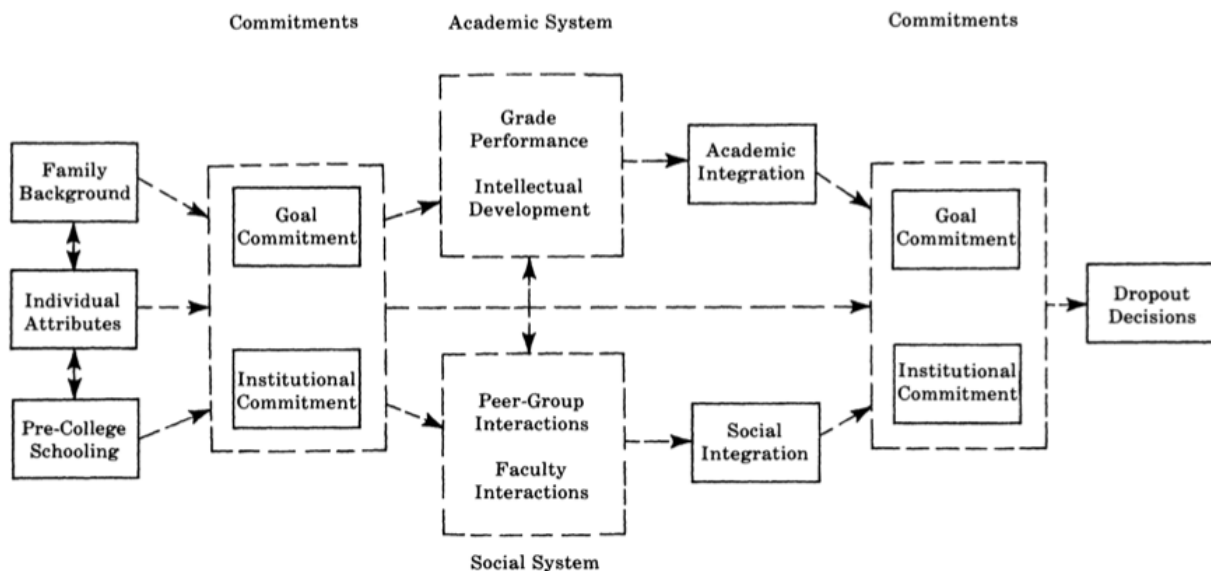
time status, and ultimately degree completion (Bozick & Lauff, 2007; Excelencia in Education, 2020, Krogstad & Fry, 2014; Pew, 2013a).

The present challenge to Latine students in the US lies not in their initial enrollment in post-secondary institutions, but in their undergraduate journey towards degree attainment. Latine students are less likely to finish their degree, with 23% of Latine enrollees getting their degree versus 47% of Whites (Minor, 2016). This difference has been observed in both two-year (a difference of 2 percent) and four-year (a difference of 12 percent) institutions (Excelencia in Education, 2020). This low completion rate leads to an overall discrepancy between Latines and Whites in terms of percentage of adults (25 years and older) who hold an associate degree or higher, with 24% of Latine adults versus 46% of White adults (Excelencia in Education, 2020). This difference can be observed across age groups. However, Latines are unique in that each age group surpasses the previous in terms of educational attainment (28% of ages 25 to 34 versus 25.8% ages 35-44) while White students lag behind their predecessors (55.2% of ages 25 to 34 versus 58.1% ages 35-44; American Council on Education, 2020). As subsequent generations of Latine students decide to continue their education at colleges and universities more and more, additional research is needed to explore how factors—both academic and social—affect their academic persistence.

### **Predictors of Latine College Student Retention and Success**

A predominant theoretical framework for examining student retention and persistence comes from Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975), which emphasizes the importance of engagement on campus towards the goal of students feeling integrated in their environment to the point of continuing with their studies. According to Tinto's model, student engagement in college first relies on background such as individual and family characteristics in addition to

prior academic experience. Students commit to both academic goals as well as social objectives to cultivate connections between themselves and their institution through interactions with fellow students and faculty members. Thus, integration of students attending college depends on both the commitment and assimilation to the academic and social environments around them, which may result from institutional experiences that are either “formal or informal” (Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 1975). Informal experiences come from students’ interaction with peers, semi-formal interactions include extracurricular involvement (such as organizations or Greek life), and formal experiences include interactions with faculty and staff (Tinto, 1975).



**Figure 1:** Tinto’s model of student retention (1975)

Criticism has come to Tinto’s model for lack of a better explanation of the college-going experiences of “marginalized” or underrepresented students, where discrimination, perceptions of campus climate, and diversity may all be significant factors to achieving academic and social integration (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nuñez, 2009). For these students, Tinto’s model relies on acculturation and assimilation wherein minority or underrepresented, culturally oppressed groups adhere to or become “incorporated” into the “dominant” social culture as a result of separation

from their own “cultural realities” (Rendon et al., 2000). Tinto (1993, as cited by Braxton, 2019) does call for the examination of campus inclusivity and a welcoming campus for diverse students as an important factor of retention, echoing the sentiments of other researchers conducting their work on primarily underrepresented racial or ethnic groups (Braxton, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nuñez, 2009; Rendon et al., 2000).

Since then, considerable research into the issue of, and variables surrounding, Latine retention in colleges has been conducted within the behavioral sciences (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008; Zurita, 2004). While Tinto’s seminal model begins with pre-college factors, then two parallel systems of academic and social integration that lead to dropout decisions, more recent research has further divided and categorized the variables impacting *specifically* Latine persistence, success, and retention in college. Such research has provided a more illustrative look into the experiences of these students, providing more color into the “cultural realities” of Latine students (Rendon et al., 2000). However, current research also continues to rely on retention theory from Tinto (1975; 1993) to show how dynamics between home culture (a pre-college factor) and institutional culture may contribute to dropping out in light of Latine students’ social and academic experiences on campus (Zurita, 2004).

### ***Personal Factors***

Personal factors may include pre-college variables such as high school academic performance (GPA and standardized test scores), financial resources, family support, and self-concept with particular importance on maintaining a “positive mental outlook” towards succeeding in college (Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). In terms of financial resources, Zurita’s 2004 qualitative study of 10 undergraduates found that being financially

disadvantaged increases feelings of alienation at university. This feeling is analogous to the sense of being an “outsider,” which decreases chances of retention (Tinto, 1987 as cited by Zurita, 2004). Another critical personal factor found by Zurita was parental support, which begins much earlier in life than college but may remain consistent as an influence throughout the academic trajectory of a Latine college student. Participants in her study reported limited parental interest in their academic achievements and college visits taken together (possibly due to a lack of prior knowledge and language necessary to engage with these activities), as well as increased emotional strain to maintain family relationships especially when the college/university was a great distance from home. Storlie, Moreno, and Portman (2014) also found that support from school personnel, family members, and friends are all crucial social factors in the world of a Latine student that can lead to increased academic persistence in college. They define these conditions as part of the “realities” for Latine students which are present before the students even attend college and are typically still in high school.

### ***Academic Factors***

Zurita (2004) found that academic factors dealing with relative unpreparedness experienced by the participants compared to their White peers can affect Latine student retention. The discrepancy between achievement on standardized testing and advanced placement credit prior to attending college contributes to a gap between Latine students and their peers from the start of their college experience. This may impact self-esteem and inhibit social integration via student to student interactions that would otherwise foster a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997 as cited by Zurita, 2004). Using educational data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 that included samples of Hispanic students who were enrolled in a community college ( $n = 517$ ) or four-year institution ( $n = 408$ ), Arbona and Nora (2007) also

found that the rigor of students' academic track in high school is a significant predictor of student achievement in college. This finding sheds light on the importance of "pre-college factors" which contribute to a sense of preparation for higher education. In addition to pre-college factors, the authors also found academic achievement predictors *during* college to include immediate and uninterrupted matriculation, full-time student status, proportion of course completion for credit (i.e., course drop-out rate), and "high" undergraduate cumulative GPA. Similar to pre-college factors, these variables help predict the academic integration between Latine students and their universities, which is crucial for retention (Tinto, 1975). Fry (2000) suggests that for Latine students, who enroll yet drop out at high rates, degree-attainment is impacted more by student experiences while attending college rather than pre-college experiences.

### ***Involvement/Social Engagement Factors***

Involvement factors are generally inclusive of the relationships that students make with both peers and faculty on campus. Involvement factors include interactions with faculty, having a mentor, and participation in student organizations (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado et al., 1996). These kinds of experiences, in addition to having casual social groups, constitute the "formal and informal mechanisms" that contribute to retention through creating a higher sense of belonging to the university (Zurita, 2004). Having robust support systems while attending college and finding support in contexts such as student organizations, dormitories, and classes lead to a greater chance at developing the determination needed to get their degree. Participation in these settings helps students believe in themselves, view their academic journey positively, and develop a sense of self-efficacy or competence that fuels intrinsic motivation to succeed (Storlie et al., 2014). Although originally categorized as a sociocultural factor by Hernandez and

Lopez (2004), involvement in one's local community is yet another engagement-related variable that was qualitatively found to impact academic persistence.

### ***Environmental Factors***

Environmental factors affecting academic persistence include campus racial climate (including experiences of discrimination), a diverse student community (and for Latine students specifically—the presence of other Latine students), and the amount of time spent on campus—which is affected by working hours, work location, and living arrangements' proximity to school (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Working on or near campus, being in a diverse student body, and not perceiving a hostile campus climate are all favorable conditions that “assure and reinforce a student's journey in higher education.” (Storlie et al., 2014, p.73). Supportive college environments facilitate this process and allow Latine undergraduates to shift their sights to the broader horizon of life *after* college being the “next step” towards a more comfortable, financially independent future. With this in mind, Latine students can more easily realize their current commitment to academic and social goals which—in Tinto's retention model (1975)—is integral to building commitment to one's institution as well as influencing dropout decisions.

### **Predictors of Latine Student Belonging**

Whether through qualitative (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Storlie et al., 2014; Zurita, 2004) or quantitative (Arbona & Nora, 2007) forms of inquiry, the significant variables for success and academic persistence found across various domains have to do with establishing cohesion and commitment between student and institution, hearkening back to Tinto's model of student retention (1975). This points to students' sense of belonging (synonymous with relatedness, cohesion, connectedness, and integration) as being a crucial factor that is both affected by academic and social experiences and *affects* retention and dropout decisions.

However, students who feel a sense of belonging at their institution may also need to be *motivated* to persist academically to be able to graduate. This raises the need for a theoretical framework that explains how belonging may lead to retention and academic persistence.

***Self-Determination Theory: Why cultivating belonging is important for academic persistence***

Bridging the concepts of belonging, academic motivation, and degree attainment is possible through the use of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) motivational framework. The SDT is based on the premise that internal (intrinsic) sources of motivation are accessible through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Rather than *extrinsic* motivation where one is driven by external factors, such as rewards or the approval of others, intrinsic motivation is fostered from within and represents a higher-quality set of motives to achieve one's personal goals. Intrinsic motivation can involve personal values, caring for others, or pursuing interests to which one is genuinely curious. However, the core needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence must be satisfied to be able to sustain intrinsic motivation and a high level of engagement with an individual's tasks in their given environment.

The first term, *autonomy*, refers to the need for an internal locus of control and causality in one's actions as they lead to rewards. In the context of SDT, actions that are considered by an individual to be exercised by their own right are thought of as "self-determined," while environmental conditions can either help (autonomy-supportive conditions) or hinder (autonomy-controlling conditions) an individual's perception that the root of their motivations is being derived internally versus extrinsically (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When certain behaviors *are* valued externally, such as in a classroom or in larger society, they may connect to the individual's motive through internalization. When someone aligns their values and goals with the larger group that is espousing them, they are creating *relatedness*, or a sense of belonging that is



equally important to fostering intrinsic motivation. Lastly, to adopt goals or behaviors as one's own (moving from extrinsic to intrinsic) is significantly affected by the individual's perception of their *competence* to both comprehend and achieve those goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory has been employed in several studies exploring the connection between relatedness/belonging, autonomy, competence to academic achievement, showing the relations between the fulfillment of student connectedness to their institution and outcomes such as academic development (Beachboard et al., 2011; Li et al., 2020), class engagement (Freeman, 2019), preparedness for the job market (Beachboard et al., 2011), dropout intentions (Taylor et al., 2012), and degree attainment (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). In theory, SDT provides a framework for Latine student motivation on the basis of belonging—a construct that has been studied much with Latine participants, but with the addition of two more constructs, autonomy and competence.

### ***Situating Belonging in Latine College Experiences***

Both quantitative and qualitative researchers have sought to use the construct of belonging as a means of organizing how myriad factors such as campus climate, connections to external communities, personal values, diversity-related interactions and activities, and faculty interest converge on Latine students' experiences to foster feelings of inclusion or exclusion in the college atmosphere (Acevedo & Stodolska 2019; Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nuñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Early use of the construct of belonging for Latine student samples (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) was adapted from Bollen and Hoyle's dimensions of "perceived cohesion" (1990) representing the extent to which one feels attached to their respective social groups. The dimension of "sense of belonging" (along with the second dimension, "feelings of morale") was operationalized in Bollen and Hoyle's "Perceived

Cohesion Scale” and has been used in a variety of geographic contexts—cities, nations, and college campuses—including studying underrepresented student cohesion (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In regard to Latine students, Strayhorn (2019) found that students respond to low levels of belonging with feelings of frustration, isolation, marginality, heightened acculturative stress, and reduced academic persistence.

### ***Social Factors that Predict Belonging***

An oft-cited longitudinal study from Hurtado and Carter (1997) creates and tests a conceptual model depicting factors which are likely to precede a sense of belonging in Latine students throughout their time in university. Their article represents an early attempt at drawing a parallel between the “fit” of student and institution defined by Tinto’s model of student retention (1975) with the construct of “sense of belonging” to describe student cohesion with their school environment. Their results show membership in religious organizations (during the second and third years of college), and sororities/fraternities, athletics, social/community, and student government organizations (in students’ third year) all significantly predicted Latine students’ sense of belonging. Interaction with other students over course material in the second and third years, and tutoring another student and talking with a professor outside of class also predicted belonging in the students’ third year of college. The positive relationships between these experiences/activities and sense of belonging indicates that developing a sense of cohesion, whether through organizational affiliation or through direct conversation with peers or faculty, helps build students’ level of identification with their school—and in the case of religious/social organizational membership, identification with external communities surrounding their college (Carales & Nora, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Overall, the data show a trend of increasing participation over time in most activities examined in the study by Hurtado and Carter—however, only a handful of the many academic and organizational activities were significant in their prediction of belonging for Latine students. Perceptions of a hostile racial campus climate also directly and negatively predicted sense of belonging, while cognitive mapping (acquiring the skills to make sense of the social, cognitive, and physical environment of college (i.e. “finding one’s niche”) significantly and positively predicted sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Johnson and colleagues (2007) also build on the construct of belonging developed by Hurtado and Carter for use with marginalized groups of college students. Their regression analysis suggests that Latine students were significantly lower-scoring in sense of belonging than their White peers. The authors surprisingly found that non-course-related faculty-student interactions were *not* significant for Latine student sense of belonging, which runs counter to the finding from Hurtado and Carter (1997). Co-curricular involvement (i.e., learning opportunities outside of the classroom), perceptions of campus racial climate, and perceiving oneself as having a “smooth transition” to college were all among the most significant predictors of belonging for the Latine participants in particular (n = 334 Latine undergraduates, N = 2967 total undergraduates; Johnson et al., 2007).

Further research has fortified the importance of perceptions of campus racial climate as a significant predictor of belonging (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Nuñez, 2009). However, structural equation modeling by Nuñez (2009) revealed a more complex relationship between belonging and perceptions of a hostile campus racial climate. The author’s analysis showed a unique yet “paradoxical” relationship between predictors—being *more* engaged in class, partaking in community service, experiencing positive cross-racial interactions, and being in diversity-

focused curricula all predicted a higher sense of belonging but were *also* predictors of perceiving a hostile campus climate. The analysis suggests that engagement on campus exposes students to both the “good” and the “bad” at their respective colleges, and that such students develop a “critical consciousness” that heightens awareness of racial/ethnic tensions in their environment (Freiere, 1970 as cited by Nuñez, 2009). The study echoes Strayhorn’s suggestion of diversity in academic and social experiences as a path to Latine student success, while showing that the interaction between these experiences can lead to counter-intuitive effects on perceptions of campus climate.

### ***Academic Factors that Predict Belonging***

Collegiate experiences and academic factors such as the type of classes taken or positive interactions with classmates have been found to be significant predictors of sense of belonging over and above background characteristics (e.g., SAT score, gender, income) or home/neighborhood area (e.g., living on/off campus or living in a majority White neighborhood; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Specifically, undertaking a curriculum of courses focused on diversity or that are inclusive of peer interactions or group discussions can be particularly beneficial for Latine students’ sense of belonging (Maestas et al., 2007; Nuñez, 2009). However, further research has shown that it is not only the *types* of classes students take that increase their sense of belonging, but also the grades that students earn in these classes (Strayhorn, 2008). Additionally, Strayhorn’s (2008) secondary data analysis of the 2004-2005 College Students Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) also revealed that time spent studying was yet another academic predictor of belonging. Course-related interactions with faculty members has also been found to be a significant predictor (Johnson et al., 2007), and may contribute a sense of “feeling

validated” for Latine students (Carales & Nora, 2020; Rendón, 2004), as well as signaling faculty interest in seeing that their students succeed academically (Maestas et al., 2007).

### **The Role of Student Organizations in Promoting Belonging**

The previous sections illustrate how undergraduate experiences on campus, whether social or academic in nature, have the ability to influence the sense of belonging felt by students. While research depicts these experiences discretely and conceptualizes academic and social integration as parallel systems influencing institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975), some contexts may include elements of both tracks. A notable context that blends both academic and social experiences and environments is student organization involvement.

Prior research has shown that participation in social groups such as Greek life and student organizations helps to develop social support that enhances Latine students’ sense of belonging in university (Garcia, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) as well as a sense of mattering in their college environment (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Such belonging is significant in that it may play a role in the academic persistence needed of students to maintain their academic standing and success (Santa Ramirez, 2022).

Qualitative studies have been employed to explore and understand how Latine student membership in organizations on campus can empower students, strengthen the bond between them, and enhance their sense of belonging in higher education (Gonzalez et al, 2020; Minor, 2016; Acevedo & Stodolska, 2019). Student organizations may provide an environment to develop academic self-efficacy (Minor, 2016), engage in cross-cultural interactions, and disseminate culturally relevant information and resources to Latine students (Gonzalez et al., 2020). They may also provide opportunities to interact with faculty coming from similar cultural backgrounds (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Minor, 2016). This creates a pathway between

organizational involvement and faculty interest, a factor for Latine student belonging and academic persistence noted previously by scholars (Kiyama et al., 2015; Nuñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Although student organizations may cater specifically to Latine students with a focus on ethnic identity and culture, students may become empowered through participation in groups with a variety of content foci, including medical, social/cultural, political, and religious-based organizations. Ultimately, such involvement aids in Latine students' adjustment, success, and survival of the college experience (Acevedo & Stodolska, 2019).

## **Research Proposal**

### **Research Questions**

In the proposed study, I investigate two research questions:

1. What role does participation in Latine-focused student organizations play in shaping a sense of belonging on campus at an historically White yet recently designated Hispanic-Serving institution (HSI) in the American southwest?
2. Using the motivational framework of Self-Determination Theory, how do these experiences on campus factor into academic motivation for these students by way of fostering a sense of relatedness (or belonging) as a Latine undergraduate?

### **Statement of Positionality**

My positionality—inclusive of but not limited to racial, ethnic, professional, gender, and class identities—will inevitably affect the research I conduct for this proposed study. In many respects, my positionality may overlap significantly with the participants required for this study—as I am a Latino man who attended the same university as those in this study. My ethnic identity being the same as my participants affects my interpretation of their experiences. That being said, I also identify as a White Latino who is white-passing, meaning that I appear and racially

identify as White. Many Latines differ in terms of racial identity and those who are White-passing are privileged to not experience racial discrimination on the basis of phenotypic expression such as skin and hair color. Experiences of discrimination may be important to the racial-ethnic identity development of my participants, and my ability to relate to those experiences will be affected by my Whiteness. In a similar manner, my masculinity and cis-gender male identity both instantiate another form of privilege and inhibit my view of how underrepresented and targeted gender identities factor into undergraduate women and non-binary experiences of student organization involvement and sense of belonging.

As a student, I attended the same institution as my participants for my undergraduate degree, so I understand student experiences at this particular university in a more personal way that incorporates my own memories into a basis of understanding the phenomena of interest. Similarly, I participated in a Latine-focused student organization during my time as an undergraduate, which led me to observe how such social experiences may benefit students through creating a sense of membership and belonging. In fact, those personal experiences created the inspiration for this study. Throughout the phases of this research including data collection, analysis, and presentation, I will strive to maintain reflexivity as a researcher by continually interrogating how my positionality interacts with the data and findings therein.

### **A Note on Research with Latine Participants**

Although the term *Latinidad* refers to a collective identity rooted in Latin America, the experience of Latine identity certainly diverges and becomes heterogeneous when considering the differences in cultures between—for example—Puerto Rico, Peru, and Argentina. Markers of culture such as language/dialect, history, and values may vary between Latine cultures, leading to sizable differences between one individual's experience of being Latine versus the experiences

of another. In the quantitative articles discussed above, “Latino” or “Hispanic” participants are grouped together to explore social and academic experiences affecting their sense of belonging in college. Although the studies hold insight into Latine perceptions of relatedness on campus, conducting a qualitative study with a smaller group of students would allow for more detailed accounts of the unique experiences of diverse, Latine-identifying participants—in other words, the “within-group variation” of a Latine sample that would typically cloud a researcher’s ability to “predict behaviors or attitudes in any psychologically meaningful way” (Phinney, 1996). As an example, Hall, Yip and Zarate (2016) describe the strengths of conducting focus groups to uncover “shared and common knowledge” as well as “divergence” among a group of participants that, when enrolling in the study, are “predefined, relatively homogenous groups.” By utilizing both focus groups and individual interviews, I will be able to more closely examine the within-group variability of my sample of Latine undergraduates—and how intersecting identities such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity all contribute to their unique experiences of university, student organization involvement, and sense of belonging.

### **Participants**

Participants will be 12 Latine-identifying students between the ages of 18-23 years enrolled at a large HSI located in the southwestern United States. The participants will be recruited from members of Latine-focused student organizations on campus using social media posts as well as word-of-mouth, constituting non-probability, snowball sampling. This kind of sampling method will assist in identifying potential participants that match the demographic requirements of the study, which should be made especially possible if the recruited participants refer to other students from within their affiliated student organizations. However, I will be striving for a representative sample of the “theoretical” diversity of Latine students at the



university (Torres, 2003). Therefore, I will use my discretion to screen responses from potential participants to ensure the presence of a variety of identities including racial background, country of origin, and gender. Additionally, I will be striving for a representative sample in terms of academic classification, area of study (academic majors and minors), and academic generational status (i.e., first-generation undergraduates). Differences in academic background will provide a fuller account of perspectives from students with experiences in different colleges, departments, and peer-networks. Students from a variety of academic areas may also associate with career-focused student organizations such as those focused on political awareness, medical professions, or social advocacy (see Acevedo & Stodolska, 2019). To the extent that a small sample for qualitative data collection can be representative of Latine students at the university, ensuring that each participant brings unique perspectives to the interviews and focus groups allows for more versatile insight into the undergraduate experience.

## **Procedure**

Twelve participants will be recruited from members of Latine-focused student organizations on campus. They will be asked to self-identify their racial-ethnic identity before enrolling in individual interviews and focus group sessions to ensure that all participants align with the sampling need for Latine students. I will conduct a series of semi-structured individual interviews across one academic semester (approximately three months) with each participant to discuss their academic experiences, student organization involvement, and sense of belonging as a student at the university. Then, three focus groups, each comprising one-third of the total sample, will meet at the end of the semester to discuss the same topics, but with the added possibility of constructing dialogue based on identifying connections across the participants' individual experiences. The focus groups and interviews will be recorded and transcribed word-

for-word. Both the focus groups and individual interviews will be conducted by the principal investigator (myself) and will be in English.

### ***Interviews***

I will conduct one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interview questions will probe the participants' experience and sense of autonomy/belonging/competence in university, their Latine identity, and how their identity has interacted with the academic environment—spanning from lecture rooms to public spaces on campus between classes, but paying special attention to experiences with their student organizations including events, meetings, and the overall sense of membership. Participants will be asked to describe connections or disconnections between their identity (namely their Latine identity, but also paying attention to intersecting identities) and the college setting to probe feelings of belonging and in-group versus out-group identification. They will then be asked to reflect on times in which their racial-ethnic identity was particularly relevant to feeling motivated (or demotivated) during times in which completing their degree felt difficult (e.g., taking a high-stakes exam, attending a “weed-out” class, completing a capstone project, etc.). These responses will then be transcribed and undergo content analysis to yield main themes. Once main themes have been identified, the interview transcripts will be reviewed again and evaluated for sub-themes.

### ***Focus Groups***

I will then conduct three focus groups of 3-4 participants (approximately one-third of the sample size per session). Similar to the individual interviews, the questions used to facilitate the group's conversation will be focused on these students' experiences as a Latine undergraduate, including feelings of belonging (or lack thereof), especially as they relate to their involvement in student organizations. Working closely with the questions that were used in the individual

interviews, I will also be interested in hearing about how the participants' Latine identity helped or hindered their academic motivation, particularly during demanding stretches of the school year. The focus groups will last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted in English. The group discussion will be recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Phenomenological Analysis**

Because qualitative data will be collected in this study, I will use phenomenology as a methodological framework. Phenomenological studies work well with small sample sizes and a large amount of detail while acknowledging and bracketing the researcher's positionality in relation to the participant (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Since the aim of this study is to better understand the lived experience of Latine university students, phenomenology will be applied to examining the phenomena of Latine ethnic identity, student organization involvement, and sense of belonging. Analysis consists of finding general themes and sub-themes throughout by relying on significant statements and "meaning units" cultivated from participants' interview and focus group data. After collecting meaning units representative of the different experiences of the participants, I will begin to cluster units together into larger themes that constitute "essential aspects" of student organization involvement and sense of belonging (van Manen, 1990, as cited by Creswell, 2013). I will then reconstitute these themes in narrative form, explaining how the themes relate to the participants' account of lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This step will offer both textual and structural descriptions of the "essence" of the phenomena, providing an exhaustive description of how Latine students' student organization involvement and sense of belonging are commonly and uniquely experienced.

### **Implications**

This study adds to existing literature by presenting an in-depth, qualitative analysis of Latine undergraduate experiences in student organizations. Although this context has previously been studied qualitatively (Acevedo & Stodolska, 2019; Minor, 2016), the proposed study presents a more current account of engagement on campus *post*-pandemic—when norms and practices of seeking common spaces, interactions, and belonging may be tied to the circumstances and isolation caused by COVID-19. Using a phenomenological approach, the proposed study will distill an essence of student organization participation, sense of belonging, and academic motivation by taking into account Latine student experiences coming from a variety of within-group perspectives. Findings from this study could create avenues for suggesting how colleges and universities—especially HSIs—can support Latine student organizations on their campuses. Ways to do this span from financial support and funding to investments of time by faculty sponsors and school personnel. Commitment to supporting student organizations helps to ensure that valuable spaces exist for Latine students to cultivate belonging, motivation, and academic success.

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