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Examining the Trump Presidency's Impact on Latinx Undergraduate Students at an Elite 4-year University

Abstract

In recent years, the 45th President of the United States has used language that some regard as offensive towards the Latinx community. This study seeks to understand how Latinx college students during the Trump era have been affected by the political climate. Specifically, this investigation aims at (a) sharing how the Trump presidency has impacted Latinx students' educational experience at a prestigious public university, including their mental health and well-being, and (b) comparing feelings/sentiments of the 2016 election to that of 2020. This study will be based upon surveys that have been distributed to Latinx undergraduate students. The survey also includes 2 open-ended questions that are designed to include student narratives. This report will show that Trump's presidency has had a negative impact on Latinx students' educational experiences and well-being; which in turn helps in understanding Latinx students' perseverance in higher education.

Although there are more Latinx¹ students attending higher education now, these students must overcome obstacles to not only get accepted into four-year universities, but also, to graduate (Solórzano et al., 2005). One of these obstacles relates to how the immigrant population and Latinx people are depicted by powerful political figures (Aldana, 2016; Rodríguez, 2012). The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States instilled fear and uncertainty among the Latinx community. His obvious discrimination and dislike of the immigrant and Latinx communities has been evident through his slogan "Make America Great Again," which has the potential to negatively impact Latinx students pursuing their undergraduate degree. Research has shown the impacts of racial microaggressions on students of color to be severe and create a hostile learning environment (Yosso et al., 2009). Students of Color have had to learn how to rise above the President's hateful comments in order to persist and excel in higher education, which is something they should be commended for. Therefore, this research aims at discovering to what extent the 2016 presidency impacted college students; specifically from the Latinx community.

There has been previous research regarding the topic of how Trump's presidential campaign and term has impacted Latinx students and students of color in general (Ramírez-Plascencia, 2019). This existing research, however, has not considered (a) the effects that are specific to the undergraduate experience for these

¹ Latinx is used to encompass individuals who are from Latin American descent. This term is also being used as a gender neutral term to be more inclusive.

students and (b) how these students have learned to cope with derogatory terms and stereotypes. Often, the Latinx population is disregarded, especially in higher education institutions that are predominately white institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how political shifts impact the educational experiences of Latinx students attending these types of four-year institutions. The following questions guide this research brief: (a) In what ways has the Trump presidency impacted the education of Latinx undergraduate students at a prestigious public university? And (b) What are the student sentiments from the 2016 election compared to that of 2020, and how has that impacted their mental health and overall well-being? This research report aims to give voice to this historically disregarded population and to gain more insight as to what these students have been dealing with since the election of Trump in 2016. Although Donald Trump is not currently President of the United States, his comments and rhetoric can have lasting effects on students, leaving a strong impact on them in the years following his presidency. Examining these effects is therefore important to learn how institutions can better support students under these circumstances.

Literature Review

The literature review, composed of three different parts, aims to bridge previous research that unpack the effects of Trump and the experiences of Latinx students. The first paragraph discusses the effect of Trump on students of color in general. The second paragraph discusses the experiences of Latinx students in higher education. Lastly, the third is meant to remind the readers of how Trump's rhetoric can impact the mental health of students of color, but also when considering the intersectionality of different struggles such as immigration status. Although the election of Donald Trump is fairly recent, there have been many papers written about the rhetoric of his presidency, the platform that he built, and how they impact education centered issues. For example, the topic of "the Trump effect" has been mentioned in articles regarding the increasing number of incidents that have been racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic as a result of Trump's public comments and presidential platform (Mette & Bertolini, 2018; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). The increase in these incidents not only creates a hostile learning environment, but also, it impacts whether or not students feel safe in class or when walking in their neighborhoods (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2018). In a 2017 study administered by John Rogers, the research team found that almost half of all the high school teachers reported that students' worry about at least one of these issues: policy discussions on travel restrictions, LGBTQ rights, healthcare access, and environmental protections. These stressors caused by these issues negatively affected student attendance or ability to focus in class (Rogers, 2017). Schools with predominantly students of color seemed to be more likely to experience the impacts

of stress on their well-being (Rogers, 2017). Since the election of Trump, the use of bullying words has been a lot more prevalent in the media and the world, which sadly can impact students of color. If a student witnesses their president saying nothing but negative statements about their family and background, the student is at risk for internalizing these hurtful words (Ramírez-Plascencia, 2019). Therefore, examining the effects of such negative statements is important to understanding the Latinx student experience, especially during the years of the Trump presidency and after.

Sadly, Latinx students face much adversity when it comes to pursuing higher education because many of them are not given the necessary resources for success. Numerous Latinx students attend schools where the conditions are not set up for their individual prosperity, and in some cases, expect them to fail (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995). Students of color are likely to feel alone and out of place in universities (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). The feeling of isolation in combination with other emotions or worries, such as financial insecurity or immigration status, can severely impact whether or not students succeed in education. Much blame is often put on Latinx students for not attending higher education institutions leading to deficit stereotypes being used to try to explain why minority students are less likely to go to college. An example of this would be the perception that Latinx students do not attend college because their families do not value education (Santiago et al., 2014). This perception can disrupt a student's educational experience as the students have to deal with the negative stereotypes that follow.

Unfortunately, students of color have had to endure more difficulties and overcome additional obstacles since the election of the 45th president. It is safe to say that the election of President Trump is associated with an increase of anxiety and fear among students of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Even though there is not enough evidence to support a causal relationship, an association between the two is evident (Mette & Bertolini, 2018). Additionally, Trump's rhetoric, even though it might be heavily anti-immigrant, can still have a profound impact on U.S.-born students. Many U.S.-born students have immigrant parents and are therefore still impacted by the stress of their parents' detainment or racial mistreatment and the effects produced (Costello, 2016). Although immigration is not solely a Latinx concern or issue, many Latinx students have to worry about their parents' immigration status as their freedom is often in jeopardy (Artiga & Ubri, 2017; Dreby, 2012; Hassett-Walker, 2019). Even though there have been many studies regarding how Trump's rhetoric has impacted students, the existing literature does not give an insight as to how Latinx undergraduate students are impacted by Trump's election and whether his comments have had an impact on their studies. This research report is important to understand the experiences of Latinx students in relation to the Trump Presidency as the former president often depicted Latinx individuals as job-stealing criminals.

It is critical to learn how the depiction of one's parents as criminals by the president can impact the students' studies, personal lives, and beyond.

Critical Race Theory (Framework)

The main framework used as a lens of analysis for this report is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT challenges the main ideology of being race neutral, which gives more power to those with identities that are idolized by society such as being white and/or male. Instead, CRT focuses on not only acknowledging that race and ethnicity matters in all spaces, but also to show that the experiences of individuals, especially people of color, are valid and valuable (Solórzano, 1997). Academia is not exempt from the influences of race and racism, as almost nothing ever is. Therefore, this framework allowed for a perspective of analysis to hold race and ethnicity to the highest importance, especially since this research centers Latinx college students who are often subjected to stereotypes and who have had to overcome numerous obstacles to pursue higher education.

Critical Race Theory holds 5 different tenets: the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, importance of experiential knowledge, and the use of interdisciplinary perspectives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2001). Although all 5 are important, for the purpose of understanding this research the 2 tenets that I focused on were the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism as well as the importance of experiential knowledge. First, the importance of race and the presence of racism is important to recognize in all institutions, public or not, and universities are no different. When analyzing my findings, it became clear that race held a great importance to understanding the experiences of students of color during the Trump presidency. Additionally, utilizing this tenet helped in my analysis of the intersection of race with other factors such as class, gender, immigration status, etc. that can have profound impact on marginalized students of color. Secondly, recognizing and understanding the importance of the experiential knowledge that students of color hold was essential to understanding not only the results of this research but also future implications. The students that participated in this study hold crucial knowledge that can help scholars and practitioners better understand the struggles of not only being a student of color but being a student who was impacted by the Trump presidency in intersectional ways. It is important that these stories are told as it brings awareness to educational institutions and politics not as two distinct separate entities but interconnected establishments, whether we like it or not.

Methods

Due to COVID-19, I recruited participants through social media and by virtually presenting in various classrooms at a top four year university. A total of 95 students took the survey, all of which self-identified as Latinx. The majority of the participants (79%) identified as being Mexican which is attributed largely to the dominant demographic around the campus. Additionally, 76% of participants identified as female. This overwhelming majority can be attributed to the fact that the majority of the classes I presented this project to were female dominated. About 93% of participants are first-generation college students and 14% are transfer students.

The data was collected through a mixed-methods approach with the use of an anonymous online survey; which consisted of 14 questions using a Likert scale of 0–5 and 2 open-ended questions. The participants were to rate how they felt about each question from a scale of 0 (being the least in agreement) and 5 (being the most in agreement). For the purpose of this study, the ratings 4–5 and 0–1 on the scale are considered to be significant findings because that indicated that the students were heavily impacted by the question in their response. The open-ended questions were intended to include personal student narratives and a space for participants to fully explain their thoughts. The two open-ended questions asked participants to (a) elaborate on their feelings/sentiments from the 2016 and 2020 election and (b) asked participants to elaborate on the extent the Trump presidency impacted their educational experience and/or overall well-being.

Findings and Analysis

This report will focus on the most significant findings from the study. The findings section is arranged into three sections. The first section focuses on the participants' sense of belonging and social life. The second focuses on how participants' mental health and education have been affected by the Trump presidency. Lastly, I compare and contrast the participants' feelings and sentiments from the 2016 election to that of 2020. The first section is intended to respond to the first research question while the second and last section address the second research question.

Sense of Belonging and Quality of Social Life

One of the ways Trump's presidency impacted the education of Latinx students was through their sense of belonging and social life. As shown in Figure 1, when asked, "The way former President Trump depicts Latinx people impacts my **sense of belonging** at my university?", 53% of the participants either ranked 4 or 5 on the scale.

95 responses

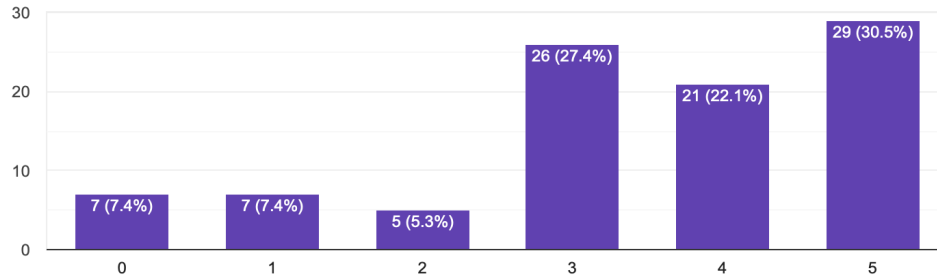


Figure 1. *Sense of belonging.*

This result shows the impact that Donald Trump has had on these students. Constantly seeing or hearing the President say demeaning comments towards your own community can eventually take a toll on students and cause them to question whether or not they belong. For example, a third-year, first-generation Latina shared:

He [Trump] really made me question if I belonged in this country, to the point that I was willing to return to my home country that I hadn't been to since I was 5 and had no memories of. My anxiet[ies] [went] through the roof and I suffered more and more from panic attacks. (student survey, 2021)

This student narrative further proves how Donald Trump's intentional perpetration of the criminalizing and demeaning narrative about minority communities impacts students. Analyzing how students' sense of belonging has been impacted by the Trump presidency is important because the lack of belonging can have detrimental impacts to their education, participation, and overall well-being, which can be evaluated by the example given.

Figure 2 displays the results when asked, "The way former President Trump depicts Latinx people impacts the quality of my **social life** at my university?", 57% of the participants either ranked 4 or 5 on the scale.

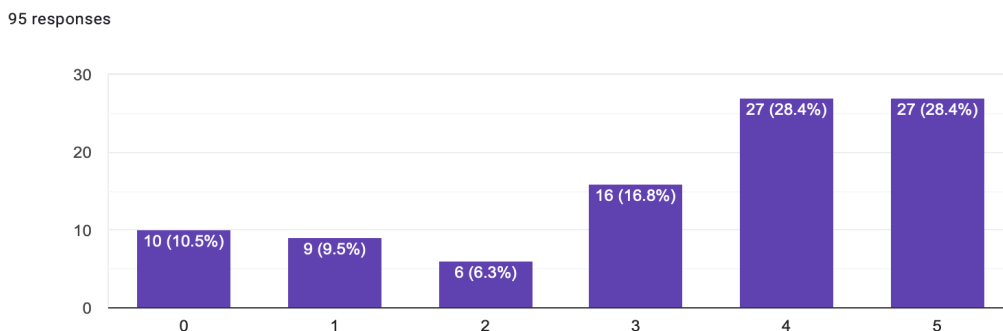


Figure 2. *Quality of social life.*

Although many might believe that the Presidency is too far removed from the individual person and therefore does not have any real impact, these results show the contrary. These students are constantly hearing and seeing how certain comments made by powerful figures in the media can negatively impact the way they socialize with others and the way others socialize with them. This lack of socialization could be due to increased fear of their family’s deportation or maybe even their own. This negative socialization can have impacts beyond just peer interaction and can impact students in the classroom, during office hours, when participating in student organizations, etc. Additionally, students may feel that they are not accepted for who they are or are depicted as criminals based on what they look like or where they come from. A fourth-year, first-generation Latina shared:

The Trump presidency has made me hostile towards white people. I remember feeling pretty disgusted when I saw the bruin republican booth on bruin day. Being surrounded by white people during my classes and while I walk across campus has made me keep to myself which might have kept me from forming friends or study groups that could have helped my academic performance. (student survey, 2021)

This student narrative is just one example of how the Trump presidency has negatively impacted an individual’s social life due to fear of being considered less than or of experiencing discrimination. This can show how for some Latinx students’ social life and sense of belonging has deteriorated due to the repercussions of Trump’s rhetoric and the next section shows us how that impacts their well-being.

Impact on Mental Health and Education

As shown in Figure 3, when asked, “To what extent, if any, has the Trump presidency impacted your mental health in a **negative** way?”, 77% of the participants either ranked 4 or 5 on the scale.

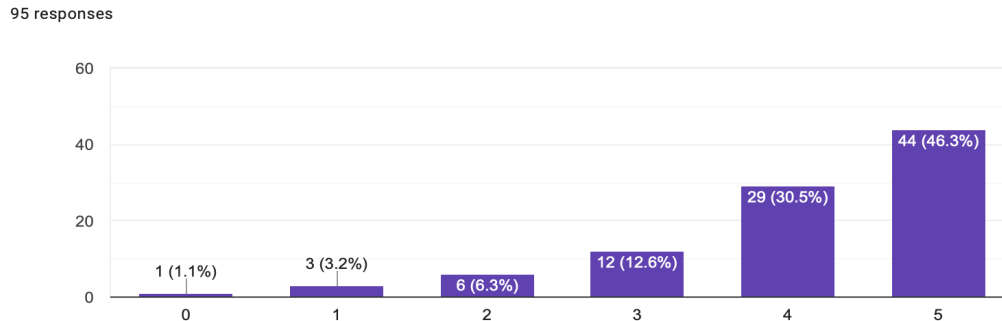


Figure 3. *Negative impact on mental health.*

The results from this question show how much Latinx students can actually internalize the negative comments and rhetoric made about them individually, their families, and their entire community. The harmful statements and verbal expressions perpetuated by former President Trump are not things that can be ignored and diminished. As made evident through these results, the participants’ mental health was significantly negatively impacted. A second-year, first-generation Latina shared:

The Trump presidency has negatively affected my well-being very much. I feared for the rights of those who opposed Trump’s views including reproductive rights for women that personally could affect me. This ultimately affected my education by worsening my mental illness with stress and fear. Attending a public university with such a diverse population made me wonder whether people had bias against me and if others doubted my academic abilities because of my identity as a Mexican and woman, which ultimately affected my own belief in my abilities. (student survey, 2021)

Students should not endure this heavy burden at the hands of powerful social figures, such as the President, but rather, it is important that their role and voice is respected and heard. The common narrative that the most competent and valuable individual is a white male must be rewritten and dismantled, but this poses a significant obstacle when current leaders do not advocate for any such change. This student quote further exemplifies the negative outcomes of the Trump presidency

such as students of color doubting their worth and intelligence due to being made feel less than.

As depicted in Figure 4, participants have significantly been negatively impacted by the Trump presidency which in turn had an impact on their academics. When asked, “To what extent, if any, do you think Trump’s presidency has **positively** impacted your education?”, 91% of the participants either ranked 0 or 1 on the scale.

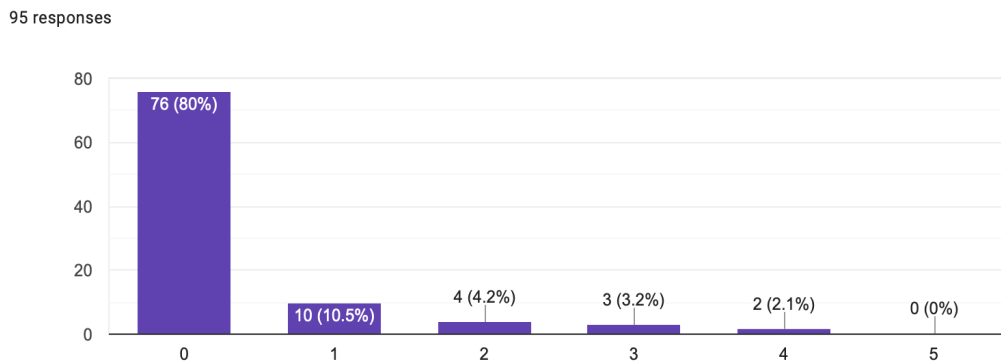


Figure 4. *Positive impact on education.*

This university is one of the top public universities in the nation; however, there are still students who felt as if their education and educational experience suffered because of the common marginalizing narrative and constant criminalizing of the Latinx community. Every single one of those students had to overcome countless obstacles to not only be accepted into this top university, but also to be able to physically attend. It is extremely unfortunate that they question their place at the university because of what they see and hear on the news from political figures. A fourth-year Latino shared:

Trump’s presidency has made me doubt my academic potential and ability to persist with the education system. It felt as if through his direct rule as president, the voices of many cultures and races were suppressed and in doing so brought a rise to racist actions which I experienced myself at my university. (student survey, 2021)

Unfortunately, these participants are not alone. Trump not only criminalizes, discriminates and is racist towards the Latinx community, but also toward many other underrepresented communities that should be receiving support from the President, but instead are depicted as less than human.

Comparison from 2016 and 2020 Election

As a researcher, I also thought it would be important to investigate whether or not the Latinx student sentiments changed from the 2016 election to the 2020 election. This comparison is important because it will allow for an analysis of the different attitudes and emotions Latinx students had and experienced in 2020 after having President Trump in office for the last four years; a presidency that represented racism and xenophobia. As represented in Figure 5, when asked “How likely are you able to remember the feelings/emotions you experienced on November 3rd, 2016, the day Donald Trump was elected to be president of the United States?”, 86% of participants ranked 4 or 5 on the scale, meaning that they were very likely to remember that day.

95 responses

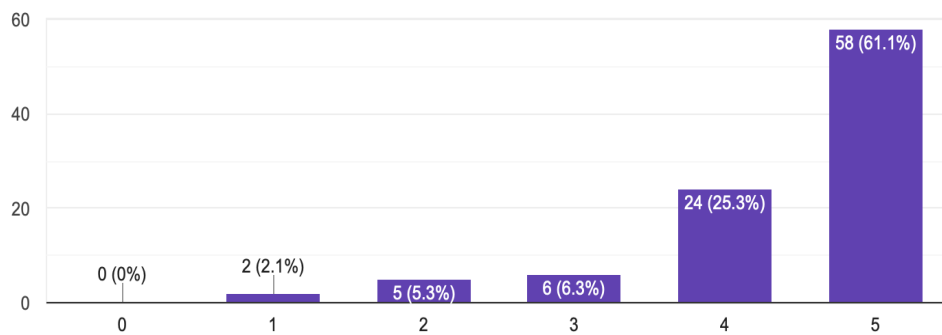


Figure 5. *Trump presidency.*

This is significant because when Donald Trump was elected, many of these participants were still in high school and in a different period in their lives. Even after 4 years, the participants indicated that they were still likely to remember that specific day, which can likely be attributed to how much they knew this presidency would impact them and their community. I then asked a follow-up question regarding whether the feelings/emotions they felt on November 3, 2016 were positive or negative, 98% of our participants indicated that their feelings/emotions were negative, as can be indicated in Figure 6.

95 responses

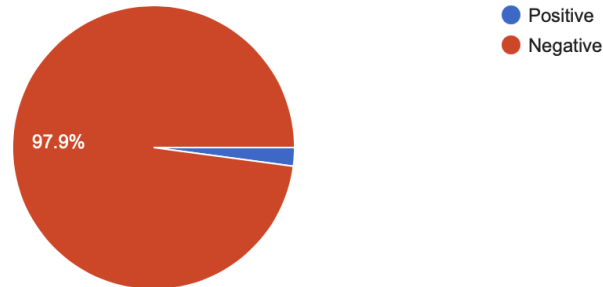


Figure 6. *Feelings about the Trump presidency.*

This finding is significant because the majority of the participants indicating that their emotions/feelings on election day 2016 were negative suggests that the Trump presidency was not only anticipated to impact the participants negatively, but might have already been impacting them before his presidency began. These results are especially interesting when compared to the results from participants when asked about the 2020 election.

When asked, “How likely are you to remember the feelings/emotions you experienced on November 3rd, 2020, the day Joe Biden was elected to be president of the United States?”, Figure 7 indicates that 84% of participants ranked 4 or 5 on the scale, meaning that a majority of the participants were likely to remember 2020 election day.

95 responses

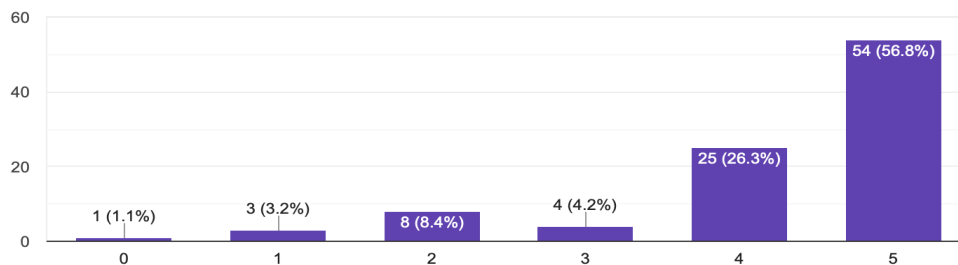


Figure 7. *Biden presidency.*

When asked the same follow-up question as mentioned earlier, regarding whether their feelings/emotions the day of the 2020 election were negative or positive, Figure 8 represents that 97% of participants indicated that they were positive.

95 responses

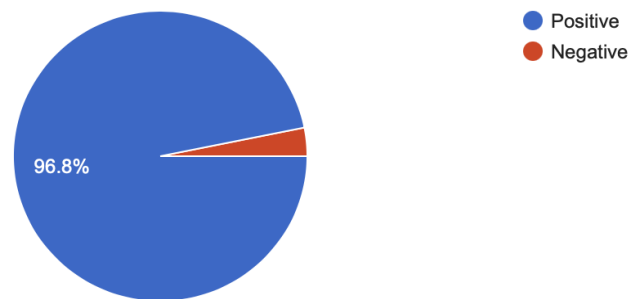


Figure 8. *Feelings about the Biden Presidency.*

This finding is significant as it explicitly shows the shift in attitudes and feelings from the Trump presidency compared to Biden's. This shift in feelings/emotions proves how much of an impact important political figures can have on students of color. Having a president who believes that students of color and their families are important can make a huge difference in one's education, especially when having experienced a president who depicted their community to be criminals.

As the results show, undergraduate Latinx students seem to be overwhelmingly aware of the comments that Trump made and continues to make about their community, most of which are negative. Unfortunately, since Trump is so widely talked about, his comments and stereotypes about people of color, especially Latinx people, seem to be covered by the media often. More than half of students reported that their lives have been impacted by the way their community is depicted in the media. This could be due to discrimination from others or from their self-doubt based on others' negative assumptions about them. These students are at risk of internalizing these statements, which can significantly impact their education, lives, and well-being. This influence is evident through lowered self-esteem, motivation, or grades. Some students feel as if others do not think they are capable of succeeding at a higher education institution such as a four-year university, which can cause them to question their admission. Over half of the students who took the survey reported that they have questioned their place and

admission into the university they attend. This can be due to a myriad of things such as bullying, imposter syndrome, or their own insecurities. When taking a deeper look into how the comments made about the Latinx community impacted the students, many of them stated that the comments lead to them doubting their intelligence, skills, and overall place at a prestigious four-year university. This self-doubt comes from perceived differences in how they look, talk, and were raised compared to most students; however, in many cases, these differences motivated them even more to succeed. Many said that they had been given the opportunity to prove those who doubt them wrong and that they were not only going to college for themselves or even their family, but for their entire community. They were going to college so that the negative stereotypes regarding the Latinx population would eventually cease to exist.

Conclusion

This report strives to show some of the consequences of Trump's presidency on the Latinx undergraduate student experience in order to give a voice to those who have notoriously been silenced. That is why I believe that conducting many more in-depth interviews regarding the Latinx college experience during the Trump era is important. These interviews should not only include the personal stories of participants, but also, the ones of the participants' families. Having a supportive family during tough times can help navigate educational journeys; however, when your family is also suffering from the same fear and anxiety, college can get lonely.

Diversifying future research to include all nationalities that Latinx students might identify with will help give more of an insight as to how other groups, such as Central Americans, navigate higher education compared to Mexicans. Although this research study is highly represented by the Mexican experience, it is crucial to further this work to ensure that all experiences are being heard and understood. The predominant Mexican student population can at times overshadow the stories of others, and the only way that researchers will truly understand the Latinx educational experience is by researching every group. Researching in-depth how much the school climate impacts the Latinx higher education experience is also important to understanding how Trump has influenced certain groups. Since Trump is open and vocal about his anti-immigrant perspective and his beliefs about Latinx people, students on college campuses might be encouraged to do the same, creating a hostile learning environment for students who already have many obstacles to overcome.

Lastly, the educational experience at a top four year public institution might differ greatly from a school such as the University of Michigan. Conducting and expanding this study at other universities will help identify trends and help compare educational experiences of Latinx students across different campuses. Although

this research is not generalizable, I would like the readers to walk away from this report knowing that Latinx students have had to deal with the hostile environment that former President Trump helped cultivate and have had to learn how to preserve. These students are truly an example of what it means to be strong and resilient.

Recommendations

Powerful institutions such as elite universities must stop being complacent when it comes to the struggles and experiences their students of color have to endure. Government and politics are not separate from public universities, they are interconnected in many forms. When Donald Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States of America, students were impacted all over the U.S. It should not be difficult to understand how some students may have felt to have a president who made racist, inappropriate, and disrespectful comments about their community. However, at the elite institution this research was conducted in, nothing much was done to help students who might have been impacted by the election of former president Trump. Students only received a number of emails from the chancellor stating that the university will not support racist acts or words and that they are “always willing to help.” Emails can only go so far. The impacts that the Trump presidency left on students are not gone after the 2020 election, we will continue to see the effects for years to come. Therefore, I recommend that universities use their vast amount of resources to conduct their own research to understand how certain communities and students have been and continue to suffer the consequences imposed by the 45th president. Before attempting to help students, universities must try to understand what areas students need more services in and how they have been impacted. After that, universities should bring in experts to evaluate which programs and resources are needed for different types of student communities. Various groups of students were impacted in different ways, therefore, there must be different programs and resources in place to help support these communities as a “one size fits all approach” will not suffice and can cause more harm than good. It is the university's responsibility to ensure that their underrepresented students are receiving the resources and have access to programs that will address their needs and help them navigate their educational journey.

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