Fostering Spaces of Belonging at an Emerging HSI: Practices of Chicanx/Latinx Student Affairs Staff in Supporting Chicanx/Latinx College Students

By

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Abstract

of

FOSTERING SPACES OF BELONGING AT AN EMERGING HSI: PRACTICES OF CHICANX/LATINX STUDENT AFFAIRS STAFF IN SUPPORTING CHICANX/LATINX COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Alissa L. Magorian

This qualitative research study examines how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals' experiences and concepts of belonging inform their practices as they support Chicanx/Latinx students at an emerging Hispanic-serving public research institution. I conducted six semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with a total of 13 Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals at UC Davis. CRT, LatCrit, and Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments were key frameworks used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that interview participants embraced situational concepts of belonging that happens in microclimates, but which is not generally felt at the institutional level. These concepts of belonging have been shaped by participants' experiences of marginalization and belonging in higher education, both as students and as professional staff. Motivated to improve Chicanx/Latinx college student experiences (Linder & Simmons, 2015; Urrieta, 2007), participants strive to foster culturally relevant microclimates of belonging and support within their departments. Five primary themes describe the ways in which Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff influence belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students: 1) representation matters, 2) providing holistic interpersonal support, 3) implementing culturally relevant structural support,

4) collaboration and advocacy, and 5) assessment and adapting to students' needs. This study fills a gap in the literature on the perspectives and experiences of the Chicanx/Latinx student affairs practitioners who support Chicanx/Latinx students at an emerging HSI.

Keywords: Chicanx/Latinx, student affairs staff, sense of belonging, microclimates, emerging Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), holistic, culturally relevant

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the UC Davis students and colleagues who inspire me every day.

To Diaz, Grace, Diego, Emma, and Olivia.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

The University of California, Davis, is currently an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), which means that its undergraduate student population is reaching 25% Latinx, and the university is seeking federal designation as an HSI to be eligible for grant funding. In fall 2018, the UC Davis HSI Task Force hosted student engagement forums to learn about Chicanx/Latinx experiences on campus and how the institution could better serve their needs. One student shared:

> There is a lot of racism and discrimination on campus. I am always seen as someone who doesn't belong here. I feel like I'm in a world that doesn't accept me, and wants me to fail. My skin color and accent make me look as a stranger. (Aldana & Reed, 2019, p. 66).

Unfortunately, this student's experience of marginalization and discrimination is not uncommon for Chicanx/Latinx students in higher education. Research shows that many Chicanx/Latinx students face subtle but incessant racial microaggressions throughout their college experience, which negatively impacts sense of belonging to the institution, and influences their intention to persist (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Yosso et al., 2009). Hostile campus racial climates are often intensified by low representation of Chicanx/Latinx students, staff, and faculty (Marquez Kiyama et al., 2015).

The HSI forums also asked what it means for UC Davis to be Hispanic serving. Several students echoed the importance of community and cultural belonging: "An institution that helps latinx students feel at home & like they belong," or "A community where I feel comfortable and am supported by others," and finally, "Welcoming of Hispanics and not merely as a group to accommodate, but a group that belongs" (Aldana & Reed, 2019, p. 68). Among the many

responses, sense of belonging emerged as a key recurring theme, and students spoke to how university staff and faculty could better serve Chicanx/Latinx students through culturally responsive programming, resources, and support.

Belonging, the perception that one is an accepted and respected member of a community, is an essential factor to college students' persistence and success (Hausmann et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2018). Yet, finding belonging within predominantly White institutions (PWI) or even emerging HSIs is complicated for Chicanx/Latinx students. In response to the cultural isolation, invalidation, and microaggressions that many Chicanx/Latinx students experience across the university, they seek out smaller, positive microclimates and counterspaces that value their identity and culture (C. E. Garcia, 2009; González, 2002; Villalpando, 2003). Thus, belonging is often found in microclimates, as opposed to the institution as a whole. Ethnic-based student life programs can provide a strong connection with peers and staff who look like them, share similar cultural values, and shelter them from the isolation they face in areas of the university. When the institution shows that it values the culture and identities of minoritized students, and students feel they are able to be their authentic selves and connect deeply with others, sense of belonging increases (González, 2002; Vacarro & Newman, 2016). These impactful, culturally relevant community spaces are often supported behind the scenes by the university's student affairs staff.

Student affairs is a critical part of higher education, providing essential services, programming, and resources that focus on the development of students to help them embrace their social identities and actualize their full potential (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Co-curricular programs are important to learning and development, and complement formal academic learning (Ahren, 2008). Student affairs professionals make up the largest share of the professional workforce in higher education (19.2%), and 26.5% of student affairs professionals

identified as people of color (Espinosa et al., 2019). The work of student affairs is holistic in nature, and includes co-curricular programming, student activities, housing, counseling, health, advising, academic assistance and tutoring, career support, campus recreation, and more (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). The programming and supports offered by student affairs offices encourages students to think critically of the world around them, be informed citizens, and learn how to become change agents of the future. These programs often strive to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion across campus (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Furthermore, research has shown that increased interactions with professionals has a positive influence on college students' cognitive outcomes (Martin & Seifert, 2011).

While there is a substantial body of literature on how faculty interactions with students are critical, less is known about the impact of student-staff relationships. Some research suggests that staff at college campuses play a critical role in student development and mentorship (Luedke, 2017). They foster academic and life skills, provide navigational support, validate, and advocate for students (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Rendón, 1994). Staff engage students through both service transactions and co-curricular programming, and they implement the student diversity initiatives of the university (Hurtado et al., 2012). However, the limited research focused on the role of staff often does not address the racial and ethnic backgrounds of staff, or how the social identities of staff impact belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Hurtado et al.'s (2015) study reveals that validation from faculty and staff mediates and lessens the negative impact of discrimination and bias experienced by Chicanx/Latinx students, thereby fostering greater sense of belonging. Some studies show that students of color benefit from mentorship and connection with staff of color, as these mentors nurture the cultural and social capital that students bring with them to campus (Luedke, 2017; Salas et al., 2014). Although there is robust

scholarly literature on the factors that influence Chicanx/Latinx college students' academic outcomes, the role of staff support, especially in relation to sense of belonging, is underdeveloped. Of the studies that seek to measure the impact of various institutional agents, many lump faculty, staff, and administrators together (G. A. Garcia, 2017; G.A. Garcia & Cuellar, 2018; Garvey & Inkelas, 2012; Hurtado et al., 2015; Schreiner et al., 2011). More research is needed to clearly distinguish the various ways in which student affairs staff support students, and particularly to explore the salience of ethnic/racial identity for Chicanx/Latinx staff in supporting Chicanx/Latinx students.

Purpose of Study

As UC Davis strives to achieve HSI status and grapples with what it means to serve Hispanic students, I seek to understand how the practices of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff in supporting Chicanx/Latinx students are informed by their experiences and concepts of belonging. My research will begin by examining how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff conceptualize sense of belonging, and how these concepts are shaped by their own experiences within higher education, as students and as professionals. Next, I will explore their daily practice of supporting and fostering belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, primarily through interpersonal interactions and structural programming. Finally, I will examine how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff evaluate the impact of their work and collaboratively advocate for institutional resources to improve retention of Chicanx/Latinx students.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals' experiences and ideas of belonging in higher education, and how those

concepts inform their everyday practice in supporting Chicanx/Latinx students. Thus, my research questions are as follows:

1. How do Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals conceptualize belonging?
2. How are their understandings shaped by their racialized and marginalized experiences in higher education, as students and professional staff?
3. What practices do Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff implement to influence sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students?

Significance of the Study

As the number of Chicanx/Latinx students enrolling at UC Davis rises rapidly, the institution has an opportunity to provide these students with the skills to thrive academically and professionally, and thus advance the social mobility of their communities. While nearly 40% of California's population identifies as Latinx, and over half of the state's K-12 population is Latinx, "less than half of California's Latinx population has attended college" (Reddy & Siqueiros, 2021). Supporting the retention, graduation, and success of Chicanx/Latinx college students ensures a more prosperous future for the wider Chicanx/Latinx community and the state of California.

Belonging is a key indicator influencing college students' persistence and success (Hausmann et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2018). Research also indicates that the campus racial climate at PWIs is often perceived as hostile to Chicanx/Latinx students and other students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 2007; Yosso et al., 2009). As the UC Davis student body becomes more diverse and the proportion of Chicanx/Latinx students grows, it is imperative that the campus implement strategies to address racial climate issues, improve belonging, and advance educational equity. Examining the experiences and practices of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs

staff can highlight key approaches in fostering belonging for and supporting the success of Chicanx/Latinx students. This study's findings can inform the university's strategic HSI efforts to close opportunity gaps, promote retention, and truly serve the needs of Chicanx/Latinx college students. These findings, while contextualized to UC Davis, may have implications for other emerging HSI campuses as well.

Chapter Two:

Theories and Literature Review

This chapter first provides an overview of the theoretical frameworks that guided this research project, namely Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments. Following the frameworks is a review of the literature related to Chicanx/Latinx student experiences in higher education, the experiences of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff, and the ways that staff foster belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students.

Theoretical Frameworks

To better understand the experiences of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff and the practices they implement to influence sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, my research is founded on core concepts from Critical Race Theory and LatCrit Theory. I will also draw upon Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) to conceptualize the ways in which institutional agents engage and interact with students within the institutional context, climate for diversity, as well as policy and socio-historical contexts. Ultimately, these theories and frameworks undergird my conceptualization of how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff implement interpersonal and structural support to influence sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students.

CRT and LatCrit

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves as an important foundation for understanding the salience of racial identity, representation, and sense of belonging within an institution that has a history of exclusion and oppression of racially minoritized groups. CRT recognizes that racism is embedded in U.S. society, that institutional racism is pervasive, and that power structures are

based in White supremacy and privilege (Crenshaw, 2011; Tate, 1997). Solorzano (1997) identified the tenets of CRT as the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, centrality of experiential knowledge, challenge to dominant identity, commitment to social justice, and interdisciplinary perspective. Solorzano's (1997) study on Chicanx Ford Scholars from working backgrounds revealed that Chicanx students typically experience racial and gender discrimination at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and the lack of Chicanx faculty and students led to the scholars feeling out of place. CRT is thus an essential lens through which to examine how Chicanx/Latinx student belonging may be fostered by the presence, support, and validation of Chicanx/Latinx staff. Furthermore, one of the goals of CRT is the transformation of institutions for social justice, achieved through critical examination and resistance to dominant ideologies. Ek at al. (2010) detail that agencies of transformational resistance combat discrimination by building inclusive communities, providing resources, empowering those communities, giving voice to community concerns, raising critical consciousness and commitment to social justice, and providing hope.

CRT also examines how race, class, and gender intersect to influence the experiences of Chicanx scholars, as do identities such as sexual orientation, immigration status, language, diverse abilities, and religion (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Solorzano, 1998). An intersectional analysis of the identities that Chicanx/Latinx staff and students hold provides a more nuanced understanding of their experience of the campus climate, and how they develop resistant strategies to the racism, racial microaggressions, and structural inequities. LatCrit goes beyond CRT analysis to examine oppression based on ethnicity, as well as immigration, culture, gender, language, phenotype, as specifically experienced by Chicanx/Latinx populations. My research will apply this expanded critical approach to explore how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff

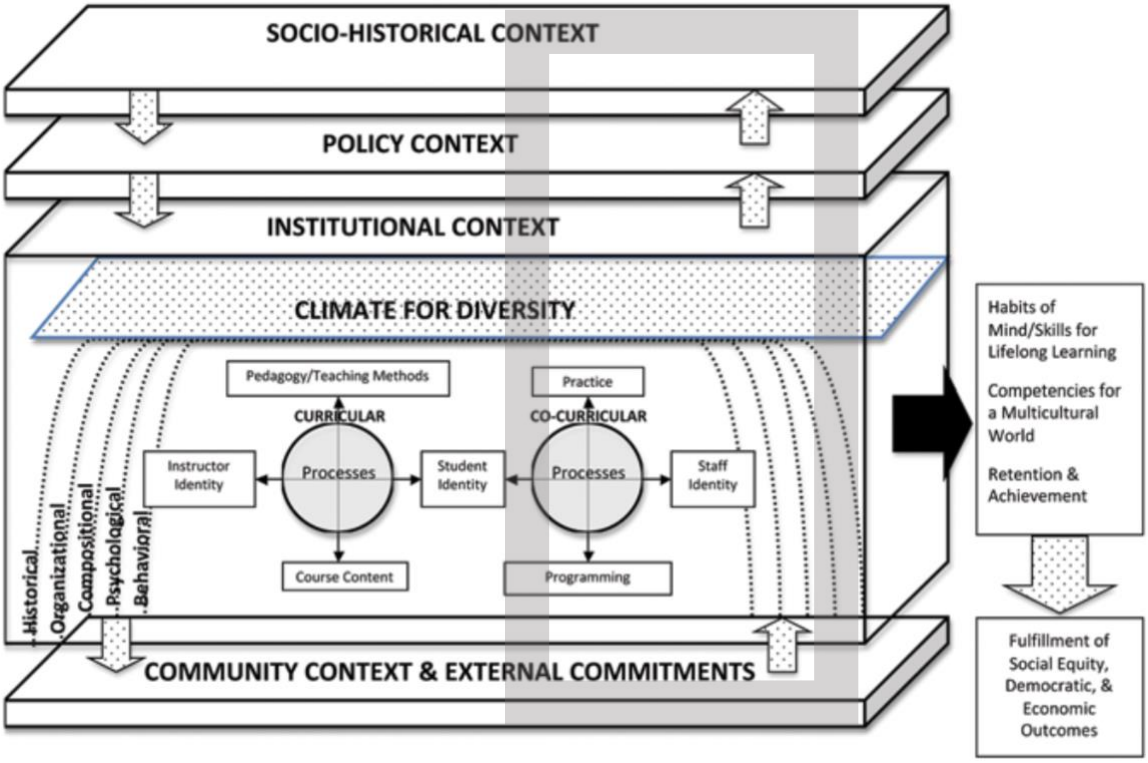
navigate and challenge the dominant pervasive racism and oppression within institutions of higher education to build community and belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. In centering the perspectives of Chicanx/Latinx staff, this study sought to examine how these staff might serve as agents of transformational resistance, pushing the university to fully practice a Hispanic-serving mission.

Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments

Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) provides a framework for conceptualizing the role that student affairs professionals play in supporting students within a university. At the center of the model is the student identity, influenced by the curricular processes on one side (including instructor identity, pedagogy, and course content), and co-curricular processes on the other (including staff identity, practice, and programming). I have highlighted the student and co-curricular section in figure 1 of the MMDLE, as this frames my research study. Surrounding the curricular and co-curricular spheres of influence is the campus climate for diversity, which is impacted by institutional and policy context, the socio-historical context, and the community context. As students engage in the curricular and co-curricular processes they grow and develop as students and global citizens, learning competencies for a multicultural world, habits of mind, retention and achievement.

Figure 1

Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments



Staff play a critical role in providing holistic and navigational support, resources, and co-curricular programming to students in ways that build community and impact sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 2012). This model identifies "the parallel role of staff in advancing student development, educating a diverse student body, and enhancing learning outcomes. Too often our models and assessments... [neglect] a critical examination of institutional actors and practices" (Hurtado et. al., 2012, p. 49). Yet staff are often the institutional agents who implement student-focused diversity initiatives, as well as policies and practices that impact students' experiences (Hurtado et al., 2012). It is also important to highlight that staff and student identities are essential components of this model, and the model outlines how the interactions between staff

and students are nested within multiple contextual levels and the institution's climate for diversity. Various processes take place at the intersection of student and staff identity, including sense of belonging, validation, and (re)socialization (Hurtado et al., 2012). Sense of belonging is defined as a student's psychological connection to and feeling that they are a valued member of a community. Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs identifies love and belonging as the third level of human need, following physiological and safety needs, and a critical step before the needs of esteem and self-actualization can be met. Furthermore, researchers in higher education have identified belonging as important in college students' persistence and success (Hausmann et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2018).

In applying the MMDLE to this research project, the interpersonal and structural support that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff provide to Chicanx/Latinx students plays an important role in the process of sense of belonging. Interpersonal support comprises the day-to-day engagement and interactions that these staff have with students, including cultural, academic, and personal validation, mentorship, navigation and guidance through institutional barriers, and advocacy. Structural support is comprised of the co-curricular programming (such as social and culturally relevant events and workshops), resources, and advocacy for institutional equity to better support Chicanx/Latinx student retention and success. These two forms of support are embedded within the section of the MMDLE between student identity and staff identity. CRT and LatCrit frameworks further inform the development of belonging through staff interpersonal and structural support because this work takes place within an institution that has a legacy of exclusion and continues to hold up structural barriers for Chicanx/Latinx students. In addition, the multiple intersecting identities of these staff (such as being the first in their family to

complete college or coming from a family with low income) may shape how they conceptualize belonging and develop their programming to intentionally engage Chicanx/Latinx students.

Literature Review

This review of literature first briefly examines the experiences of Chicanx/Latinx students in higher education. It then provides an important foundation for understanding some of the key issues that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff must consider in their co-curricular work to support Chicanx/Latinx students. As such, it informs how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff envision their roles and possible motivations for joining this field. Next, I explore the literature on sense of belonging and validation for Chicanx/Latinx students, which deepens the understanding of their experiences in higher education and suggests the importance of embedding belonging in the co-curricular practices of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff. Unfortunately, the research on belonging focuses on either peer engagement or the impact of faculty and administrators, leaving a gap on staff practitioners in general, and Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff in particular. The final section will assess literature on the experiences of Chicanx/Latinx staff in higher education (at times using literature on faculty and staff of color as proxies), and how they offer interpersonal and structural support to influence belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students.

Understanding Chicanx/Latinx Student Experiences

Latinx students make up more than 55% of California's K-12 public school enrollment, but disparities continue to exist in Latinx college student enrollment across various higher education institutions (California Department of Education, 2022). Despite rapid increases in the percentage of Latinx students who have completed college prep coursework required by the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) (from 22% in 2007 to 39%

in 2016), Latinx students tend to enroll in community colleges (50%) and comprise only 26% of UC enrollment (Rodriguez et al., 2019). Furthermore, only 20% of California-born Latinx young adults have a bachelor's degree, compared to the 33% state average, 58% Asian American, and 41% White (Rodriguez et al., 2019). Nationally, 44% of Latinx students were the first in their family to attend college, which adds another layer of complexity in that their family members are not able to help them navigate college (*Excelencia* in Education, 2022). Research has shown that Latinx students face several barriers to higher education degree attainment, including less access to academic preparation opportunities (Orfield & Ee, 2014; Zarate & Gallimore, 2005), concerns about affording the cost of college (*Excelencia* in Education, 2022; Education Trust-West, 2017), as well as cultural alienation and racial and ethnic microaggressions (González, 2002; Yosso et al., 2009).

Latinx students who experience a hostile campus climate are less likely to feel a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuán, 2005). Yosso et al. (2009) found that in addition to microaggressions based on race, class, and gender identity, Latinx students also faced microaggressions based on "language, culture, immigration status, phenotype, accent, and surname" (p. 667). An institution's environment has an impact on the psychological well-being of Latinx students, and perceived lack of cultural congruity and minority-related stress contributes to elevated symptoms of depression (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Gloria et al., 2005). Latinx college students also report lower levels of belonging than White students (Strayhorn, 2008). Overall, a hostile racial climate plays a significant role in the disparities seen in the persistence and retention of Latinx undergraduate students (Huber et al., 2006).

Although HSIs only make up 18% of higher education institutions, they enroll 66% of Latinx undergraduate students, and thus play a significant role in providing Latinx students

access to higher education (*Excelencia* in Education, 2022). HSIs are defined as institutions that enroll 25% or more Latinx undergraduates, and they often enroll large percentages of low-income and first-generation college students (de los Santos & Cuamea, 2010; Núñez et al., 2011; Salinas & Llanes, 2003). Research suggests that Latinx students in HSIs experience greater growth in academic self-concept than their peers in non-HSIs (Cuellar, 2014). However, despite demographic changes to the campus student body of HSIs, many institutions struggle to change the institutional culture to better serve the varying needs of Latinx college students (Doran, 2015; G. A. Garcia, 2017; G. A. Garcia, 2018). Latinx students at HSIs continue to face racial and ethnic microaggressions, although the frequency and type of microaggressions vary by the institution's compositional diversity. Evidence suggests that HSIs with high percentages of Latinx students provide a more positive climate. The overwhelming majority of Latinx students (70-82%) at emerging HSIs and HSIs with only 45% Latinx enrollment experienced microaggressions, compared to much lower levels of reported incidents (15%) at HSIs with 80% Latinx enrollment (Sanchez, 2019). In addition, Latinx students from an HSI with 75% Latinx enrollment attributed their academic persistence in part to a "strong collective sense of belonging, acceptance, and peer support" at the campus (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016, p. 30). This research speaks to the continued need to address campus climate for diversity and fostering sense of belonging for Latinx students.

Sense of Belonging & Validation

Sense of belonging is defined as a student's psychological connection to and feeling that they are a valued member of a community. Researchers have identified belonging as important in college students' persistence and success (Durkheim, 1951; Hausmann et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993). Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of integration explored the role of belonging

in college student persistence, but his underlying assumption that students must separate from their families and assimilate to the culture of the university in order to succeed has been criticized for ignoring the experiences of students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This critique of Tinto has sparked a growing body of research that examines sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students and students of color, which is a critical foundation for the work of student affairs professionals. This section will provide an overview of factors that contribute to a sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx and marginalized student groups, how belonging is developed in microclimates, and the role of validation in promoting belonging. This will set the stage for a deeper examination of the role of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff in fostering belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students through interpersonal and structural support.

Factors that Contribute to Sense of Belonging

Several factors contribute to sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx college students and students of color including academic engagement, identity, representation, institutional practices, and microclimates. While academic engagement (i.e., class participation, time spent studying, and academic discussions with peers) is positively associated with sense of belonging for Latinx students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Nuñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008), it is mediated in part by social interactions with diverse people and perspectives (C. E. Garcia, 2019; Nuñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Belonging is also influenced by inclusive institutional practices, such as a diverse and culturally sustaining curriculum, faculty interest in students, and holistic support (González, 2002; Maestas et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2018; Nuñez, 2009). Identity is central to sense of belonging. Scholars have pointed to factors such as racial, ethnic, and cultural identity, second-generation immigration status, and the representation of Chicanx/Latinx students, faculty, and staff as influencing sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx college students

(C. E. Garcia, 2009; González, 2002; Museus et al., 2018; Nuñez, 2009). First generation Latinx students report lower sense of belonging, cultural fit, and perceptions that they mattered in the institution (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Furthermore, G. A. Garcia and Dwyer (2018) found that Latinx students felt belonging "within an organization that has a similar racialized identity as them, and that creates a strong identification," such as an HSI (p. 208). When students see a critical mass of peers and institutional agents who look like them, and perceive that their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities are recognized and valued within the university, they feel a greater sense of belonging. This literature suggests that representation matters and that inclusive practices affect belonging.

Campus Climate and Microclimates

Research has shown that the overall campus environment influences a student's sense of belonging, and perceptions of a hostile climate has the strongest negative effect of all direct variables on belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Nuñez, 2009). In contrast, institutional practices that support a culturally engaging campus environment (including holistic support, cultural familiarity, validation, and culturally relevant knowledge), are significantly statistically related to sense of belonging for students of color (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2018). However, evidence suggests that microclimates may have a greater impact on belonging for Chicanx/Latinx college students than the overall campus climate (C. E. Garcia, 2019; González, 2002; Villalpando, 2003). Microclimates are smaller spaces within universities that can have a strong impact on the experiences of students of color, such as student clubs or student life centers. González (2002) describes how two Chicano college students dealt with a hostile campus climate by seeking out and establishing supportive microclimates: they lined the walls of their dorm room with cultural artifacts, sought guidance from their Chicano professor,

and joined MEChA. Ethnic-based programs, centers, and student organizations can provide Chicanx/Latinx students a strong connection with peers and institutional agents who look like them, offer cultural validation, and serve as shelter from the marginalization they may face in other areas of the university. Thus, Chicanx/Latinx students are more likely to feel belonging within a particular subculture, but not necessarily the greater campus community (C. E. Garcia, 2019; González, 2002; Villalpando, 2003). While this research highlights the importance of supportive microclimates, it neglects to examine the role that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff play in implementing student life programs that offer Chicanx/Latinx college students interpersonal and cultural validation.

Validation

Rendón (1994) defines validation as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). Validation theory centers students' personal voices, cultures, and backgrounds, and is particularly important for Chicanx/Latinx and other marginalized students, who often express that they feel isolated, excluded, or that they don't belong. Research has shown that validation leads to the students' increased sense of self, academic abilities, and sense of belonging (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2018; Hurtado et al., 2015). Rendón (1994) indicated that faculty, staff, and administrators serve an important role as "validating agents" for marginalized students (p. 34). Validation, especially interpersonal validation, from faculty and staff mediates the negative impact of discrimination and microaggressions on belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students (Hurtado et al., 2015).

Co-curricular spaces have the potential to offer interpersonal and cultural validation by hosting cultural programming, cultural and ethnic retention centers, ethnic-based student

organizations, and forms of cultural advocacy (Andrade, 2019b; Maramba and Palmer, 2014; Salas et al., 2014; Tachine et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2019). These programs allow students to connect with peers and staff of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds, build community across common experiences, and provide opportunities for holistic mentoring (Andrade, 2019b; Maramba and Palmer, 2014; Salas et al., 2014, Tachine et al., 2017). The cultural validation students receive from ethnic organizations provides a "home away from home" (Maramba and Palmer, 2014, p. 525), and fosters *familia* structures of support (Cerezo et al., 2013; C. E. Garcia, 2019; González, 2002; Villalpando, 2003; Yosso et al., 2009). While there is a rich body of literature on the ways in which Chicanx/Latinx peers connect and find validation within microclimates, little research examines the role of student affairs practitioners in supporting Chicanx/Latinx students through co-curricular programs, much less the practices that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals implement to foster Chicanx/Latinx students' sense of belonging.

How Chicanx/Latinx Student Affairs Professionals Influence Chicanx/Latinx Students' Sense of Belonging

To examine how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals support Chicanx/Latinx students, it is important to explore how these staff experience and navigate the campus climate, and the ways in which the climate impacts their work. As noted by Hurtado et al. (2012), there are five dimensions of campus climate for diversity: compositional diversity, historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, organizational and structural dimension, psychological climate, and behavioral climate. I will first examine concerns in the compositional diversity of the higher education workforce overall, highlighting compositional diversity for student affairs professionals. Following this, I will delve into the literature on the experiences of staff and

faculty of color in higher education, touching on issues of historical legacies of exclusion, as well as organizational, psychological, and behavioral dimensions.

Representation of Chicanx/Latinx Staff

As college student enrollment becomes increasingly more diverse, a key question for institutions of higher education to grapple with is: does the workforce supporting this diverse student population reflect the demographics of those they serve? National data on higher education staffing shows that the workforce is not reflective of college student demographics, as the majority of non-academic staff are White (Espinosa et al., 2019). While staff of color are underrepresented in postsecondary institutions overall, there are higher proportions of people of color in lower-level staff and professional positions (Espinosa et al., 2019). Approximately 42% of service and maintenance staff identified as people of color, with 25.2 percent identifying as Black, 11.6 percent as Hispanic; in addition, roughly 25% of all office and clerical staff identify as people of color (Espinosa et al., 2019). People of color and women are more deeply underrepresented in higher-level professional, administrative, and executive leadership positions (Espinosa et al., 2019; McChesney, 2018). White women employees in postsecondary institutions are overrepresented in comparison to both the U.S. population and among four-year degree holders, primarily occupying roles as staff and professionals, while White men are overrepresented in administrative and faculty positions (McChesney, 2018). Conversely, women of color are underrepresented compared to the U.S. population and have the lowest median pay of all groups compared to White men (McChesney, 2018). Retention of underrepresented staff of color is a critical issue in higher education, and pay equity and climate for diversity are important factors in staff intentions to remain at an institution (Buttner & Lowe, 2017). The existing underrepresentation of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals means that Chicanx/Latinx

college students have less access to mentors and advocates who look like them and share similar cultural values. When Chicana/Latina student affairs staff are also underpaid for their work, it leads to faster rates of burnout and turnover. In this circular feedback loop, high turnover rates impact the underrepresentation of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff, which in turn affects the experiences and success of Chicanx/Latinx college students.

It is especially important for student affairs staff to reflect student demographics, given their central role in supporting students. Research has shown that Black students who have same-race role models have higher levels of achievement (Gershenson et al., 2018), and greater representation of student affairs professionals of color improves campus climate for college students of color (Rapp, 1997; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1991). Even though 26.5% of student affairs professionals identify as people of color (Espinosa et al., 2019), the racial/ethnic composition of student affairs professionals are still not representative of current college student demographics (Espinosa et al., 2019; Frye & Fulton, 2020; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018; Rapp, 1997). As Chicanx/Latinx college student enrollment continues to grow at a fast pace reaching 17% nationally, only 8% of student affairs professionals are Hispanic (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). White student affairs professionals are overrepresented relative to the White student population, African American student affairs professionals overall are currently proportional to African American students, and Hispanic/Latino and Asian student affairs professionals are underrepresented compared to their student populations (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018).

The proportion of women and minorities in the student affairs profession has increased over the years, but the percentage of underrepresented minority students in master's programs for student affairs remains small (Turrentine & Conley, 2001). Of student affairs degrees conferred from 1995-1998, Hispanics comprised 4.8%, African Americans 11.6%, Asian Americans 1.7%,

and American Indians 0.8% (Turrentine & Conley, 2001). This indicates that the diversity of the labor pool for entry-level positions in student affairs has not matched the much-faster growing diversity of college students. The NCES projects a 15% increase in Hispanic/Latino students by 2026, a 7% increase of Black students, and an 8% decrease in White college students. Unless colleges and universities strive to address issues of employee recruitment and retention, and develop best practices to increase the proportions of Hispanic/Latino student affairs professionals, the impending surge in Hispanic/Latino students will widen the representational gap. Bridging this gap is especially crucial and timely for universities that are currently emerging or established HSIs.

Complicating the representational gap, workforce data shows that the racial/ethnic composition of staff varies widely by the type of institution, whether it is public or private, and the highest level of degrees it offers. Frye & Fulton (2020) found that higher proportions of White and Asian staff are employed at masters and doctoral level institutions, compared to underrepresented racial/ethnic minority staff. Conversely, higher proportions of American Indian, Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander staff were employed at associate level colleges (Frye & Fulton, 2020). In particular, Hispanic professional staff are seen in much higher proportions in public associates (11%), public baccalaureate (18%), and private for-profit associates (25%) institutions, as opposed to the masters and doctoral institutions and private non-profit institutions (6-9%) (Frye & Fulton, 2020). That there are higher proportions of Hispanic staff at public community colleges is not altogether surprising when we consider that 40% of the 559 federally designated HSIs are public two-year institutions (*Excelencia* in Education, 2022). However, the underrepresentation of Hispanic staff in higher-level degree-granting institutions is

more concerning as the majority of the 393 emerging HSIs are four-year universities, 45% private and 25% public (*Excelencia* in Education, 2022).

Hispanic faculty and administrative leaders are also underrepresented in higher-level degree-granting universities. Santos & Acevedo-Gil (2013) found that across the CSU and UC system, the representation of Latinx faculty and high-level administrators does not reflect these systems' Latinx undergraduate student and general population, and there was very little change in this gap across the 8 years of data the authors analyzed. In summary, there are more staff of color, and particularly Latinx staff, in open access, lower-level degree granting institutions than in elite research institutions that offer higher-level degrees. There are, no doubt, many factors influencing these results, but it is important to note that public associates and baccalaureate colleges, as well as private for-profit institutions, tend to have more diverse student populations than do masters, doctoral and private non-profit institutions.

Isolation, Microaggressions, and Counter Spaces

So how does the compositional diversity of an institution impact the experience of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals? The underrepresentation of staff of color contributes to the psychological and behavioral dimensions of campus climate, and can lead to experiences of isolation, alienation, tokenism, invalidation, and microaggressions (G. A. Garcia, 2016; Gomez et al., 2015; Hurtado et al., 2012; Mena, 2016; Robbins et al., 2019; Steele, 2018). Women and staff of color are less likely to perceive the campus as having a positive climate (Mayhew et al., 2006). Furthermore, women of color report "feeling less respected by their colleagues, less appreciated by their supervisors, and less likely to be given new and challenging opportunities" (Marcus, 2000, p. 64). Constant microaggressions, tokenism, not feeling valued, feeling invisible, isolation, and being seen as not as capable all contributed to a chilly work

environment for staff of color (Steele, 2018). In addition, staff of color felt an unspoken expectation and obligation to do extra work outside their job descriptions to support students of color, which was not expected of their White counterparts (Steele, 2018).

This sense of obligation for staff of color to support students of color is highlighted in Gomez et al.'s (2015) life history interviews with staff of color, who described their work as a battlefield that they must strategically maneuver to advance equity for first generation students of color. The stories told by these women of color detail the racial, linguistic, and sexist microaggressions they faced in working with predominantly White faculty and administrators who didn't share the staff members' goals of educational equity for students of color (Gomez et al., 2015). Microaggressions were exacerbated by the positionality of staff within the hierarchy of the institution, described by one of the participants as a "caste system" in which staff are valued less than faculty and administrators, even when the staff member held a doctoral degree (Gomez et al., 2015). While the participants demonstrated a strong dedication to "lift as we climb" and strategically "fight to bring attention to issues related to students of color, they do so at great personal and professional costs" (Gomez et al., 2015, p. 687). The burden of constantly advocating for students of color while facing incessant microaggressions led to increased levels of stress, racial battle fatigue, exhaustion, and ultimately took a toll on the physical and mental health of staff of color (G. A. Garcia, 2016; Gomez et al., 2015).

While the research on the experiences of staff of color in higher education is limited, the more robust literature on faculty of color corroborates the themes described above. Turner (2002) describes the effects of being tokenized as a woman of color in the academe, including: feeling more visible, isolation, pressure to not make a mistake, lack of credibility, lack of respect, exclusion, negative stereotypes assumed, less likely to be sponsored, and increased stress. The

interlocking effects of race and gender compound the pressures of the workplace for women of color, for faculty and staff alike. Women faculty of color are overburdened by departments, expected to serve as role models, and advise and mentor students of color. While they often desire to give back to their communities, this often places an undue burden of service that White male faculty do not feel pressure to do (Turner, 2002). More importantly, this service work is not rewarded in the tenure and promotion process (Turner, 2002).

Ek et al. (2010) describe the ways in which an interdisciplinary research collaborative, Research in Education for the Advancement of Latin@s (REAL), which serves as an agency of transformational resistance and counter space for Latina faculty and scholars to combat the microaggressions, invalidation, and isolation of being at a large public university. The collaborative provides muxerista mentoring (leveraging the social and cultural capital that Latina scholars bring with them), generates research that benefits the Latinx community, and develops a strong sense of belonging and community (Ek et al., 2010). One of the scholar-participants, Lourdes, describes the belonging and *familismo* that characterizes this unique space for Latin@ faculty:

> it's just something amazing to see so many Latinas and Chicanas in one place… I think it's just the feeling of security. You know, a feeling of security, … I've walked into other spaces where it's like you don't know quite where you belong or where you fit in… You know [with the REAL group] it's just like you can let your guard down (Ek et al., 2010, p. 546).

REAL is a prime example of the role and impact of microclimates on faculty and staff of color in higher education. In this context, microclimates include smaller spaces within the university that faculty or staff would frequent, such as their department or unit.

Microclimates and Culturally Engaging Environments

Other studies have examined microclimates that staff of color experience. Mayhew et al. (2006) found that staff's perception of the overall climate depended upon their department's climate for diversity. G. A. Garcia's (2016) research on student affairs professionals' experiences with campus racial climate at an HSI found that the compositional diversity of the department influenced perceptions and behaviors, highlighting the importance of microclimates. Microclimates could be positive or negative. Positive microclimates are not only compositionally diverse but also marked by leaders and staff who demonstrate passion and dedication to supporting students of color, fed in part by their connection to and identification with these students (G. A. Garcia, 2016). These kinds of microclimates serve as counterspaces similar to the REAL collaborative, where students and staff of color alike benefit from a community that challenges deficit notions, negates racial insults and microaggressions, and provides positive support, validation, and belonging (G. A. Garcia, 2016).

Staff of color not only experience the effects of positive or negative microclimates, but they can create such microclimates for students of color. Student affairs professionals play a critical role in developing culturally engaging environments that foster community and belonging for students of color within the microclimates they oversee, from student life programs to ethnic retention centers (Museus et al., 2018). Culturally engaging campus environments include indicators such as cultural relevance, culturally validating environments, and cultural responsiveness (Museus et al., 2018). While all student affairs professionals must be prepared to support the rising number of Chicanx/Latinx college students and students of color, it is also critical to have Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals who can provide cultural familiarity, who understand the racism and other forms of oppression that Chicanx/Latinx students

experience, and serve as role models (Gershenson et al., 2018; Rapp, 1997; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1991).

Motivations for Chicanx/Latinx Individuals to Become Student Affairs Professionals

There is relatively little research on the motivations that drive students to become student affairs professionals, and even less scholarship that takes race and ethnicity into account for career choice. While Taub and McEwan (2006) found that students in graduate student affairs programs seek this field to work with students, be of service to others, and engage in personally fulfilling work, unfortunately, their study had too few students of color to develop a meaningful analysis on what influences people of color to become student affairs professionals (Taub & McEwan, 2006). Encouragement of a mentor and exposure to the field via involvement in student activities were key factors in students' consideration of the student affairs profession (Linder & Simmons, 2015; Taub & McEwan, 2006). Linder and Simmons's (2015) research found that students of color in student affairs graduate programs were motivated by their passion to support access, opportunity, and a sense of community for undergraduate students of color and first-generation students, informed by their own college experiences of isolation and structural racism. These students prioritized graduate programs that were dedicated to diversity and social justice, and they pursued a career in student affairs with the intent to advocate for undergraduate students of color (Linder & Simmons, 2015).

A study on the identity production of Chicana/o activist educators reveals similar themes of commitment to social justice, a desire to give back to the community, and specifically to raise consciousness of racial and ethnic oppression (Urrieta, 2007). Urrieta (2007) describes that the concept of Chicana/o identity "implies taking on a strong political orientation and a commitment to unlearn White supremacy" (p. 117). The alienation, microaggressions, and discrimination that

Chicana/o activist educators faced within White-stream higher education institutions prompted them to think critically about structural oppression in education. The students sought out counter spaces where they could connect with other Chicana/o and Latina/o peers for validation and *familismo*, participate in cultural and ethnic activities, and engage in advocacy and activism. A few examples of such activities include: MEChA, Chicana/o Teatro, Danza, Ballet Folklorico, and orientation programs for underrepresented minority and low-income students. Getting involved in these activities allowed Mexican American college students to unpack incidents of racism and marginalization with peers and mentors, resist deficit narratives, and learn how to be leaders and agents for change (Urrieta, 2007). These transformative experiences shaped the students' understandings of themselves within predominantly White institutions, allowed them to intentionally adopt the identity of Chicana/o activist educators, and go on to pursue teaching positions to serve the needs of urban Latino youth (Urrieta, 2007). While the empirical research on the motivations for Chicanx/Latinx staff for becoming student affairs professionals is sparse, it suggests that their career paths are informed by their own college experiences as well as a passion to provide equitable access, a supportive community, and raise the consciousness of Chicanx/Latinx students, students of color, as well as first-generation and low-income students.

Chicanx/Latinx Student Affairs Staff Influence on Chicanx/Latinx Students

While there is limited empirical research on the specific impact that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals have on Chicanx/Latinx college students, related literature has shown that institutional agents can positively influence student outcomes, particularly for minoritized college students (Bensimon, 2007; Garvey & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2012; McCallen & Johnson, 2019; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2011; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015; Torres & Hernandez, 2009; Tovar, 2015). A study of nearly 400 Latinx community college

students in California found that institutional agents and support programs had a small but significant impact on the students' academic success and intent to persist until degree completion (Tovar, 2015). Furthermore, both academic and interpersonal validation from institutional agents can help mitigate the harmful effects of discrimination and bias, and increase sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 2015). Institutional agents are defined by Stanton-Salazar (2011) as members of an organization who "are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (p. 1066). In the higher education context, institutional agents include student affairs professionals, admissions and financial aid officers, counselors, academic advisors, faculty, and administrators. Furthermore, institutional agents can fulfill multiple roles with a recipient, and can serve as either gatekeeping agents or empowerment agents for Chicanx/Latinx and other marginalized students (G. A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Empowerment agents use both positional and personal resources to positively impact marginalized students via direct and indirect support (G. A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Empowerment agents are not only dedicated to promoting educational equity by providing resources to minoritized students, but they are committed to sparking critical consciousness in their students and other institutional agents, empowering them to become agents of change to counter oppressive and hierarchical structures and transform the world (G. A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

As noted in the sections above, staff and faculty of color often feel a sense of obligation to mentor, support, and advocate for students of color (G. A. Garcia, 2016; Gomez et al., 2015; Linder & Simmons, 2015; Reddick, 2011; Turner, 2002; Urrieta, 2007). Latinx and undocumented Latinx college students in particular report having a stronger connection with faculty and institutional agents of color, and felt a stronger sense of belonging in certain spaces,

such as Chicano Studies classes or living-learning communities and programs led by Chicano Studies departments and multicultural centers (G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; González, 2002; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015). Stebleton and Aleixo (2015) concur that "student affairs professionals hold an important role in supporting undocumented Latinx students" (p. 269). The following sections will examine the literature on how institutional agents, particularly student affairs staff of color, provide interpersonal and structural support to Chicanx/Latinx students and students of color, and how this support impacts belonging.

Interpersonal Support

Interpersonal support addresses how institutional agents interact and engage with students, and spans concepts of mentoring, navigational guidance, counseling, academic advising, interpersonal and academic validation, and encouragement. The ways in which institutional agents interact and engage with Chicanx/Latinx college students play a key role in fostering a sense of belonging. In a study of Latinx college students across three urban universities (two HSIs and one PWI), students who have an identified mentor or advisor consistently demonstrated higher levels of academic integration, cultural affinity, institutional commitment, satisfaction with faculty, and encouragement (Torres & Hernandez, 2009). Direct interpersonal support from institutional agents is often the primary means by which Latinx college students, particularly first-generation students, might attain social capital to navigate higher education more effectively. Within an orientation and transfer program targeted to Latinx students, Andrade (2019b), for example, found that "counselors and staff are crucial for positive validation that positively influences students' motivation, persistence, and adjustment" (p. 34).

Research has evidenced that institutional agents who practice humanized advising, provide holistic support, and implement proactive academic advising facilitate greater success

among students of color (Museus & Mueller, 2018; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Humanized advising allows for advisors and students to recognize each other as human beings, fosters a deeper understanding of each other's multiple intersecting identities, develops respect and trust, and involves advisors showing that they care about and are committed to the success of students of color (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Humanizing interactions make institutional agents more approachable, less intimidating, and increases students' comfort level – thereby contributing to a space of inclusion and belonging (Museus & Mueller, 2018). In a similar vein, holistic advising supports the whole student, beyond academics, with the understanding that a student's personal, work, and academic worlds are all interconnected (Museus & Ravello, 2010).

There is a growing body of research that suggests student affairs professionals and institutional agents of color may provide stronger interpersonal support for students of color. Luedke's (2017) study builds on Museus & Ravello's (2010) findings by exploring how staff and administrators of color mentor of students of color (specifically African American, Latino, and bi-racial students). Staff of color were found to provide holistic support in ways that White staff did not (Luedke, 2017). Staff of color nurtured various forms of capital that students brought with them to college, promoted authenticity and realness, and formed personal connections. They also developed trust through meaningful and honest dialogue with students, providing direct feedback, and developing strategies for success. Finally, these staff of color made themselves available to help with both academic and personal concerns, and in "addressing students' lives outside of the classroom, advisors made students feel that they mattered" (Luedke, 2017, p. 48). Other research shows the importance of common ground in developing trust and cultivating social capital between institutional agents and students (Museus & Mueller, 2018). Southeast Asian American college students "underscored the value of those agents sharing similar cultural

backgrounds or sharing similar educational experiences" (Museus & Mueller, 2018, p. 200). Through positive interactions and mentoring relationships with staff of color, students of color acquired cultural and social capital to navigate higher education more successfully (Luedke, 2017; Museus & Mueller, 2018).

Themes of *respeto* (respect) and *confiaza* (trust), validation, as well as the importance of cultural familiarity and shared identities are echoed in the literature on the impact of institutional agents on undocumented Latinx students (Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015). Undocumented Latinx students report high levels of stress and fear due to their immigration status, often exacerbated by insensitive or intimidating interactions with faculty and staff (Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015). When undocumented Latinx students chose to disclose, it was "more likely to occur with faculty members and institutional agents who had some form of shared experience (e.g., race/ ethnicity, cultural background, language)" (Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015, p. 263). Building trust and respect through humanizing and holistic support practices is critical to supporting students of color, and marginalized students find it easier to connect with institutional agents who have a shared identity, who may have a better understanding of their experiences. The majority of institutional agents interviewed from four institutions across the U.S. failed to recognize how the needs of undocumented and DACA college students are unique and different from the needs of other marginalized student populations (Nienhusser & Espino, 2017). Yet, when some institutional agents took the time to interact with and develop relationships with undocumented/DACA students, these personal interactions helped shape their understanding of the challenges and experiences the students faced (Nienhusser & Espino, 2017). This deeper understanding formed by personal, humanizing interactions can activate some institutional agents to become empowerment agents for Latinx undocumented students, advocating for resources and support of

individual students and greater structural equity in policies and practices (Nienhusser & Espino, 2017).

While student affairs professionals provide direct interpersonal support and resources to Chicanx/Latinx students in ways that promote a sense of belonging, they also are often responsible for providing indirect structural support. The next section will address the ways that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals work to advance sense of belonging and educational equity for Chicanx/Latinx college students through the structural support of programs, policies, and institutional practices.

Structural Support

Structural support is defined here as the ways in which student affairs professionals and other institutional agents indirectly support student success, including developing co-curricular programs, implementing policies, and influencing institutional practices. In developing culturally engaging student life and co-curricular programming, Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals and staff of color have the opportunity to create counterspaces and positive microclimates, to foster greater community and belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students and students of color (Museus et al., 2018). Examples of such spaces include: student residential communities that center various cultural, racial and ethnic identities (C. E. Garcia, 2019), Educational Opportunity Programs, which provide financial, mentoring, transitional assistance and academic advising for low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students of color (G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015), Puente, MESA, as well as ethnic-based multicultural centers, orientation, bridge, and transfer programs, and student organizations (Andrade, 2019b; Santiago & Brown, 2021; Tovar, 2015). A study of a culturally sustaining orientation and transfer program for Latinx students, Adelante, revealed that participating in a program that affirmed

their cultural and ethnic identities, as well as providing key resources and mentorship, was critical to the students' motivation, persistence, and success (Andrade, 2019b). Andrade points out that the program's success is due in part to the validation that counselors and staff provided to students, the way in which the program fostered sense of belonging, and the staff's hard work in developing productive collaborations with the universities students sought to transfer to (Andrade, 2019b).

Higher education institutional agents are also responsible for implementing complex and sometimes ambiguous policies mandated by the state or federal government, or by the institution itself. While some policies may be equitable in nature, many institutions have a historical legacy of exclusion and oppression which existing policies have inherited and often continue to perpetuate. For true change to take place, higher education needs more institutional agents to serve as empowerment agents that advocate for policies and practices that establish structural equity for Chicanx/Latinx and other underrepresented students. According to a study on institutional agents who implement policies related to undocumented and DACA students, only "One-third of institutional agents believed that their central role in implementing policies for undocumented and DACAmented students was to provide educational access" (Nienhusser, 2018, p. 439). Many of these empowering institutional agents used vagueness within exclusionary policies to provide as much access as possible within the confines of the law. Others advocated for individual students and guided them to key resources, and some pressed for institutional aid to support undocumented and DACA students when the state failed to provide it (Nienhusser, 2018). Advocates work to dismantle oppressive systems that prevent students of color from accessing opportunities (G. A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). Whether they recognize it or not, many institutional agents across varying levels of positionality play a key role in interpreting

and implementing policies that impact Chicanx/Latinx and other marginalized students. Although the literature above is generalized to institutional agents and fails to explore the role of Chicanx/Latinx staff within the context of emerging HSIs, the findings do suggest an approximation of how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals might serve to advocate for equity and lobby for resources to support Chicanx/Latinx college student success.

Summary

As Chicanx/Latinx college student enrollment rises across the nation, it is imperative that higher education institutions address and transform the structural inequities that have served as barriers to this student population's success. In order to thrive, Chicanx/Latinx college students need a culturally engaging environment that fosters a sense of belonging. While there is a growing body of literature on the factors that contribute to belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, this literature focuses on either peer engagement or the impact of faculty and administrators. While there are a few studies on institutional agents, this research often combines and conflates faculty, administrators, and staff. There is a gap in the literature on the perspectives of the staff practitioners who provide co-curricular programming and support to Chicanx/Latinx students, and there is limited research on the impact of practitioners who hold similar marginalized identities as the students they serve. Thus, my research seeks to examine the role of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals in supporting and influencing belonging for Chicanx/Latinx college students at an emerging HSI.

Chapter Three:

Methodology

Research Design

This research project applied a qualitative approach to explore the ways in which Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals at an emerging public research HSI implement interpersonal and structural practices to foster belonging for Chicanx/Latinx college students. Qualitative research seeks to understand "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). The stories of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals are central to this study. Their experiences, perceptions of belonging, and practices elucidate how institutional agents within an emerging HSI interact with and develop programs to empower Chicanx/Latinx students.

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups to collect these stories. Individual interviews provided a confidential space for participants to feel comfortable sharing their personal stories and experiences in higher education, and provided time for them to reflect on their practices. Experiences of belonging and marginalization are sensitive topics, thus individual interviews were appropriate. The one-on-one space of an individual interview also allowed me to ask more probing questions. Patton (2015) states that "the purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). On the other hand, focus groups provided a space for participants to interact and engage in a dialogue on topics of common interest and concern. According to Morgan (1997), focus groups encourage participants to share and compare experiences, allowing researchers to examine similarities and differences. In this research study,

the focus groups centered on participants' perceptions of institutional efforts toward the HSI Initiative. This research study focuses on the specific context of UC Davis with the intention that the findings and implications for policy and practice will be tailored to immediately benefit UC Davis in its goal of achieving HSI status and improving student success.

Setting

UC Davis is a large, land-grant public research university located in the city of Davis, California, which is set in the northern Central Valley between Sacramento and the Bay Area. It is one of nine undergraduate campuses in the University of California system and boasts more than more than 31,000 enrolled undergraduates (University of California, 2022a). Thirty-nine percent of all undergraduates at UC Davis are first-generation, 28% are historically underrepresented minorities, and 32% are Pell grant recipients (University of California, 2022a). As an emerging HSI, the percentage of Chicanx/Latinx undergraduate students had been growing steadily until the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and enrollment of this population dipped slightly in fall 2021 to 22.6%. Table 1 shows the racial/ethnic composition of the undergraduate student body from Fall 2017 to 2021 (University of California, 2022a).

Table 1

UC Davis Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 2017-2021

Race/Ethnicity		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
African American	%	3.5%	3.6%	3.7%	3.7%	3.8%
	#	1,055	1,101	1,138	1,166	1,188
American Indian	%	0.7%	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%	0.3%
	#	196	185	146	139	106
Hispanic/Latino(a)	%	21.0%	21.9%	22.6%	23.1%	22.6%
	#	6,318	6,715	6,998	7,183	7,146
Pacific Islander	%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%
	#	101	105	114	124	111
Asian	%	31.8%	31.1%	31.2%	32.1%	33.8%
	#	9,548	9,568	9,666	10,017	10,705
White	%	24.7%	23.4%	22.8%	21.6%	21.4%
	#	7,422	7,178	7,077	6,728	6,772
Domestic Unknown	%	2.4%	2.3%	2.1%	2.2%	2.3%
	#	714	715	654	681	724
International	%	15.7%	17.1%	16.7%	16.4%	15.5%
	#	4,712	5,256	5,189	5,124	4,905
Total	%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	#	30,066	30,718	30,982	31,162	31,657

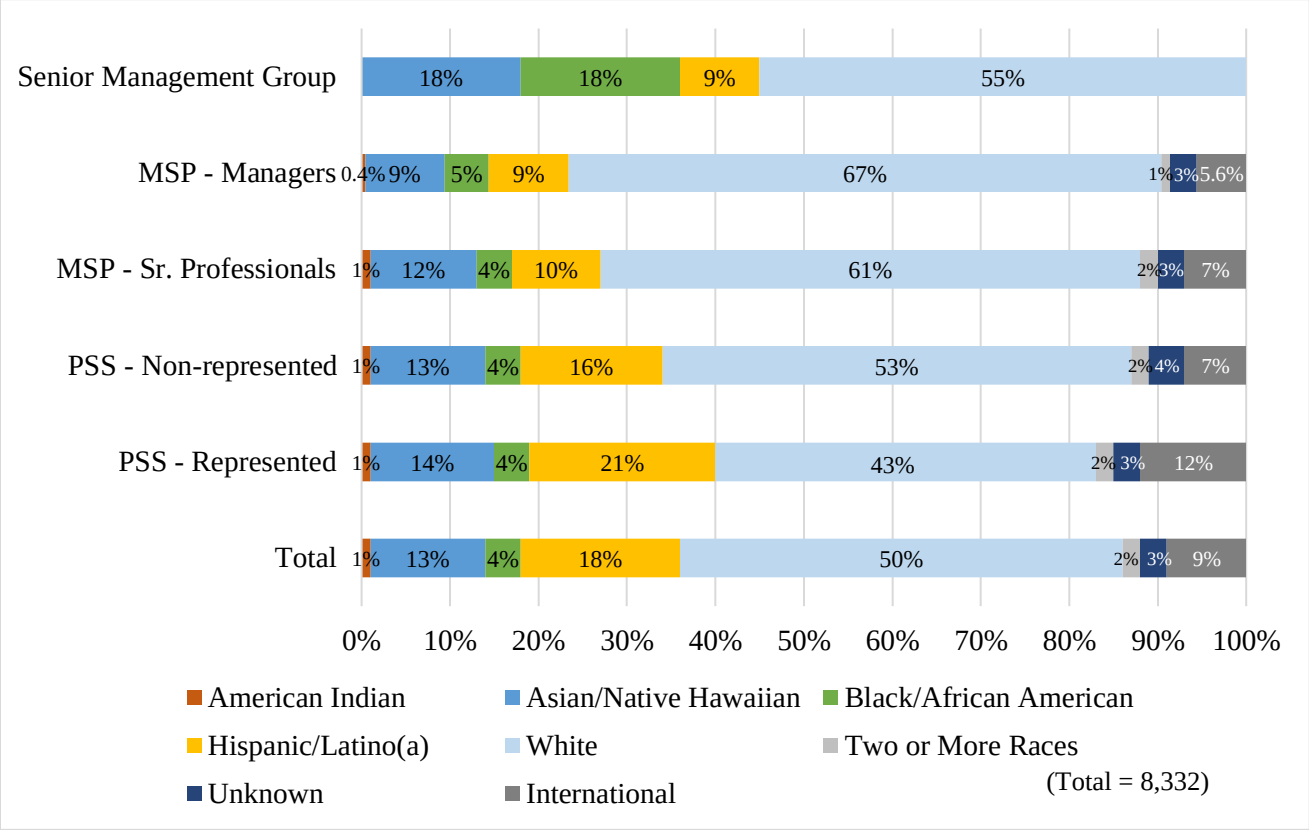
As of fall 2021, UC Davis had approximately 9,721 non-academic, non-student staff supporting the main campus (excluding UC Davis Health), of which 8,332 are career staff (University of California, 2022b). The demographics of staff and administrative leadership shown in Figure 2 reveal persistent disparities in racial/ethnic representation among the staff who run the university and serve students in various functions (University of California, 2022b). This data shows that overall staff demographics are not representative of the undergraduate student body, as approximately 50% of total staff are White, compared to 21.4% undergraduate students. The figure also shows that higher proportions of Chicanx/Latinx staff are in the Professional and

Support Staff level (PSS), and conversely, they are underrepresented in management and senior administrator positions (Senior Management Group and Manager & Senior Professional, MSP).

Chicanx/Latinx undergraduate students now comprise 22.6% of the student body, but only 18% of total career staff are Chicanx/Latinx. While somewhat outdated, the 2016 data from the *Assessing Staff Diversity at UC Davis* report show that 25.1% of staff within the Division of Student Affairs self-identified as Chicanx/Latinx (from a total of 1,165), which was comparatively larger than the percentage of Chicanx/Latinx students that year, 18.8% (from a total of 36,462) (UC Davis Staff Diversity Administrative Advisory Committee & Staff Assembly, 2017). It is important to note that the Division of Student Affairs includes staff in many different kinds of positions, from food service staff, to business support assistants, to the program coordinators that directly support students. While there are complicating factors to consider when interpreting this high percentage of Chicanx/Latinx staff in the Division of Student Affairs, it may speak to the division's commitment to hiring Chicanx/Latinx staff to serve a growing Chicanx/Latinx student population. There is currently no published data on the demographics of student affairs staff at UC Davis to see if the ratio between Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff and students has changed since 2016. However, it is possible that the higher proportion of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals has influenced sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, and perhaps was a factor in the steady increase of Chicanx/Latinx students at UC Davis.

Figure 2

UC Davis Career Staff by Level & Race/Ethnicity, October 2021



Institutional Context

History of Exclusion

It is often as a point of pride that people will refer to the University of California, Davis, as a land-grant university. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 allowed for the creation of public colleges and universities, primarily intended as agricultural schools but also for liberal education of the working class. States were granted federal land or could use the proceeds from the sales of federal land to build these public colleges. The Morrill Act was instrumental to opening access to higher education for White men who did not have the social or financial wealth to afford private colleges and universities. Yet, it is important to note that the federal land granted to states was

land that was forcibly seized from Indigenous tribes. As a land-grant institution, UC Davis is built upon land stolen from the native Patwin people. Dr. Jack D. Forbes, late professor emeriti of Native American Studies at UC Davis, pointed out that the University of California system directly benefitted from the colonization of Native Americans, noting that the university "was in great part financed by the sale of 90,000 acres of California Indian land (which the Indian people were not paid for)" (Lee et al., 1988).

Liberation Movements

Established as an extension of the Berkeley campus in 1908, UC Davis systematically excluded Native Americans, Chicanx/Latinx, African Americans, and Asian Americans until the late 1960's when the campus was forced to desegregate. Up to that point in time, it had "offered no instruction in American Indian Studies" or any of the other ethnic studies areas (Lee et al., 1988). The 1968-69 strike of the Third World Liberation Front, a coalition of Chicanx/Latinx, African American, Asian American, and Native American students and faculty, finally pushed UC Davis and other campuses to create ethnic studies courses and departments. The first Chicano and Chicana Studies courses were offered in 1970-71, and the major department was officially established in 1975 (UC Davis College of Letters & Science, 2019).

Desegregation and the creation of Chicano and Chicana Studies and other ethnic studies majors, however, did not necessarily create a positive campus racial climate. In 1990, students from MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) protested experiences of discrimination in the Spanish Department, and the subsequent Hunger Strike of May 1990 eventually led to the creation of the Cross Cultural Center (UC Davis Cross Cultural Center, 2020). This progress was met with policy challenges a few years later when in 1995 UC Regent Ward Connerly ended affirmative action in admissions across the UC system with SP-1.

Connerly also campaigned for Prop 209, which in 1996 prohibited all state governmental institutions from considering race, sex, or ethnicity in employment and education. Santos et al. (2010) found that the elimination of affirmative action had a disparate negative impact on admissions of underrepresented minorities across the UC system. The 2013 UC Davis Campus Climate Report indicated that underrepresented minority and other people of color were less comfortable than White respondents with the overall climate, climate in their classes, and the workplace climate (Rankin & Associates, 2014). The report noted that higher percentages of underrepresented minority and people of color experienced exclusionary conduct based on race, and that a higher percentage of staff respondents experienced exclusionary conduct compared to faculty or students (Rankin & Associates, 2014).

Recent Efforts in Advancing Educational Equity

The campus's historical legacy of exclusion continues to persist in structural inequities for students, faculty, and staff of marginalized identities. This inevitably impacts the climate for inclusion and belonging for institutional agents and students alike. The student voices section of the UC Davis HSI Task Force Report highlight experiences of isolation and feelings of not belonging, microaggressions, discrimination, and challenges navigating a bureaucratic system that was not built for them (Aldana & Reed, 2019). Yet, the hard work and steady progress of the institution on reaching milestones, such as becoming an emerging HSI, are worthy of celebration and serve as inspiration for continuing to advance equity efforts.

The transformation of UC Davis into an emerging HSI with rising enrollment of Chicanx/Latinx students has taken place over a relatively short period of time. The Division of Student Affairs certainly played an important role in advancing the HSI Initiative in the last decade. The goal of increasing enrollment of Chicanx/Latinx students was embedded within the

2020 Initiative, a broader institutional effort to increase enrollment in such a way that brought financial stability to the university in the wake of the Great Recession in 2011. In 2012, the university hired Dr. Adela de la Torre, who identifies as Chicana, to serve as vice chancellor for Student Affairs, and her leadership kept a strong focus on advancing the HSI Initiative. Under the leadership of Walter A. Robinson, then executive director of Undergraduate Admissions, and Dr. Blas Guerrero, director of strategic diversity recruitment and transfer initiatives, the campus strategically expanded recruitment and yield efforts to more Chicanx/Latinx communities across the state. Admissions staff also collaborated intentionally with partners in Student Life programs to ensure admitted students had a welcoming and smooth transition to the university.

As the UC Davis HSI Taskforce report describes, the rapid increase in Chicanx/Latinx applicants and enrolled students was the result of targeted outreach by Admissions staff in areas such as Imperial County, Ventura County, and Salinas (Aldana & Reed, 2019). These staff offered more bilingual programming, invited family participation at outreach events, partnered with programs such as Puente, the Chicano Youth Leadership Conference, and the Sacramento Mexican Consulate's Steps to College, and provided critical information to prospective students and their families about financial aid, housing, and support services. Finally, in 2017 the campus opened the Center for Chicanx and Latinx Academic Student Success, known as El Centro, advancing retention initiatives to provide academic and holistic support to Chicanx/Latinx students. This institutional history of exclusion as well as efforts to create a more inclusive campus environment are important context for examining the practices of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals in influencing belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students.

Sample

The participants in this study self-identify as Chicanx/Latinx and were employed as student affairs professionals at UC Davis at the time of data collection. I recruited 6 participants for the interviews and 8 participants for the focus groups (4 in each group). One participant who I recruited for the interview also agreed to join a focus group, thus the total sample consists of 13 individuals. I conducted purposeful sampling of participants from various student affairs positions, primarily in student support roles, including program coordinators, advisors, and administrators. Purposeful sampling allowed me to focus on "selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions" (Patton, 2002, p. 230). This sampling technique is efficient for identifying study participants, but it may lead to participants who share similar perspectives, which can limit the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To counteract this potential limitation, I strove to create a sample that is inclusive of various backgrounds, identities, work, and educational experiences. Recruitment areas included (but are not limited to): Student Life centers that specifically support Chicanx/Latinx students or other marginalized student populations (such as the Center for Chicanx/Latinx Academic Student Success, the Cross Cultural Center, and the Student Recruitment and Retention Center), Student Housing, Enrollment Management, Latinx Staff & Faculty Association, and Staff Diversity Administrative Advisory Committee.

Demographic Profiles of Participants

The participants in this study all self-identify as Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals at UC Davis, and they bring a rich array of diverse backgrounds, identities, and experiences that inform their perspectives and practices. The demographic profiles lay a contextual foundation and serve as a preface to the analytic findings.

As previously noted, the 13 participants of this study all hold positions that are traditionally considered student affairs roles, either by directly supporting students, coordinating co-curricular programming for students, or serving as an administrator overseeing such programming. The participants work in ten different units on campus, with the majority working in Student Life centers that provide academic and/or holistic student support, but also include roles in housing, academic advising, and outreach. Some of these Student Life centers and offices are specifically dedicated to supporting marginalized and historically underrepresented students, including Chicanx/Latinx students; others are focused on general student support. The majority of the staff have held their current position between 2-5 years (nine participants), but two participants are very new with less than two years on the job, and two have held their role between 6-10 years. Their total work experience at UC Davis is more wide-ranging, with two participants having less than two years at the campus, five with 2-5 years, two with 11-15 years, and four having more than 16 years of service at the campus. Nine participants have prior experience working in a student affairs position at a different college or university.

The participants bring a rich array of diverse identities and experiences. They shared the following descriptions of their race/ethnicity (counts are duplicated, as participants indicated multiple identities): Mexican or Mexican-American (8), Latinx or Latina (4), Chicanx/o/a (3), Chapin (1), Guatemalan (1), Native (1), Indigenous (1), White (1), Biracial/White (1). It is significant to note that ten of the participants self-identified as the first in their family to attend college. Not surprisingly, these student affairs professionals have attained high levels of education, with five participants holding a doctoral degree, seven a Master's degree, and one a Bachelor's degree (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Highest Educational Level Attained by Participants

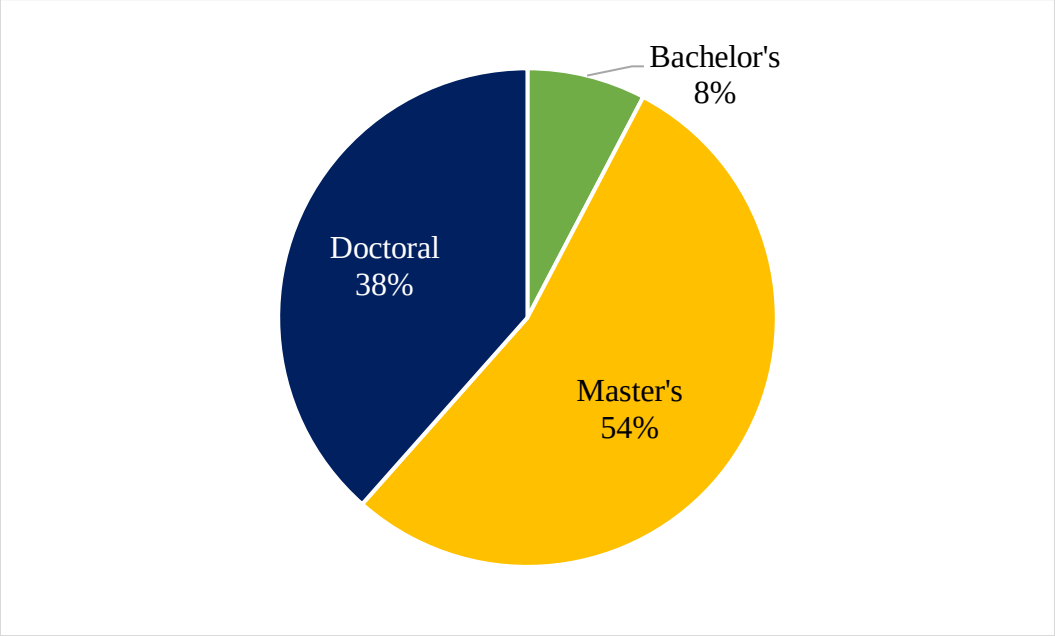


Table 2 indicates various additional identities that participants were prompted to describe in the pre-interview survey. Participants also had the opportunity to write in other identities that are important to them but were not named in the survey, which included: low-income student, child of Central American immigrant parents, child of farm workers, migrant student, English learner, California Cadet Corps, and parent.

Table 2

Participants' Additional Identities

Category	Description	#
First Generation Status		
	First in the family to attend college	10
Languages Spoken		
	Fluent in Spanish and English	8
	English and some Spanish	3
	English only	2
Gender Identity		
	Cisgender woman or female	7
	Cisgender man or male	4
	Genderqueer/nonbinary/trans	1
	Declined to state	1
Sexual Orientation		
	Heterosexual or straight	5
	Queer	2
	Pansexual	2
	Gay	1
	Bisexual	1
	Declined to state	2
Religion/Spirituality		
	Catholic	6
	Spiritual	2
	Non-religious	2
	Christian	1
	Atheist	1
	Declined to state	1
Disability Status		
	Chronic illness or disability	2

When asked to rank the salience of their various identities, there was near consensus with race/ethnicity being the most relevant (12 participants). Gender identity was indicated as second most relevant for seven participants. Although first generation status was only indicated as second most relevant for two participants, it appears in lower rankings for several other participants, with eight total mentions. Language received five total mentions, religion/spirituality four, sexual orientation three mentions, and disability status one mention.

Two participants wrote in socioeconomic status as salient to their identity, and one mixed immigration family status.

Table 3

Salience of Identities

Identity	Total Mentions	First Most Salient	Second	Third	Fourth or More
Race/ethnicity	12	12	0	0	0
Gender Identity	7	0	7	0	0
First Generation Status	8	0	2	3	3
Language	5	0	2	3	0
Religion/Spirituality	4	1	0	0	3
Sexual Orientation	3	0	1	2	0
Socioeconomic Status	2	0	0	2	0
Disability Status	1	0	0	1	0
Mixed Immigration Status	1	0	0	0	1

Data Collection

Data was collected via in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews lasting approximately 60-90 minutes with individual staff members, as well as two semi-structured focus groups, each an hour long with four participants. A semi-structured interview protocol provides flexibility during the interview process to develop a conversational tone and ask spontaneous questions that respond to the participants' perspectives in real time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured interviews provided rich and descriptive data (Patton, 2002) on the way Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals make meaning of the university's structures, their experiences, and how these experiences shape their practices in influencing belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Prior to the interview, participants completed a brief online survey to collect demographic, educational, and workplace information, which provided important background for each participant.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted via the online video conference tool Zoom due to health and safety considerations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before each interview or focus group began, I informed participants that the interview would be recorded and that their responses are confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research study. During the interviews and focus groups, I took field notes to capture significant details of the conversation. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded via a secure Zoom account (not video recorded). I downloaded Zoom's audio transcription and cleaned up the transcription to ensure accuracy and clarity. Following the interviews and focus groups, I wrote brief analytical memos capturing my immediate thoughts and reflections on the dialogues. Analytic memos prompt the researcher to critically reflect on the interview experiences and emergent patterns in the data, and are key to the coding process (Saldaña, 2016).

The interview protocol asked participants about their perceptions and experiences of belonging as a student and current staff member, and how they strive to foster belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students through their practice as a student affairs professional. The focus group protocol asked participants questions about their perceptions of the campus's HSI Initiative and their professional roles supporting Chicanx/Latinx students at an emerging HSI.

All electronic data was securely collected and is stored in password protected files on a password-protected laptop. Data collected on paper, such as hand-written field notes and memos are kept in a secured location. Participants were given pseudonyms in the memos, notes, and analysis to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

Creswell & Poth (2018) describe the qualitative data analysis process as a spiral, with the researcher moving in circles of analytic strategies, as opposed to a linear approach. Analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection and write up of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is cyclical and reflexive, creating a feedback loop that constantly informs and shapes each of the steps. My analytic process for this study was no exception. To make sense of the participants' language, ideas, and interactions shared in the interviews and focus groups, I wrote reflective analytic memos that started to analyze and contextualize the discourse. Memos were periodically drafted after interviews and focus groups took place, which spanned from March through June 2021. Early memos focused on initial impressions for the individual interview, but later memos begin to draw connections across multiple interviews and focus groups. I continued to write memos through the coding process, as this helped me to explore emerging patterns and allowed me to reflect more deeply on the meanings that can be drawn from the textual data.

Qualitative methodology also requires rigorous content analysis, where the researcher identifies themes, focusing on the frequency of themes and how they are treated (Berelson, 1952; Robson, 2002). Coding efficiently and systematically analyzes qualitative data to develop themes, and is "the 'critical link' between data collection and their explanation of meaning" (Saldaña, 2016). For this study, I conducted several rounds of open (or initial) coding, focused coding, and In Vivo coding analysis. During the first cycle coding process, I conducted open coding and inductive analysis to reveal emergent patterns on three interview transcripts and one focus group transcript. After reviewing the initial codes developed, I then created a codebook with definitions and examples for each of the codes, adjusting and revising codes for alignment with my research questions, consistency, and clarity. This helped me to begin to organize and categorize emerging codes and themes. The development of emerging codes and themes were guided by a CRT and LatCrit lens in identifying the centrality of race and racism, drawing on experiential knowledge, challenging dominant ideologies, and examining oppression based on intersectional identities, such as ethnicity, immigration, culture, and language as experienced by Chicanx/Latinx populations (Solorzano, 1997).

With a first-draft codebook primer for guidance, I then conducted second-cycle focused coding on all the transcripts, further refining and adjusting the codes to account for new findings and reflections on the emerging themes. Using Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments, the focused analytic coding honed-in on the interpersonal and structural practices of Chicanx/Latinx staff that influence belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Finally, I conducted In Vivo coding to highlight the participants' voices and examine their lived experiences in their own words. Saldaña (2016) states that simultaneous coding is helpful when the data "suggests multiple meanings that necessitate and justify more than one code" (p. 94). In

Vivo coding can unearth both explicit and latent meanings, and potentially add a layer of richness and nuance to the focused coding. The In Vivo coding process also put to practice an important tenet of CRT by centering experiential knowledge (Solorzano, 1997).

After conducting the focused and In Vivo coding, I reviewed and re-organized the codes using color-coding and categorization. Noting the frequency of codes, I carefully examined the data included within codes. For codes that had very high frequencies and were too broad to provide meaningful nuance, I broke out the code in sub-categories. Similarly, for codes that had very small frequencies I evaluated if they were related to other codes, and in those cases combined the codes. I revised the codebook to improve organization, clarity, and accuracy of definitions. This process allowed me to identify patterns to further build interpretation and meaning. Emerging themes were clustered together to inform the overarching phenomena and findings.

Limitations

The focus of this study was to examine Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff concepts of belonging, how those concepts were shaped by their racialized experiences in higher education, and finally what practices they employ to foster belonging and success for Chicanx/Latinx students. One of the limitations of this study is that the purposeful sample of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff at UC Davis may have produced sampling and response bias in the outcomes. The fact that I know and have worked with some of the staff members interviewed may have influenced participants to provide socially positive responses. To address these concerns, I was intentional in the selection process to recruit staff I have not worked with. I also worked to create an environment of utmost trust and confidentiality, in which participants could feel comfortable in being open and vulnerable. At the start of the interview, I reminded

participants that I would use pseudonyms, that the data would be aggregated in themes, and not include any personal or potentially revealing details they may share. Listening deeply to the participants' stories and providing affirmation through the interview process was also critical to developing trust and invoking more honest responses.

Another potential limitation to this study is that by narrowing the focus to Chicanx/Latinx racial and ethnic identities, this may have primed participants to speak more directly to just their racialized experiences without fully examining how their other intersectional identities may influence their perceptions, experiences, and practices. Several participants certainly reflected on how being the first in the family to attend college, learning English as a second language, or their/their family's immigrant status impacted their undergraduate experiences, and inform their current practices as student affairs staff. However, there may have been missed opportunities to further examine the role of socio-economic status, gender identity, and sexual orientation in the participants' experiences of belonging in higher education, as both students as staff.

Trustworthiness

I took multiple steps to ensure trustworthiness of the data analysis, first by recognizing my positionality and personal biases while conducting research at an institution in which I am also a staff member. As a White cisgender woman, I understand that my experiences and perceptions of the institution may differ from those of my Chicanx/Latinx colleagues, and may influence my interpretation of the data. Thus, I conducted member checks to confirm that my findings are congruent with the reality of the participants, soliciting feedback from some of the participants on emerging findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peer review through the dissertation committee has also provided essential feedback on emerging findings in the

preliminary analysis. This triangulation helped to ensure the validity of the themes emerging from the interviews and focus groups.

Positionality

I am a queer, cisgendered, able-bodied woman from a White, working-class family. I am also a first-generation college student. My racial identity has kept me immune from being a target of racial discrimination, and having citizen status in the U.S. provided me with a certain measure of security and stability. These privileges have afforded me access to and success in the education system. The various intersecting pieces of my identity have shaped my experiences and the critical lens through which I examine policies and practices in higher education. I am driven by questions such as: How do race and gender power dynamics play out in higher education administration, and what is the impact on campus climate for diversity and inclusion? How do staff of color experience the workplace? What is the retention impact of staff on students of color?

As a staff member and scholar practitioner at UC Davis, I am embedded in the institutional administration, which in some ways provides me with insider status. As an insider of the institution that I am also researching, I am cognizant of the interpellating and co-opting forces of bureaucratic institutions, and strive to disrupt/decolonize the White, male, heteronormative, hierarchical power structures entrenched in the university. Villenas (1996) elucidates the complexities of insider/outsider identities in the research process, and how researchers can be co-opted into being complicit in the marginalization of their own identities. Villenas argues that "researchers must examine how their subjectivities and perceptions are negotiated and changed, not only in relation to the disenfranchised community as research participants, but also through interactions with the majority culture" (Villenas, 1996, p. 721-22).

As a professional staff member, and past chair of the Staff Diversity Administrative Advisory Committee (SDAAC), I have a strong insider status with other staff dedicated to equity work at the university. However, I was cognizant that approaching staff participants as a researcher (as opposed to a colleague) might complicate existing relationships and create distance if some staff perceive my role as researcher as unfamiliar, or as part of a more exclusive level within the hierarchy of academia. My leadership practice in SDAAC has also afforded me the opportunity to build relationships and work with senior administrators, where critique of the institution and advocating for attainable steps to address inequities must be balanced within a highly political terrain. As a White, cis-gendered woman with high educational status, I have been privileged in the way people view me and the equity work that I do, compared to colleagues of color who voice concerns but are not always heard or recognized in the same way. My goal with this research was to leverage the privilege and influence I hold to garner support for equity initiatives and make space for others to be heard. In particular, this research sought to highlight the experiences, perceptions, and best practices of my Chicanx/Latinx colleagues in student affairs.

Chapter Four:

Findings

Chicanx/Latinx Student Affairs Conceptions of Belonging

Chapters Four and Five present the emergent findings on Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals' perceptions and experiences at an emerging public research HSI set within the framework of Hurtado's (2012) Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments. This study used six semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with a total of 13 Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals. Chapter Four delineates the findings of the first two research questions on how the participants conceptualize belonging based on their racialized experiences as both students and student affairs staff members. These findings build a foundation for exploring how staff then embed these concepts into their everyday practice, which will be covered in Chapter Five.

The interviews and focus groups showed that the participants conceptualize belonging in nuanced and complex ways, reflecting on their own experiences in higher education as students, and their current roles as staff. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of how participants conceptualize belonging, identifying the primary theme as belonging in spaces. The second section examines participants' reflections of their racialized experiences as undergraduate students. The third section outlines participants' perceptions and experiences of belonging as student affairs professionals within an emerging public research HSI. The overarching theme of belonging in spaces serves as a through line tying together the participants' concepts and experiences of belonging in higher education.

Belonging in Spaces

The primary theme of *belonging in spaces* addresses how participants conceptualized and experienced belonging as occurring in spaces, specifically within positive, culturally relevant microclimates, but not necessarily to the institution as a whole. This section first examines how the interview participants describe their understandings of belonging as connecting to community. It then details one participant's description of belonging as situational in nature, dependent upon time and place. Finally, the data shows that a few participants contrasted the concept of situational belonging with that of institutional belonging or fit. This distinction signals that belonging for these participants occurs in certain spaces where community is found.

Connecting with Community

When asked what belonging means to them, several of the interview participants described belonging as connecting with community. For example, Anthony stated that, in essence, belonging for them is about "finding people that are similar to me and that have similar experiences." Gabriel's definition resonates with this core concept: "sense of belonging for me is being able to see folks that look like me, but not just look like me, but we share either a common experience or common identities. Or common ideologies, too." These participants' concepts of belonging incorporate key elements of representation and shared identities, but it's not just about the numbers – it's largely about connecting to a community with similar, relatable experiences and values. José echoes and expands on this understanding of belonging as:

> feeling like they are not one amidst a sea of numbers. It's about like having your own interests, values, and communities like represented within the places or spaces you populate. Not just by yourself, but by other people as well, too. And that's baked into like having accessible restrooms, to having art within offices and centers and spaces, that like touches upon your own livelihood, or having folks respect basic dignities.

José's description of "one amidst a sea of numbers" speaks to the cultural isolation they experienced as an undergraduate at a PWI: "when I say predominately [White], I mean about 80, between 80 and 85%... there weren't a lot of students who identified as Chicanx or Latinx." Their definition of belonging highlights the importance of representation and connecting to community with shared values and demonstrates how physical and cultural elements of one's environment may contribute to a sense of belonging. Overall, several participants shared that belonging is about connecting to a community or space where your experiences, identities, cultures, and values are reflected.

Situational Belonging

One participant specifically described belonging as situational. They articulated that belonging is "a time and place where you can be your authentic self." They indicated that they did not feel belonging broadly across the institution:

> In most of the spaces of my work… there's a lot more filtering and thought that goes into the way that I'm going to act, and what I'm going to say, and how I want to be perceived. So there's a lot, and I think that the reason that happens is because I don't feel like I belong… When I'm out of those spaces, I start to feel more of that belonging, and I think that's why I've like pushed myself to find those places.

This situational aspect of belonging is significant. It speaks to their perception and experiences of belonging as transitory, occurring in microclimates where they feel comfortable being themselves. Their definition of belonging as a time and place where one can be their authentic self also touches on how they hide or withhold aspects of their identity in spaces where they do not feel belonging. Although the other interview participants did not articulate their definition of belonging in these exact words, they each had experiences as undergraduates and professionals

that prompted feelings of not belonging to the institution, and in response they sought out culturally affirming spaces of belonging.

Belonging in Microclimates Contrasted with Institutional Fit

A few participants were keen to contrast belonging in microclimates as fundamentally different from the concept of "institutional fit" or belonging to the institution as a whole. Some participants used visual metaphors to illuminate this distinction. For example, José expressed that "belonging is when like the piece of the puzzle matches up with the, like, vacancy that's there." Conversely, they describe that institutional "fit is like trying to put a square peg in a round hole." In the first metaphor about belonging, the individual finds a space that complements their shape, indicating an easy and harmonious connection. In the second metaphor presented, José linked institutional fit with a kind of assimilative pressure as incongruous shapes are forced together. Taken in context of their experiences, this imagery seems to imply an expectation that the individual should change to fit into the dominant culture of the institution, or as José describes more specifically, "feeling that sort of press of White supremacy just culturally." Lupe also described their sense of belonging at UC Davis in terms of fit: "It just kind of feels like a wearing a new coat or something, or a new article of clothing and it's just like it doesn't fit all the way." Lupe's description indicates an uncomfortable mismatch.

While not evoking the image of "fit" per se, Rosa still grappled with mixed feelings around belonging at the institution: "it's this whole sense of belonging that is different. Just different. So yes. It does feel like a resistance because it's a give and take." Rosa's description evokes a tension, a resistance to the dominant culture of the institution. One of the focus group participants, Andrea, speaks to how institutional fit is problematic, especially as the university is seeking HSI status, stating:

> I don't like the idea of trying to fit in this model… like the kids get to play with like different shapes and forms, and they're trying to put a circle into a triangle. I feel like that's what we're trying to do. When we need to change the shape first.

Rather than trying to press students to assimilate to the university's culture, Andrea called on the structure of the institution to change, to embrace and reflect the many cultures, identities, and values that Chicanx/Latinx students bring with them. These participants' imagery and language choice indicate a dissonance, mismatch, and even resistance to the notion of institutional belonging.

While Andrea advocated for the institution to change its shape, José countered the validity of structural belonging in their role. They explained that as a student affairs professional they are committed to fostering "individual senses of belonging for students" within their spaces and spheres of influence, but they are "not necessarily invested in like structural belonging." José felt it necessary to distance themselves from structural belonging because of the university's foundation on the violent expropriation of land from Native Americans, historical legacy of exclusion, and continued research ties with corporations that perpetuate oppression of marginalized communities. They view higher education as resistant and slow to change toward justice, "it's all just kind of structured so as to retain the status quo and steer her as she goes." Although José was the only one who specifically named the institution's past and present oppressive practices as the reason for distinguishing individual belonging from institutional fit, participants' experiences in higher education underline that structural belonging is problematic.

In summary, participants' defined belonging as connecting with community that shares and affirms similar identities, experiences, and values that they bring to a space. Their concepts of belonging are intimately tied to how belonging happens in smaller, positive microclimates,

and not to the institution as a whole. The next two sections will examine how participants' understandings of belonging have been shaped by their own racialized experiences in higher education, reflecting on both their student and staff experiences.

Reflections on Marginalizing Undergraduate Experiences

Participants' nuanced concepts of belonging are rooted in their experiences within higher education, as undergraduates and as student affairs professionals. This section first examines participants' reflections of their marginalized experiences as undergraduate students. During their undergraduate years, several participants described experiences of isolation, lack of socio-cultural belonging, lack of academic belonging, and seeking culturally relevant spaces of belonging. In many cases, these experiences overlap, and thus are interwoven throughout the examples of their reflections of marginalization.

Isolation

Reflecting on their experiences as students in higher education, participants indicated an overall lack of belonging and described campus climates that were generally not welcoming to students of color and other intersecting identities, such as gender identity, and socio-economic status. One participant who attended UC Davis as an undergraduate spoke directly to the often-isolating experience in the classroom:

> It was a very different environment coming to Davis. I came from a community that was very brown and black... [at UC Davis] not only was I one of the very few persons of color, but I was also the only male for the most part, male of color in those spaces.

The transition from a community of color to a predominantly White institution was difficult and isolating for this participant both in terms of race and gender. Gabriel spoke directly to how lack of representation impacted his sense of academic belonging, describing that the classes were

"very White, too. And so, for my first two or three years, like I didn't really find myself belonging in the classrooms." Echoing that sense of isolation, Rosa stated that she was often the only Latina in her classes, as well as an English-learner, and "always felt out of place." Socio-economic status also impacted the participants' experiences of lack of belonging in the classroom. Gabriel stated, "definitely, like class played a part into it. Folks talked about going either to private school or having taken AP courses or IB courses, and I never took those courses." Experiences of isolation are often compounded when Chicanx/Latinx students from low-income backgrounds discover that many of their peers have had more academic opportunities. Speaking to the cultural isolation that Chicanx/Latinx students continue to experience at UC Davis today, Andrea shared that in stakeholder meetings, students have expressed that "they miss the music, they miss the food, they miss their family." This finding suggests that the environment hasn't changed much across generations.

Racial Microaggressions

For some participants, experiences of racial microaggressions negatively impacted their sense of social belonging. José shared that they had "lots of experiences of like discrimination, or social isolation, or misunderstanding" during their undergraduate experience. They explained that their time in college was marked by "little instances of like… speaking non-English language, and like having folks kind of look around like, 'Why are you doing that?'" These kinds of interpersonal microaggressions contributed to José's sense of not belonging.

One participant who attended UC Davis found the campus racial climate tense due in part to the 2011 Pepper Spray incident, in which campus police pepper sprayed peaceful student protestors from the Occupy Movement. They described the student community during this tumultuous period of their undergraduate experience:

> we were very divided, because people didn't know how to address the issue, right? One, Linda Katehi was a woman, a woman of color even though she might not seem or present different intersectionalities she had in place. But ultimately, she was head of the institution and so there's accountability on that part. In terms of the climate, and it was interesting, like there was a lot of incidents happening on campus. There were demands for her resignation, there were visuals for the folks that were like, you know, occupying the space. Folks that got pepper sprayed and so forth…

This participant found the incident particularly disturbing considering "what police violence means to marginalized communities, especially brown and black folks." The additional incidents that the participant referenced were racially offensive incidents on campus, including the 2014 Associated Students UC Davis Coffee House "Cinco de Drinko" event and the 2015 photo of the Lacrosse team dressed in a style stereotypically associated with some male Hispanic groups.

This participant described feeling that the administration's responses to the incidents were inadequate, stating "there's really no institutional hold in helping the students unlearn that [behavior]." While these incidents of police violence in the Pepper Spray situation and racial microaggressions on campus contributed to this participant's feeling of not belonging to the institution, it also galvanized Chicanx/Latinx and other marginalized students to take collective action. This participant shared that the Pepper Spray "incident really helped me find my community on campus." In response to the racially tense campus climate, this participant sought out student communities of resistance, as well as Chicanx/Latinx communities specifically, and became involved in social justice activism and community building efforts.

Beyond individual and institutional racial microaggressions, one instance of racialized aggression emerged in the data. One participant disclosed that they experienced being the target

of a hate crime and being falsely accused of stealing during their undergraduate years at a large public PWI (not at UC Davis). In addition to the hate crime and false accusation, this participant shared that they are "a survivor of like a pretty significant case of police brutality that followed from that. And I think that's… a microcosm of just like what treatment generally looks like for folks who identify as people of color," particularly within a rural, predominantly White area. While this participant holds multiple marginalized identities, they directly tie this experience to their racial identity. This traumatic experience deeply contributed to the participant's overall lack of belonging.

Lack of Academic Belonging

Several of the participants further experienced a lack of academic belonging because the curriculum failed to reflect their cultures and identities. Lupe expressed feeling disconnected from a class where the content was centered on White culture and history. When she chose to incorporate her background into assignments to make the course more relevant and meaningful to her, Lupe's professor told her that her work was "too cultural." This devaluation of Lupe's work simply because it was not centered on the normalized White culture further invalidated and marginalized her in this academic space. Anthony shared that "the more I felt like I belonged at school, the less I felt like I belonged with my family at home." He described doing a community service project for a class titled "The Inner-City Family," in which he volunteered at a church. The professor assumed that students had no knowledge about inner city family dynamics, but in fact, Anthony identified with the people who went to the church. The professor's assumption affected Anthony's perception of himself as a student, "it really made me feel like, 'Okay, I don't belong in this class or at this school because, if I belonged, I wouldn't know about this experience.'" The professor also seemed to have an implicitly deficit view of people living in the

inner city: “It was almost like, ‘Oh, we're going to go learn about these people who are not in a good place.’” It was upsetting for Anthony to see a community that he identities with objectified and negatively stereotyped.

A few participants also shared how their sense of academic belonging was impacted by whether they received academic validation and support. For example, Ariana found it challenging to engage in a Women’s Studies class because “the academic language like was so foreign.” The theory and academic jargon Ariana encountered in this course threatened to overwhelm her, in part because it was so disconnected from her life experiences. Yet, when professors made the content accessible and validated students’ experiences, this engendered a greater sense of academic belonging for some participants. For example, Anthony shared a moment when his professor provided academic validation:

> she was talking about like intelligence, and people feeling like they're like smart or not… just because someone doesn't have a large vocabulary, that doesn't mean that they're not intelligent… What it means is that they weren't exposed to other things… That idea resonated a lot with me. And made me feel a lot more comfortable with who I was, because I came from a place where I didn't know the culture of being… at a university.

The professor’s validation was important in shifting Anthony’s perception of himself as smart and gaining a sense of academic belonging. He found this validation particularly impactful as a first-generation student still trying to learn the culture of the university.

First-Generation Experiences

Ten of the participants identified as first-generation college graduates, including five of the six interview participants, and this identity appears to have impacted their undergraduate experiences. In addition to the academic invalidation many described as experiencing in the

classroom, several participants found it challenging to simply navigate the university. Lupe shared her experience of feeling very much alone and lost, “Not knowing about Financial Aid that well, not knowing about adding and dropping classes, not knowing about the ten-day drop period, not knowing about waitlisting. Like, I kind of basically was just floating around.” Her family didn’t know how to help her through the bureaucratic maze of financial aid, enrollment processes, or how to advocate for the classes she wanted. Eventually, she found faculty and peer mentors who helped guide her on how the university works, but it took time. Reflecting on her undergraduate experience, Rosa articulates that “as a first-generation, low-income student, I don't think I ever felt like the university was there to serve me.” She went on to explain how she struggled with the power dynamics of the university, “I didn't feel like I had the right to ask faculty for things, such as research, you know different things, you know, that I should have felt comfortable, but I didn't.” Ariana shared that as a first-generation student, “navigating an institution was rough.” During her first year, Ariana “didn’t go to office hours and connect with faculty,” she didn’t get involved, she simply commuted to school and returned home to help her family. This left her isolated and disconnected from the university.

While all participants were ultimately successful in completing college and nearly all went on to earn higher degrees, a few of the participants experienced initial academic difficulties as undergraduates. These difficulties appeared in part to be connected to their experiences as first-generation students, in addition to experiences of academic invalidation. One participant struggled for a period because they overloaded themselves with science and math classes. As a first-generation college student, they didn’t have guidance from family or others on how to balance their science coursework for success. They described the intimidating experience of going through the subject to dismissal process:

> I did get a formal request or formal letter for subject to dismissal. So I had to meet with the dean's office. And in that meeting, there was a lot of like mixed emotions, because I thought it was just like a consultation meeting, but it was actually, like, "Okay, like here's the paperwork and we're ready to like process you out of the institution."

This participant found the expectation to leave the university and the speed of the process shocking. The subject to dismissal process was inherently invalidating and contributed to the overall lack of academic belonging this participant felt. However, they were able to appeal to stay by switching majors, so they dropped their science-based major and subsequently joined Chicano/a Studies. Another participant expressed that they let their grades slip in their first year due to their over-involvement in student organizations:

> I spent a lot of time working on, just like, finding events and putting thought and energy into those things that I did, and less into my academics. And so, I was that that student that is like super involved and is trying to do everything.

In this participant's case, during their second year an advisor noticed their slipping GPA and helped them to develop a plan to bring up their grades with a better balance between academics and extra-curricular activities.

Seeking Out Spaces of Academic Belonging

In response to the overall lack of belonging participants felt at their institution, several sought out spaces within the university that were culturally relevant, built community around Chicanx/Latinx identities, and provided validation. These spaces were both academic and co-curricular in nature. Of the six interview participants, four sought out spaces of belonging within academic departments such as Chicano/a Studies, the Spanish department, or Bilingual Education. After feeling disconnected and invalidated in some of her initial college courses,

Ariana began to intentionally search for classes taught by Chicanx/Latinx faculty. This became an act of academic survival for her:

> I was very strategic and always like registering for a [Chicano/a] Studies class each semester, if it fit in my schedule… So I was like, you know, I need to do this for myself. Like being in a class where I feel like I can see people that look like me, have instructors that that look like me. And if I can do that, then that will build my self-confidence academically.

The academic and cultural validation Ariana experienced in her Chicano/a Studies classes provided a space of belonging and affirmation, which was crucial to developing the self-efficacy and academic confidence she needed to succeed in college. After invalidating and isolating experiences in one major, Gabriel switched to a Chicano/a Studies major, and described their sense of belonging within in this space: "I felt like there is when I first started feeling like I had a place on campus or that it felt like home." Lupe expressed that once she started taking Chicano/a Studies classes and engaging with the community, "that's kind of where my purpose and my sense of belonging kind of solidified itself… then, I was able to go back to my [major] classes and be like well, I'm just going to still make this." Connecting with culturally relevant spaces not only helped her find her "niche," but gave her the confidence to resist critiques within in her major classes that her work was "too cultural." In summary, many participants found belonging within a specific department or classes where they weren't the only students of color, where their identities and cultures were affirmed and centered, in response to the overall negative campus racial climate and lack of belonging they felt at the institutional level.

However, this generalized theme of belonging in spaces, as opposed to "institutional fit" or belonging at the institutional level, is contextualized primarily within PWIs. While a majority

of the interview participants attended a PWI, Rosa had the unique experience of attending a PWI initially, then transferring to an HSI. She shared the eye-opening experience of transitioning from a university where there were very few Chicanx/Latinx students, much less Chicanx/Latinx staff and faculty, to one where there was a critical mass of representation:

> there were people who looked like me, buildings named after Garcia's, like names that I knew. The grocery store was like full of people that look like me… But I felt like I belonged. And that to me - And faculty! There were so many faculty that were Chicano/Latinos on this campus. And I loved it.

Rosa's experience at the HSI highlights an overall supportive environment, one in which Latinx campus leaders serve as role models and invest in student success, where faculty took time to provide helpful feedback on her work, wrote letters of recommendation, and nominated her for scholarships. As opposed to her prior institution where she had to seek out spaces of support, Rosa describes a broader sense of belonging at the HSI, "it was implicit, that I could have opportunities." Rosa certainly didn't waste opportunities at her first institution, but she thrived academically and in student leadership roles while at the HSI, and the support she received from faculty and campus leaders at this campus propelled her to pursue advanced degrees.

Co-Curricular Spaces of Belonging

Many participants also found belonging in student organizations and programs that provided community across Chicanx/Latinx and other marginalized identities. These co-curricular areas include Latina sororities, a student ballet folklorico group, a Chicanx/Latinx screen-printing community, and multi-cultural or cross-cultural centers. Lupe described her discovery of the Chicanx/Latinx-based screen-printing community as the point "where my purpose and my sense of belonging kind of solidified itself." A few participants became involved

in advocating for social justice in their institutions, finding both community and a strong sense of purpose in student activism. Anthony's involvement was broad, not specific to ethnic-based groups, but he described an unconscious connection with other Chicanx/Latinx peers, stating "the people that I gravitated towards had similar identities, as far as my Latinx identity. However, I, at the time, didn't even feel connected to that. But yet, that was what was giving me a sense of belonging." After a rough and isolating first year, Ariana started to connect with peers in her classes, and eventually joined a Latina sorority. Within this Latina sorority, Ariana found lifetime friends who she could relate to, and who supported each other through their college experience:

> Looking back now, I'm like thank goodness that I was part of that. That I'm still part of that, because this was, it was six of us that really kind of like supported each other and we were all first gen. We all came from low-income households… But all of us were like going through the similar struggles and challenges.

Ariana expressed relief and gratitude for discovering a space where she could authentically connect with peers who shared similar experiences. Through this sorority Ariana also found fulfillment by giving back to the local Latinx community, volunteering at an organization focused on empowering Latina women, as well as at a student run clinic that served low-income Latinx folks. For Ariana and several other participants, their undergraduate involvement in ethnic-based student organizations and programs provided social counterspaces of belonging, community uplift, and support.

Summary

Overall, participants' undergraduate experiences across academic, social, and cultural spheres informed their concepts of how belonging occurs within culturally relevant and

validating spaces, but not to the institution as a whole. Experiences of isolation, invalidation, racial microaggressions, and cultural starvation within PWIs influenced many participants' feelings of a lack of belonging at the institutional level during their undergraduate years. They then responded to these experiences by seeking out culturally affirming and nourishing spaces that allowed them to connect with peers who shared similar backgrounds and experiences, to resist deficit perspectives, to build and uplift community. These experiences shaped the participants' concept of situational belonging in spaces, and their commitment to fostering welcoming microclimates and culturally relevant counterspaces for students, as opposed to expecting students to assimilate and fit into the institution. This concept of situational belonging in microclimates affirms one's authentic self in resistance to, as José described it, "the press of White supremacy."

Marginalization and Belonging as Professionals

While participants' undergraduate experiences played a key role in shaping their concepts of belonging in spaces, their working experiences within an emerging public research HSI added further layers of nuance. This section outlines participants' experiences of institutional marginalization and finding spaces of belonging as student affairs professionals at UC Davis. It leads with an overview of participants' motivations for pursuing a student affairs career, examines how participants described their sense of belonging as professionals at UC Davis, and then delineates the structural factors that influenced their perceptions and experiences. Overall, their experiences as professionals are generally marked by a lack of institutional belonging, positive microclimates, feeling overburdened and undervalued, and frustration with the institution's inadequate investment in Chicanx/Latinx retention.

Motivations for Pursuing a Student Affairs Career

A brief examination of the participants' motivations for pursuing a student affairs career shows that many were drawn to the field primarily in response to their own undergraduate experiences of marginalization, and some were influenced by mentors they encountered in higher education. A couple of the participants clarified that they had not initially considered a career in student affairs. Lupe was recruited by a student affairs supervisor because of the community-based work she was doing and described "it wasn't necessarily like a goal to be a part of student affairs. It was kind of just like, this is where my path kind of led me to." Similarly, Rosa describes a planned happenstance approach: "I never knew that student affairs was actually a profession… I fell into it because I love working with students, and I love helping students." In contrast, others intentionally pursued student affairs professions through programs like the NASPA Undergraduate Fellowship Program and graduate programs related to higher education. Whether they arrived in student affairs through happenstance or intentional planning, undergraduate involvement seems to be a common, underlying factor.

All six of the interview participants were highly involved during their undergraduate experience, and expressed being positively impacted by student organizations, community service, activism, and campus jobs. These participants' involvement was often with culturally affirming Chicanx/Latinx-based organizations and programs. This involvement provided participants with a glimpse of what a student affairs career could look like and connected them with influential staff, frequently staff of color or other marginalized identities. For example, the mentorship and holistic support that José received from multiply marginalized staff members in higher education inspired them to student affairs to "provide really culturally relevant and meaningful care for students, as they navigate their educational journeys." This example

demonstrates José's perception of student affairs as a profession where they can cultivate microclimates of belonging for marginalized students.

The six interview participants further expressed an overall alignment of their work as a student affairs professional with their values of social justice and serving marginalized, first-generation students of color. While this alignment applies to their individual roles, for some it also encompasses the profession more broadly. Anthony describes a general recognition within the field of student affairs "that representation is important. And diversity and inclusion are important." Several participants shared that they are particularly driven to ensure younger generations of Chicanx/Latinx students have a better experience in higher education than they had. Describing her career path to student affairs as coming "full circle," Ariana was drawn to provide the mentorship and guidance that she wished she had had as an undergraduate. Lupe echoed this sentiment and expressed fulfillment in serving as a "guiding light post that I, maybe, necessarily wasn't aware of, when I was an undergrad." Reflecting on his motivation for becoming a student affairs professional, Anthony tied it to his experience as a first-generation student: "where were the places that I struggled? And how can I change that for students who are like experiencing school right now?" Another participant named the systemic exclusion and institutional barriers that students of color often face:

> the reason why I wanted to enter higher education was because I didn't want to allow other students to fall in the same place as I did. I wanted them to have a different educational outcome. Or if they were on AP/SD, like I needed to help our community or folks of color navigate the institutions that weren't built for us.

Beyond simply serving as a mentor and guide, a few of the participants also expressed wanting to implement systemic change in the exclusionary structures of higher education, as Anthony

described it, the “processes or procedures, or things that may impact somebody but are not realized.” José articulated, “I want to make sure that like I'm a part of creating the change. To do so for folks across the spectrums of identity.” Overall, many participants came to student affairs with a desire to support marginalized students, and some specifically aim to address structural inequities.

Experiences of Belonging as Professionals

When asked about their perceptions of belonging as student affairs professionals at UC Davis, most interview participants expressed feeling belonging within their specific centers or departments, as well as in their units, the next level of structural organization. For example, Gabriel shared “I do feel that I belong within my department and within our cluster.” Several participants work in “predominantly identity-based spaces” or centers within the Student Life unit, and it is important to note that these spaces have greater representation of staff of color and/or staff with multiply marginalized identities. Gabriel describes the demographics of his department and larger unit, as well as the impact of that representation on his sense of belonging: “it’s all like BIPOC folks, like you know, it's all folks of color. And that's what I really like about it and that's why I feel a part of it.” José elaborates on the environment at this unit level:

> there's just really great symbiosis between our units and great collaborations that happen. And both personally and professionally it's super fulfilling to be a part of a network… who, whether or not they agree with, like those deeper lofty philosophical principles on structure, certainly like have the same mission in practice at those individual levels.

In addition to having a critical mass of colleagues who identify as people of color within these microclimates, this example demonstrates the importance of having colleagues who share a common mission of advancing equity.

In contrast to most participants' experiences, one interview participant did not feel a sense of belonging in their department. This participant described the stressful, constant self-monitoring of their social identity within the department where they perceived a lack of belonging: "there's a lot more filtering and thought that goes into the way that I'm going to act, and what I'm going to say, and how I want to be perceived." This instance may have been impacted by a couple of factors. This participant was in a department that is not connected to identity-based centers, and the departmental climate, set by leadership in that area, was described as not particularly inclusive or welcoming for staff of color. They shared their concerns about the high rate of turnover for black women in this department:

> the person who just left the role… she identified, identifies as a black woman. The person before her who had her role identified as a black woman, and I think they both spent no more than like a year and a half in the role…. I don't think it's a coincidence that two black women left that position within a year and a half of getting the job.

This participant indicated that "a large part of the issue comes from like the director and assistant director level." For this participant, the concept of belonging in spaces does not just apply to the students they serve, but also for Chicanx/Latinx and other marginalized staff at UC Davis. They capture the concept and their experience of belonging thus:

> belonging doesn't feel like something you have, or you don't have…. it comes at different moments of whatever is happening and I think that those moments may happen more or less for different people, depending on who you are, right? …in the moments where I do have it, I've had to find those moments, and I've had to search for that space.

While this was the only instance of lack of belonging at the departmental level, this experience had a negative impact on the participant and eventually caused them to move to another position away from the toxic climate in that department.

It is interesting to note, however, that some participants did not feel belonging across the Division of Student Affairs or at the institutional level. For example, Gabriel shared "Do I always feel that we're part of the university when we have the Student Affairs wide meetings…? No, not necessarily, but within my niche, within my bubble, I do." He explained that while the pandemic had abruptly stopped the in-person meetings typically hosted by the Division of Student Affairs, causing greater isolation, even before the pandemic he didn't feel belonging to Student Affairs or the university more broadly. José further contextualized that while they felt a sense of belonging in their department, and that it extends to the Student Life unit, "I wouldn't say it does for Student Affairs. I think that's also a little bit unique to Davis, just because of its size, like I have felt that way about divisions of Student Affairs at smaller institutions." For these two participants, belonging is distinctly felt in smaller spaces, not at the large divisional or institutional levels.

Involvement in Employee Resource Groups and Committees

Given the high level of involvement during their undergraduate years it is not surprising that many of the interview participants are now involved in employee resource groups and committees on campus. Involvement spans activities such as the Latinx Staff and Faculty Association (LSFA), the Staff Diversity Administrative Advisory Committee, a queer and trans affinity group, the Casa Advisory Board (Casa refers to Casa Cuauhtémoc, the Chicanx and Latinx themed residential building and living learning community), among others. José expressed gratitude for these spaces, "I super appreciate the way that I can connect with

colleagues across a wider swath of the institution... it's really, really enriching when you also share that base of like lived experience." These various staff affinity groups build community for many of the participants, provide a safe space for staff to be their authentic selves, provide cultural affirmation, vent frustrations, as well as receive mentorship. For the participant who didn't feel belonging in their department, they sought out community elsewhere, and "the places where I've been able to find that are working with LSFA." They initially had wanted to advance equity "for students in the [department] around their identity as Chicanx/Latinx, but just experience has like impacted that." Now they are focusing their energy on spaces like LSFA and the HSI Task Force. These groups and committees were identified as an important resource in supporting the retention and professional development of the participants.

Years of Service as a Factor of Belonging

Furthermore, participants' experiences of belonging at UC Davis were influenced by the amount of time they worked on campus. For context, three of the interview participants had worked at the campus for approximately five or more years, while the other three participants had 2-3 years of professional experience at the campus. One participant had joined UC Davis just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and they were struggling to connect with colleagues outside their department. They shared that "with the pandemic and being remote, it's been a challenge, right? Navigating that sense of belonging, and you know… as a professional." In contrast, two of the participants who have worked at UC Davis for five or more years indicated comfort of knowing the university in ways that newer staff did not articulate. Lupe shared that "it does feel like this is like my home. Like I know where everything's at, I kind of put my feet up on the table." Rosa expressed that after sharing so many life events with

colleagues while working at UC Davis, “I feel like a permanent fixture in this space.” These two participants seem to express that they are deeply rooted in the campus.

Yet this sense of rootedness is still coupled with an ambivalence towards institutional belonging. Lupe described her complicated feelings of belonging at the institutional level:

> So I would say, like yes and no. Yes… because I've been here for so long. But also no, because… the higher you go, the more of like the like curtain behind the curtain gets pulled back... you start to see like, okay, there’s like hierarchies everywhere.

Lupe indicates that hierarchical power structures in the university, experienced over time, negatively impacted their sense of belonging at the institutional level. Another participant shared that they had experienced an instance of being invalidated by others who held greater positions of power. They indicated that when they raised a critical concern that challenged a problematic institutional narrative, some folks in positions of power sought to devalue this participant’s work and question their professionalism. This invalidating incident impacted their sense of belonging. Yet, during this challenging time the participant reflected:

> Who am I am in my core? Like what do I value?… What do I stand for and what do I want to fight for? And once I found that, then my sense of belonging was different. Because even when people question it, I have to tell myself well, is what I said true? Is this experience true? Like is my journey what is true to me, you know? Or are they going to define this in terms of belonging. So I would say now I totally feel like I belonged, right? As a staff, as a student, as an alumni.

After grounding themselves in their values and purpose, this participant re-defined their belonging not through the invalidating judgment of others, but rather in resistance to institutional power dynamics that seek to silence criticism and maintain the status quo.

Overburdened, Undervalued

Additional factors that influence belonging for Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff include an environment in which they are generally overworked, overburdened, and undervalued. Several participants spoke to the need to support Chicanx/Latinx student retention, the lack of capacity to meet that need, and the high rate of burnout. Lupe described "feeling the pressure of having to like provide this massive amount of resources and like programming, but then, at the same time, like that leads us to the ground." The enormous level of overload and burnout is made clear when Margarita speaks to the volume of work that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff take on, citing that for the more than 7,100 Chicanx/Latinx undergraduates on campus, "we have one or two centers dedicated to their success. And we have five or six advisors to that community." There are a handful of staff dedicated to supporting thousands of Chicanx/Latinx students.

In addition to being understaffed, participants expressed concerns about the unspoken expectation that they support retention efforts on top of their regular work. For the few staff who do have retention built into their position description, Luna describes "it's at a percentage where there's so much other stuff on there, that if you… really try to commit, you end up kind of going above and beyond, right? And that comes at a cost." Critical of the institution's lack of adequate resources while pursuing HSI status, Daniela asks "we get these students… what is the support that we can give them when they… get here? Because we're all stretched thin." These participants expressed frustration at university's intent to increase enrollment of Chicanx/Latinx students in order to reach HSI status when they feel there isn't sufficient staffing and resources to support and retain the current level of students.

Beyond the sheer numbers of that disproportionate ratio between Chicanx/Latinx staff and students, several participants indicated that an additional burden is placed on them to

volunteer for committees and task forces that support Chicanx/Latinx student recruitment and retention. Several participants shared that they volunteered for such committee work at some point during their time at UC Davis. Some expressed frustration that despite the time and effort they spent providing recommendations and strategies, their ideas weren't always factored in leadership's decision-making processes. Margarita eloquently argued that the institution is "constantly asking the people who've been oppressed to make changes within a structure of oppression." This extra work was not compensated. Several participants remarked that they felt undervalued by the university as a whole and underpaid for their work. Luna shared that staff "pay stays very, very plateaued in a lot of ways," despite mounting workloads. All these factors contributed to increased turnover rates. Rosa shared "I have hurt to see people leave. So many colleagues. When I think of the people of color that have left, and the feelings that they've had leaving these institutions." Other participants echoed this loss of Chicanx/Latinx staff as a demoralizing experience that further contributes to the increased workloads and overburdening of remaining staff.

Perceptions of the HSI Initiative

The university's HSI initiative is another contextual factor influencing participants' experiences of belonging at UC Davis. Participants from both focus groups expressed deep concern about the university's approach toward becoming an HSI and felt that the university needed to invest more in supporting the retention and success of Chicanx/Latinx students. Fernando described current institutional efforts towards the HSI Initiative as "subpar. Too, too long…the journey hasn't even started." He explained that this subpar effort stems from "the lack of not even sufficient funding, but to me, the lack of funding to do it. Not even do it right, just to do it."

Many focus group participants perceived a disconnect between the administration's narrative and actions around HSI, and what they see as the true need of the campus. Daniela described that during the launch of the HSI Initiative there "was this constant emphasis on the number.… the investment seems to be in hitting that that magical number," but she indicated there was a dearth of conversation around how staff, already overworked, are to support the growing number of students. The university's focus on hitting the 25% mark to achieve HSI status was perceived by some focus group participants as ignoring the deeper campus issues of retaining and supporting Chicanx/Latinx student success. Andrea echoes and expands on Daniela's comments regarding the institutional focus on enrollment numbers rather than retention:

> there was a lot of data that was driving this force that was based off projections for UC applications and enrollment. So there was a lot of data around that. A lot of projections, you know, high school, looking at high school status and who's graduating from the high schools and from the regions and, and therefore, we could yield 25%, right? But there was never robust data used, I think, in the conversations that I was in about the current state of student retention at UC Davis. And when we push back on that, it's like nobody's responsible for it.

Participants expressed skepticism and perceptions that the institutional narrative around HSI and belonging is merely lip service. Speaking on the lack of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students and its impact on retention, Anthony shared his perception that "the fact is, they don't belong. And we have to work really hard in order for them to stay here." His statement echoes sentiments shared by Luna, Daniela, and Margarita that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff continue to shoulder the burden, and the strain on staff grows as more students are enrolled.

In addition to concerns about lack of funding and staffing for Chicanx/Latinx student retention efforts, some participants spoke to issues regarding stakeholder involvement, coordination and leadership, and organizational structure. While some staff expressed appreciation for the current robust stakeholder involvement in the HSI Task Force, others were critical that initial HSI initiative efforts did not center students. Andrea shared that "from the beginning students felt left out. Students were like, how are you talking about the future, like HSI, aspiring to an HSI institution? When we're here right now, not having enough support, resources, guidance, or even validation." Fernando felt that the campus should consult with HSI experts to guide strategic efforts. Some participants expressed anticipation for the new HSI director, and hope for greater leadership and coordination, but were also frustrated that the HSI Task Force was not involved in creating the position description for this director role. Clarity in responsibilities and organizational structure across the various units that impact retention were described as "missing pieces" by some of the participants. Luna shared her frustration that "at the end of the day I haven't really seen too many changes." Overall, participants expressed a desire for meaningful change from the campus's HSI initiative. However, with limited investment in retention efforts that fail to match the fast-growing numbers of Chicanx/Latinx students, institutional messages of diversity and belonging rang hollow to several focus group participants.

Summary

In summary, while most participants expressed that they did not feel belonging at the divisional or institutional levels, they often found spaces of belonging within their departments and units, when connecting with colleagues of color, or in staff affinity groups and committees that focus on advancing equity. These positive microclimates of belonging provided affirmation, community, and support to sustain participants through the many challenges they face. Feeling

overburdened, under-resourced, and undervalued, several participants shared that they witnessed high levels of burnout and turn-over of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals. These professional experiences shaped their concepts of belonging and provided important context for how their working environment, the campus climate, and university structure impacts their day-to-day work and ability to influence belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students.

Chapter Five:

Findings

How Staff Influence Belonging for Chicanx/Latinx Students

This chapter presents the findings related to the third research question, which asked what practices Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals implement at an emerging HSI public research university to influence sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. An analysis of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups of the participants revealed five overarching themes on their practices. The first, *representation matters*, reflects the participants' belief that representation matters and that having a critical mass of Chicanx/Latinx students, staff, and faculty influences sense of belonging. The second, *holistic interpersonal support*, touches on the ways that Chicanx/Latinx staff interact, engage, and connect with Chicanx/Latinx students. The third theme, *culturally relevant structural support*, provides an overview of the culturally relevant programs and practices Chicanx/Latinx staff implement to support belonging. The fourth theme is *collaboration and advocacy*, which focuses on the ways that Chicanx/Latinx staff develop networks and cross-campus collaborations to support students and advocate for institutional support. The final theme, *assessment and adapting to students' needs*, demonstrates the ways that Chicanx/Latinx staff evaluate the impact of their work and strive to continuously improve programming and practice to better address the changing needs of newer generations of Chicanx/Latinx students.

Representation Matters

Representation matters emerged as an overarching theme throughout the individual interviews and focus groups. While the number of Chicanx/Latinx students at UC Davis is growing, participants were cognizant that this does not reflect the proportion of Chicanx/Latinx

students in the state's K-12 system, which is approximately 55%. Many Chicanx/Latinx students are coming from high schools that serve predominantly students of color, but when they enter predominantly White institutions, they are often one of only a few students of color in the room. Luna shared "I have so many [students], they come in and it's like, I don't see myself here... How can I feel like this is a place that I belong if I just don't see myself?" From their own undergraduate experiences, participants intimately knew that a lack of representation can lead to experiences of isolation and negatively impacted students' sense of belonging.

In addition to low representation across the student body, participants were consistently concerned about the overall staff and faculty demographics that did not match the current proportion of Chicanx/Latinx undergraduates. Ariana expressed the theme directly, "representation definitely matters. And students need career staff, they need faculty members, right? That look like them. That identify with some of their experiences." Rosa spoke to the importance of campus leadership reflecting the student body: "who we have in leadership positions really matters. When you don't have people of color who are aligned with communities, it shows." Rosa's comment points to how leadership should not only reflect the communities in terms of their identity, but in critical consciousness – leaders should serve, support, and work to advance underrepresented communities.

While overall campus representation of Chicanx/Latinx staff, faculty, and campus leaders does not reflect the student body, many participants noted higher representation of people of color and other marginalized identities in their specific units. Anthony stated that in contrast to other fields, student affairs values diversity and inclusion, and this value is manifested in part by having staff that are more representative of the student body demographics. This value is also reflected in the hiring practices of the participants and their individual departments, whether

hiring for career staff or student employees. Rosa describes "I try to be very intentional in building a team where they can support one another, but also bring diverse backgrounds," including marginalized identities related to immigration status, sexual orientation, and gender identity, in addition to race and ethnicity. Anthony echoes this intentional effort to hire diverse students, sharing that:

> we do what we can to recruit a lot, like, a diverse population of students. So we reach out to different campus partners. In the past we've tried to table in different spaces on campus to make sure that we are seeing different students and not just like the students who can afford to eat in the Dining Commons.

Observing her own department's equitable staff recruitment practices, Ariana shares that "looking at retention… and recruitment of staff and faculty who have different life experiences, or come from different backgrounds, is going to be crucial. Right? For the work that we're doing with the students." Some participants described how representation of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff is essential across the wide spectrum of Chicanx/Latinx identities. As Luna states, "if you just dissected the Chicano/Latino community, I mean it is super diverse." A couple of the participants reflected on how, within the Chicanx/Latinx community, Mexican culture, food, language, and traditions are usually more prominent in California, while Central American, South American, and Indigenous cultures are marginalized. These participants viewed it especially important that student affairs professionals reflect the full diversity of the student body and they took action to recruit diverse candidates.

A few focus group participants expressed concern about the local context not being particularly welcoming to Chicanx/Latinx students. Andrea pointed out that other HSI institutions are located in areas where there are surrounding Chicanx/Latinx communities, but

"the surrounding community of UC Davis is not ready to have a HSI institution. You can't even get good pan dulce in Davis." She articulated that Chicanx/Latinx students need to feel welcomed not just on campus, but off campus, in the City of Davis where they will primarily reside for most of their undergraduate years. Apprehensive that the campus is not engaging the City of Davis as it pursues HSI status, Anthony expressed that it is a "major component that we need to figure out, especially as students leave campus after their first year, living off campus." He shared that he personally does not feel a sense of belonging in the City of Davis. These participants identified that the lack of community and culturally relevant resources for Chicanx/Latinx students in the City of Davis causes further isolation and lack of belonging.

The participants of this study made it abundantly clear that representation matters. Chicanx/Latinx students need to see themselves reflected in the student body, in the classroom, in the faculty, in the staff, and particularly student affairs staff. Representation is the foundation for community and finding spaces of belonging. Yet representation is not just about the numbers. It encompasses culture, knowledge, the curriculum, resources, institutional structure, as well as space and the physical environment, both within the campus itself and the surrounding City of Davis. Finally, participants reflected on the diversity within the Chicanx/Latinx community, and the importance of having this diversity represented across campus. The next sections on holistic interpersonal support and culturally relevant programming will focus on how participants embedded their concepts of belonging in spaces into their everyday practice.

Holistic Interpersonal Support

In examining how participants influenced sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, holistic interpersonal support emerged as one of the overarching themes. Within this theme of providing holistic interpersonal support, six subthemes describe the various ways that

participants interact and engage with Chicanx/Latinx students on an individual level to foster community and belonging: being one's authentic self, being inviting and available, building relationships, supporting the whole student, and mentoring. This section will expand on these subthemes to delineate how participants provide holistic interpersonal support to Chicanx/Latinx students, and thus influence belonging.

Being One's Authentic Self

Participants consistently expressed that being present and being their authentic self in spaces allowed Chicanx/Latinx students to connect with them on social and cultural levels. Several participants shared observations of Chicanx/Latinx students reaching out to them after a presentation, interaction, or through referrals via the network of Chicanx/Latinx staff. Lupe shared that "my presence in general in spaces… is like a main factor of people, of students, of Chi/Lat students feeling connected." Lupe described that many times after a workshop or event, Chicanx/Latinx students often approached her for conversation, and Lupe attributed this to the way she looks, her relatability, her life story, and simply being her authentic self. Similarly, Anthony expressed a belief that being his authentic self-fostered a sense of belonging for students, clarifying that "with Chicanx/Latinx students what I try to do is… when I'm talking to them, how can I incorporate parts of me into this conversation, so that they feel like they can share more of themselves?" Several participants perceived that their presence at the university draws Chicanx/Latinx students in and sparks more interaction on campus. José attributes this in part to "my name and the way I look, like I think there's a lot of resonance for folks." In general, participants indicated that being visible and authentic helps them to connect with Chicanx/Latinx students.

Beyond mere presence, some participants expressed the importance of showing their humanity and sharing aspects of their identities with students. Gabriel articulated that he uses his experiences to relate to students: “I bring my whole self into the work. And so all of my lived experiences, all my identity, all of that comes into play when we're building a relationship.” Several participants spoke to intentionally sharing their intersectional identities and parts of their life stories with students. When working with Chicanx/Latinx students, Rosa sees this reciprocity as key to connecting with students: “to be vulnerable at times, for them to know me. That it's not just about me knowing them, but it's for them to know who I am and where I'm coming from so that we can build trust.” Being one’s authentic self involves visibility, transparency, honesty, vulnerability, being open about the multiple identities one holds, and sharing one’s story. This draws students into engaging within spaces and is a foundational element of building community and belonging.

Being Inviting and Available

In addition to being visible and sharing one’s authentic self, many participants described inviting students into their space and making themselves available to support Chicanx/Latinx students. Directly articulating this welcoming quality, Lupe shared “A lot of people feel like I'm very warm and feel like I'm very inviting, which is like how I want you to feel all the time.” While having an inviting presence may initially seem like a small thing, it has a big impact on students’ sense of belonging. As Rosa states, “if you don't have that warmth, if you don't have that care, students can feel it. They know it, they see it.” Not only did many participants express that they have a warm and inviting presence, but they worked to create welcoming environments around them as well. Gabriel is intentional about creating a welcoming professional space: “I try and nurture a spot for folks that they feel welcome in, so that they can have that place on

campus, and they can go to that place on campus." In creating welcoming spaces, participants noted actions such as keeping an open door, providing snacks and food, having comfortable furniture.

Participants also made intentional efforts to be available to students. Echoing several participants, Gabriel describes "making that time to connect with them to talk with them. I try and be visible as much as possible, like at the Fall Welcomes, at large events that the university is doing that's directly for our community." Being present at community events provides opportunities for students to engage and make connections with staff. Other participants share their calendars with students who want to meet. The effort to be available highlights one of the many ways that Chicanx/Latinx staff go above and beyond to support students, as well as the overburdening of so few staff to support a growing student population. For example, Luna shared: "I can send somebody to my colleague, and she, whether or not it's within the job description or has the capacity, will do what she can to try to make it work." Through a network of Chicanx/Latinx colleagues, Chicanx/Latinx students are referred to staff who work hard to accommodate and support the student. Drawing students in with a warm presence and making the time to meet allows staff to connect with students.

Building Relationships

By presenting their authentic selves and inviting students in, participants begin to foster relationships with students that may last through graduation and beyond. Many of the interview participants demonstrated that they build from these initial connections by showing interest in students' lives, who they are, the communities they come from, what their goals and interests are. Gabriel described that he is very intentional in his practice to "develop relationships with the folks that I directly supervise." Before the pandemic he found it easier to also develop

relationships with other students who attended events or simply visited that space. Opening up space for students to share who they are is key to Rosa's practice: "anytime I meet with a new student I always ask them like, 'Hey, tell me about yourself.' Like, where are you from, and you know, why did you want to come to UC Davis?" Ariana noted that simply listening is essential to building the relationship. In response to asking how she can support, some students told Ariana "you can just listen. Like thank you, I appreciate you just listening. Right? So being that soundboard." Ariana indicated that students don't always need answers or to have things fixed, but rather just listening and being a soundboard for students develops that relationship, helps them feel connected, heard, and allows them to reflect in a safe space.

To listen deeply and develop the relationship, one participant indicated that she is intentional about "coming from a place of non-judgment" (Rosa). Beyond non-judgment, Gabriel emphasizes that it is important "to validate what they're going through or their lived experiences." Listening, validating, and getting to know students are critical elements of fostering trust and developing the relationship. Speaking to both institutional and individual relationships with Chicanx/Latinx students, Margarita articulated that "anytime you're wanting to build a community or build a sense of belonging, it has to start with trust-building. And to see that there's respect and that the relationship is honored." Fernando emphasized the high impact of relationships on student retention: "the bottom line is relationships. That makes the world of a difference for [students] staying." Participants demonstrated that they make intentional efforts to cultivate relationships with Chicanx/Latinx students, and these relationships often allow staff to provide more holistic interpersonal support.

Supporting the Whole Student

The results of this study show that participants are dedicated to supporting students to grow and thrive both academically and personally. Some participants demonstrated a deep understanding that Chicanx/Latinx students bring a rich array of community cultural wealth and they "value what [students] bring to the table" (Rosa). Several of the focus group participants indicated familiarity with the campus's recent HSI Task Force Report, and one participant even referred to data from the report that 71% of Chicanx/Latinx undergraduates at UC Davis are first-generation, and 43% are from low-income backgrounds. Margarita further cited the retention statistics for these intersectional identities: "if you look at low-income, first-generation Latinx students, I think they have like a 30 or 40% chance of graduating. And it's half, like you know, half of what the average is of the UC." One of the participants noted that while the undocumented student population is small, approximately 80% of undocumented students at UC Davis identify as Chicanx/Latinx. These participants demonstrated a keen awareness of the intersectional identities that Chicanx/Latinx students hold, as well as some of the barriers or challenges they face. The previously identified practices of participants sharing their authentic selves, inviting students in, and striving to build relationships thus establish a foundation for them to better meet students where they are and provide tailored holistic support.

Participants demonstrated various ways that they support the whole student, including outreach, guidance, affirmation, as well as emotional and moral support. Some participants shared various examples of personally reaching out to students to make sure they have access to basic needs resources. One participant had connected with an undocumented student who was unable to file for DACA before the 2017 recission, so when DACA applications opened again in December 2020, this participant reached out to the student. That student later followed up to thank the participant, sharing that their DACA application was accepted, with work authorization

they were able to get a job, and "it made the difference… between like their family having enough money to pay rent or not, and to have food as well." Knowing that issues of housing, food, and financial insecurity impact students' well-being as well as their ability to thrive academically, this example speaks to how some participants made concerted efforts to connect students with critical resources.

Many participants also provided interpersonal validation and emotional support. When students expressed feelings of invalidation and lack of self-efficacy, Rosa provided positive affirmation and tried to "remind students of who they are, in my eyes. Like, how I see them. So, to me that whole sense of belonging is… being a mirror to them." Providing perspective, encouragement, and guidance, some participants articulated that they help students to see their own strengths and potential. Gabriel expressed that he is open with sharing his own undergraduate experiences when appropriate and tells students that earning that degree is an act of resistance, because it shows "that you made it through an institution that wasn't designed for you." Beyond simple encouragement, some participants provided emotional and moral support, including walking students in distress to counseling support services, helping a student who had an anxiety attack at the bus station to get safely home, and being there in times of crisis when family is not able to. One striking example comes from Rosa, who received a call from a colleague that a student had been in an accident: "'she's in the emergency room. Her mom has called me worried. Can you go check in on her?' And I'm like absolutely, and I have dropped whatever I'm doing and I end up in the ER." While this may be an extraordinary example, the data indicates that many participants collaborated with each other and consistently went above and beyond to show students that they care and support them through difficult situations and life challenges. Overall, several participants demonstrated that supporting the whole student involves

meeting students where they are at, being there for them, and connecting them to the resources they need.

Mentoring

Data from the interviews and focus groups revealed that mentorship is an important subtheme within the overarching theme of holistic interpersonal support. A few participants reflected on the importance of mentorship for Chicanx/Latinx students. Mateo, a focus group participant, shared that he personally benefitted from the mentorship of Chicanx/Latinx staff during his undergraduate years, "we all recognize the value of mentors and having role models and mentors in your community. I know when I was a student here, I leaned heavily on folks… who have retired and moved on, like Joaquín Galván, and Gary Perkins, and Griselda Castro…" All six of the interview participants shared experiences where they received guidance and mentorship from staff they connected with through student organizations, academic advisors, faculty, or supervisors within student jobs they held. Often, but not always, these mentors identified as Chicanx/Latinx or other marginalized identities. Ariana sees mentorship as a critical investment in people, and describes "that's when I see the impact, right? Like… me pouring into them, and then them pouring into each other, or other people. And it's just seeing the legacy." Now serving in student affairs professional roles, many participants found themselves in the position of Chicanx/Latinx students coming to them for guidance, and they took the time to mentor and invest in the next generations.

The mentorship that some participants described tended to be informal and organic in nature, not part of formal mentorship programs. Some participants articulated a desire to empower students to maximize their potential, grow their skillsets, and develop personally and professionally. The mentorship that many participants provided was student-centered, and often

took the form of asking powerful, open-ended questions rather than didactic guidance. For example, Anthony articulated: “I feel like a lot of our work is planting seeds and letting those seeds grow with that person…. so I really just tried to question and share in a way that allows them to develop the idea themselves.” Anthony’s approach gives students space for self-reflection and exploring new pathways. Some participants also guided students with developing goals and making plans for reaching those goals.

A few participants directly articulated that they are cognizant that the Chicanx/Latinx students they interact with may be in different stages of identity development. Rosa described supporting students in their identity development, which may encompass exploration and critical thinking around race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, first-generation, low-income backgrounds, immigration status, among other identities. She worked to empower students by reminding them of the community cultural wealth they bring with them, as well as helping them navigate family dynamics while exploring their own identity and life goals: “you don't have to follow what your parents want. You get to be you.” Anthony reflected on the development of identity happening over time, and students may not always be aware of when or why they gravitate towards certain individuals or communities for connection and support. He cited his own undergraduate experience of not consciously feeling connected to his own Latinx identity, yet often forging connections with Chicanx/Latinx peers, staff, and faculty. He reflected on this experience and applied it to his current student affairs role, “so often, we like as professionals in student affairs think like, ‘Oh, these students want to connect with people who look like them, and they want this.’ And I think what's forgotten is a lot of students are… at different stages of their identity development, with different identities.” In these mentoring

relationships, participants endeavored to support students where they are in their identity development.

Some participants spoke directly to ways that they foster critical consciousness with the students they mentor, to develop personal growth and empower students to be change agents. In particular, a few participants challenged students to think critically about representation and equity within their spheres of influence. When guiding student assistants who create programming, Lupe encouraged them:

> to think critically of like what… the image, or what the message they want to try to create, talk, or address…. Like when you're like a particular student from like from a marginalized identity and you look at flyers all day long, and you're not seeing anybody that kind of even remotely looks like you. Like, how do you think they will make you feel about like wanting to come?

Similarly, Gabriel stated that he likes to "make sure that folks are developing some sort of critical consciousness to the work that they do, and that they're intentional about it." He challenged his students to consider if the programming and work that they do truly serves everyone in the community, and encouraged students to make decisions that uplift the most marginalized within the Chicanx/Latinx community.

While fostering personal growth was identified by several participants as an important aspect of mentorship, many also demonstrated a deep commitment to preparing students for graduate school and careers. Nearly all participants indicated that they regularly provide letters of recommendation and reference checks for students applying to graduate school or jobs. Rosa shared that:

> writing letters of recommendation for graduate school has been amazing. Every single student I've written one for has gotten into a school…. and now they're going to get PhDs, or they become medical doctors… And some of them have gotten really good jobs with these startup companies. And I've mentored them on negotiating, and you know, using our Internship and Career Center.

José detailed that they helped students with things such as "negotiation preparation, with cover letter writing, interview preparation, and connecting folks to one another." Ariana described how she builds up student staff, providing an example:

> there was one person in particular that… I started developing her. Like, I started giving her more leadership. I did share with her like, you know, I'm not just dumping this work on you, right? Like there's a reason, there's a purpose, right? And yeah, she ended up interviewing and she ended up you know, taking the job once I left.

This shows how Ariana helped students explore career options, and groomed them for more advanced roles by giving progressively increased responsibilities over time. Similarly, Gabriel expressed intentionality in helping students "grow and develop within the position. So that they're prepared for not just finishing UC Davis, but also prepared for what's beyond." Gabriel made a professional development plan with each of the student assistants he worked with, and guided students in attaining the essential skillsets and knowledge they seek to gain in the position. He then helped students to translate those skillsets to the job market, "we make sure that they understand how they can utilize that role when interviewing for other positions or other career opportunities, or even grad school, too." This participant was committed to showing students how to articulate transferable skills and take the next steps in their academic and career goals.

Many participants also utilized their networks within the campus, alumni, and in the surrounding community to connect students to internships, graduate programs, and careers. When a student shared that they didn't get an internship they had applied to, José took time to connect them with a community non-profit they are part of to see if another opportunity was available. Some participants worked to help students overcome challenges they face, such as seeking funded research and internship opportunities (as not all students can afford to take unpaid positions), or helping undocumented students navigate work authorization and interviews. For example, in their programming and on an individual level, Mateo described striving to make sure "that we are preparing our students and providing them with the opportunities to build their networks or social capital, to make those connections, to have experiential learning opportunities." For Mateo and other participants, this type of mentorship and professional development is necessary to help Chicanx/Latinx students find meaningful careers that contribute to their communities and enrich them and their families.

In summary, holistic interpersonal support is one of the primary ways in which participants fostered individual belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Holistic interpersonal support is comprised of several elements, including: being one's authentic self, being inviting and available to students, working to build relationships, supporting the whole student, and providing mentorship. Participants demonstrated that they embed and apply concepts of belonging in spaces in their everyday interactions with Chicanx/Latinx students to draw them into community, connect them to resources, promote their personal growth and professional development, and launch them towards greater opportunities.

Culturally Relevant Structural Support

Culturally relevant structural support emerged as one of the key themes describing how participants fostered belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Structural support encompasses co-curricular programming, workshops and events, various student services, and resources formally dedicated to supporting students. *Culturally relevant* structural support thus provides programming and resources that centers and values students' identities and cultures, builds inclusive communities, develops critical consciousness, and advances educational equity. This section will delineate the types of programming that builds spaces of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students and examine ways that participants offered culturally relevant structural support.

Several participants indicated that they create programs and events that build community for Chicanx/Latinx and other marginalized identities. Ariana shared that they are intentional in their efforts to "develop programming so that students could build community with each other." Lupe described that her center is responsible for "providing those different things from social to educational to like retention stuff, providing a plethora of those [events]." Rosa led a first-year seminar for Chicanx/Latinx students, where she connected students to Chicanx/Latinx peers, staff and faculty:

> I bring in guest speakers that look like them, Chicano/Latino staff from all over campus, from financial aid, to advising, to counseling, to you know the Center for Leadership and Learning, the Undergraduate Research Center... I bring people to them, that tell them their stories, too.

This participant's seminar builds community, connects students to role models and mentors, and help students learn about resources and opportunities to thrive.

As noted earlier, several participants expressed a keen awareness of how their presence and visibility influences the engagement of Chicanx/Latinx students, emphasizing that representation matters. Therefore, it is no surprise that many participants strategically developed programming that focused on representation of marginalized communities and raised critical consciousness. For example, Lupe described creating events that focus on marginalized communities within Chicanx/ Latinx identities, "making sure that the programming that we were doing wasn't super like Mexican centric... So we try to talk about the like Afro-Caribbean, or Central American," communities. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, Lupe coordinated with different Student Life centers and "organized like a processing space for police brutality." In addition to short-term programs, this participant also worked to expand critical consciousness beyond the moment through continued Bystander Imperative trainings and activities that prompt reflection on the impact of White supremacy. Similarly, Anthony intentionally builds space for students with similar identities to connect while developing critical consciousness. He facilitated "a two-day Social Justice Training… and one of the activities that we did was affinity groups" based on racial/ethnic and other identities, where students had the opportunity to share their experiences. After the training, a student expressed to Anthony that "it was so eye opening to like be in that room and hear people having the same experience and realizing like that we have this identity that was a commonality." These types of programs thus provided culturally affirming spaces of belonging and prompted students to think critically about their racialized experiences in society and higher education.

One participant noted that many of the Chicanx/Latinx-centric programs are only offered on an annual basis. Andrea describes her frustration with the sparse programming:

> I look forward to Tardeada, which happens only once a year. I look forward to Danzantes del Alma annual show, which only happens once a year. And I look forward to you know our yield reception for our Spanish-speaking families and students, which only happens once a year. And so forth. So it's very, very limited.

Fernando tied the limited programming to the "lack of funding, the lack of staff, a lack of resources to really connect with as many of the Latino students that need support on campus." Andrea commented that in the face of such structural challenges, she and her team remain dedicated to providing spaces of "…belonging, appreciation, cultural identity development, community… We continue to offer culturally relevant support and resources." Many other focus group participants echoed Fernando's and Andrea's sentiments that more culturally relevant programming and resources are needed to foster multiple spaces of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students across campus.

Overall, the data from this study show that participants provided culturally relevant structural support to validate students' cultural identities, develop critical consciousness, address educational inequities, and promote belonging. From basic student support resources to co-curricular programming, this structural support is the foundation for building spaces of belonging and advancing Chicanx/Latinx student success. While this foundation is essential, participants voiced concern that Chicanx/Latinx centered programming represents a small fraction of all that is offered, and that more institutional investment is required to adequately meet the needs of a rapidly growing Chicanx/Latinx student population.

Collaboration & Advocacy

Collaboration and advocacy describe the ways that participants developed partnerships to support individual Chicanx/Latinx students, as well as how they campaign for institutional

resources that advance retention and equity. The interviews and focus groups revealed that participants work to build strong professional networks with Chicanx/Latinx and other supportive colleagues. Staff leverage these networks for warm referrals to connect students with resources and supportive spaces of belonging. Collaborative efforts also include campus and community partnerships for programming and student resources. In addition, Chicanx/Latinx staff networks have organized to collectively strategize on retention efforts and advocate for institutional resources. This section will provide examples of the various collaborative and advocacy efforts of Chicanx/Latinx staff as they strive to foster spaces of belonging and improve Chicanx/Latinx students' experiences in higher education.

Collaborative Networks

Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff collaborate on several levels to support belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. As noted in the section on professional experiences, participants develop networks with colleagues in other units within the Division of Student Affairs, as well as affinity groups like the Latinx Staff and Faculty Association. This informal network of Chicanx/Latinx professionals spans across the university. Staff then lean on these networks to connect individual Chicanx/Latinx students with critical resources, support, and opportunities. Gabriel describes how this informal Chicanx/Latinx staff network operates:

> I think what the community is good at doing, and I think this comes from our culture, too, is that once we find resources or once we find those folks on campus, where oftentimes like, I'll be meeting students, and they'll be like, 'Somebody said I could come speak to you.' And I'm like, 'Yes, of course!'

Gabriel is eager to be a resource and support to students who are referred to him. Similarly, Rosa provided an example of working in the background with colleagues, "doing these warm

handoffs, where I walk over to some other partner, and I say, 'Hey, I want you to meet this student and they're looking for a job. Like, how can you help them?'" Luna shares how she will often "collaborate with folks on the academic advising part or… folks in Student Affairs on like helping them retain some of their students when they come into difficulty, that referral process." These examples demonstrate how the network supports Chicanx/Latinx students from the point of admission through post-graduation, linking students to everything from basic needs, housing, financial aid, academic support, mentors, internships, and job opportunities. These warm referrals also serve to bridge students to the wider Chicanx/Latinx community, "integrating students into the campus fabric" (Ariana), which can help foster multiple spaces of belonging.

Beyond providing warm referrals throughout the Chicanx/Latinx professional network, participants demonstrated that they collaborate with other units to develop programming and provide resources. Luna and several other participants described "intentionally working collaboratively with like the different spaces on campus," and indicated that these cross-unit collaborations allow for innovative, intersectional, culturally relevant co-curricular programs to holistically support students. José expressed that they "feel so much enrichment for doing programmatic collaborations." Some participants also described using their connections with community-based organizations, such as the Yolo Interfaith Immigration Network and Empower Yolo, to support students beyond what is available on campus. While those off-campus collaborations are valuable, Sofia is hesitant "to lean on those community supports, because we don't have the infrastructure within UC Davis or within the institution. …it's really hard to navigate, but also honor that community support without taking advantage of it." The collaborative programming efforts of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff create efficiencies and

develop more intersectional, holistic programming and resources, but participants indicated that collaborative efficiencies only go so far in supporting and retaining Chicanx/Latinx students.

Advocacy Efforts

Finally, the collaborative efforts of Chicanx/Latinx staff encompass advocacy for institutional funding, staffing, and coordinated retention efforts to better serve the rapidly increasing population of Chicanx/Latinx students. A few of the participants who have worked at UC Davis for many years referenced a historical Chicanx/Latinx Network (CLN) that organized to address retention of Chicanx/Latinx students. The CLN included folks such as Joaquín Galván, a retention coordinator from the Learning Skills Center, and Arnold de la Cruz in Counseling. Luna shared that the original CLN was "focused a lot on trying to support community as much as we can. … to work on a White Paper saying, really, we need more support. …We're losing folks. We're losing way too many." Andrea reiterates the CLN's emphasis on retention, and notes how coordination efforts shifted over time:

> We were aware of the lack of validation, sense of belonging.…we also knew that nobody was taking responsibility for the retention. Now, with CCLASS [the Center for Chicanx/Latinx Academic Student Success] open, we could say that perhaps CCLASS takes the lead on that retention effort. But it's still everyone's responsibility, right?

These participants highlight that the question of responsibility is a critical one that the campus is still wrestling with to this day.

Luna and Andrea indicated that the CLN came together to address an urgent need for the collective advocacy for institutional support of the retention of Chicanx/Latinx students. However, in 2017 when the Center for Chicanx/Latinx Academic Student Success launched, these participants observed that there was ambiguity around the roles of campus partners and

coordination of retention efforts. Their narratives seem to suggest that while the CLN's advocacy was effective in gaining more infrastructure and institutional funding for Chicanx/Latinx retention, the formal centralization of retention into one entity began to erode the earlier community's "sense of like all of us were in this together…. Now we don't do that [community organization] as much because there's this illusion that it's not needed. But I think it is still needed" (Andrea). Daniela echoes this sentiment and ties it to more concretely to the campus's wider HSI initiative:

> once everything went into HSI, it became only that… there wasn't a lot of focus on things that were already being done. And that really diminishes… the work and the efforts by folks who are putting in that time with students and creating programs and support networks and systems.

Specifically, some participants noted that many Chicanx/Latinx staff have been tapped to serve on the HSI Task Force. Fernando shared that "the task force is composed of, again, volunteers, right? Staff is doing other work. Not people who are hired to do the work, specifically." While stakeholder involvement is important, relying too much on the volunteer labor of Chicanx/Latinx staff is problematic, as Sofia states: "there comes a lot of like pressure for a group of people who are already overworked and underpaid to make these other big decisions on behalf of the institution." In addition, many focus group participants were critical of the institution's over-emphasis on enrolling a certain percentage of Chicanx/Latinx students to receive grant funding, and the correspondingly slight attention to retention. A few participants feel that serving on the HSI task force has taken away time and energy on the retention work that staff were doing prior to this institutional initiative. In summary, the focus group participants speak to a continued tension between seeking institutional commitment in formalized retention resources and

leadership roles to coordinate strategic retention efforts, maintaining Chicanx/Latinx community organization and stakeholder input, and the need for the entire campus community to take responsibility for retaining Chicanx/Latinx students.

Overall, collaboration and advocacy are key to sustaining the efforts of participants in creating spaces of belonging and success for Chicanx/Latinx students. The Chicanx/Latinx professional network continues to be essential for participants to safely connect individual Chicanx/Latinx students to critical support. These warm referrals bring students into the Chicanx/Latinx community, guiding them to spaces where they will be welcomed and provided resources. While organized community advocacy has evolved and shifted over time, participants demonstrated that they continue to speak up and seek institutional resources that advance retention and educational equity.

Assessment & Adapting to Students' Needs

The final theme that addresses the question of how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff foster belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students is *assessment and adapting to students' needs*. Participants engage in a number of assessment activities, both systematic and informal. They then work to integrate the feedback and data they receive to improve programs, access to resources, and holistic interpersonal support. Staff recognize that younger generations of Chicanx/Latinx students face new and challenging environments, and they strive to adapt to students' needs, although oftentimes limited capacity makes it difficult for staff to pivot. This section will provide examples of how staff assess their impact, and work to address the changing needs of Chicanx/Latinx students.

Assessment ranges from informal check-ins and anecdotes to systematic collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. For participants who work one-on-one with

individual students, assessing a particular student's needs involves asking questions, and collecting feedback and anecdotes on the impact of their interpersonal practices. These often include stories where staff have supported individual students through challenges, messages of gratitude that students send to staff, and updates when students achieve graduation, grad school acceptances, or job offers. While these anecdotes often skew toward the positive impact of individual staff on individual students, staff also receive feedback about negative student experiences, as Anthony shared, "I'm hearing from students like they don't feel supported." Staff ask students probing questions such as "How are things going for you? …where is our Center like addressing your needs and concerns? Where is it not?" (José). By simply listening to students, Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals have an ear to the ground on what students are experiencing and can informally observe trends.

Systematic data collection and analysis are more limited by comparison, but this is a function of participants' job responsibilities (only a few are officially responsible for program assessment), workload and time constraints, and comfort levels working with data. Some participants regularly conduct surveys, including pre- and post-program surveys to assess whether program objectives have been met. Gabriel shared strategies for obtaining feedback during workshops: "I have folks make it interactive, like give shout outs, or do something where they can see, like a word cloud, or be able to jot something on a postcard." Another important way of collecting feedback and assessing data is through stakeholder meetings, such as student advisory boards and advocacy committees. These groups review quantitative institutional data related to Chicanx/Latinx student retention, such as GPA and academic standing, then "start talking about like how we're going to help the students who are on academic probation" (Anthony). Stakeholder groups use this data to develop recommendations and strategies.

A few participants do engage in data analysis within their units. José shared that they regularly analyze retention data for their unit, and that "getting into the nuances of the data also helps to inform what programs to do." These participants point out that it is important to examine the data critically. Anthony expressed concern that the data used in his unit's annual report "haven't in the past included race or ethnicity. And so I've been trying to get that to happen." He cites lack of staff capacity to disaggregate and analyze the data, as well as hesitation from the unit's leadership to explore the data from that critical lens. Overall, participants expressed a desire for more systematic assessment practices, but the hurdles of limited time and capacity, accessing institutional data and/or collecting unit-level data, and having the expertise to analyze it from an equity lens have proven challenging.

Similarly, participants expressed a desire to be more flexible in adapting to the changing needs of newer generations of Chicanx/Latinx students. Those participants who commit time and energy, and have the tools, to conduct program surveys and needs assessments are better equipped to adjust. Andrea holds listening sessions with Chicanx/Latinx students, and shares that "we continue to adapt to the community needs, the student needs, as the students are connected to our spaces." Lupe expressed that some Student Affairs units have been slow to adapt: "Chi/Lat students from this era are, have way different needs from the Chi/Lat students in the 90s…. everybody I feel like kind of knows that, but then they still go in the same path." The overburdening of units that support high numbers of Chicanx/Latinx students, and the subsequent limited capacity, is certainly a factor impacting adaptability. Mateo recognized that so much has changed in the last several decades, within the Chicanx/Latinx student body, the institution itself, and the socio-political and economic contexts that students are now navigating. He seeks institutional support to address the issue: "What do they want, what do they need? How

does that look? And then, what resources… do we need to make that happen? And what training does the staff need to make that happen?" The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected the health and financial security of Chicanx/Latinx communities. At UC Davis, participants had to make big operational shifts to maintain community programming and provide resources in a remote format. Anticipating the campus's future return to in-person operations, participants were already wondering how to meet the needs of "this generation that had to stay in a whole global pandemic and had do online classes for their first year" (Lupe). The question that remains to be answered is, how has the pandemic, and subsequent institutional shifts, impacted Chicanx/Latinx student retention?

At the institutional level, participants articulated that the university needs to have a more coordinated and in-depth research effort focused on the retention of Chicanx/Latinx students. In contrast to the university's ample quantitative data on the projections of UC applications and enrollment that drove the HSI initiative, Andrea states: "there was never robust data used… in the conversations that I was in about the current state of student retention at UC Davis. And when we push back on that, it's like nobody's responsible for it." While the Center for Chicanx/Latinx Academic Student Success has access to quantitative data on GPA and academic standing for Chicanx/Latinx students, the analysis and strategic use of that data has fallen to stakeholder groups and the Chicanx/Latinx network. Participants are concerned that the university has not conducted rigorous qualitative research to uncover the root causes of retention issues. Margarita in particular wants to see the institution focus more on the translation of this research into concrete institutional strategies and the "practical applicable experiences that affect our actual students' everyday lives." Again, participants reiterated that the burden of the practical

application of retention data and strategies cannot fall to their shoulders alone – it is a campuswide responsibility.

Summary

The findings and analysis of this study show that participants work in myriad ways to influence belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Their practices are guided by their concepts of individual belonging in spaces, which are distinct from and resistant to cultural hegemonic notions of institutional fit. These concepts of belonging have been shaped by participants' marginalizing experiences in higher education, both as students and as professional staff. Within PWIs, these experiences often include isolation, cultural starvation, and invalidation. In response to these experiences, participants navigated to find spaces of belonging and culturally relevant support. Motivated in part by a desire to improve Chicanx/Latinx student experiences in higher education, participants embed their concepts of belonging into their everyday practice.

The findings indicated five overarching themes that address how participants influenced belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students: 1) representation matters, 2) holistic interpersonal support, 3) culturally relevant structural support, 4) collaboration and advocacy, and 5) assessment and adapting to students' needs. Participants articulated that representation matters and that it influences sense of belonging. Thus, they worked to be visible and authentic, they created inviting spaces, and provided holistic interpersonal support for Chicanx/Latinx students. Participants also worked to offer culturally relevant structural support, creating resources and programs that represent diverse marginalized communities within Chicanx/Latinx identities, foster a critical consciousness, and develop community and belonging. Furthermore, participants developed professional networks where they provided warm referrals for students, collaborated across campus on programming, coordinated retention efforts, and advocated for institutional

support. Finally, by assessing and adapting to students' needs, participants sought to continuously improve programming and practices to better address the changing needs of newer generations of Chicanx/Latinx students.

Chapter Six:

Discussion and Implications

This concluding chapter briefly summarizes the study's purpose and approach, then discusses the findings in relation to existing scholarly research. It presents general implications for policy and practice and provides recommendations for action. Finally, the chapter outlines areas for future research and provides concluding remarks.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals' experiences and concepts of belonging inform their practices as they support Chicanx/Latinx students at UC Davis. By centering the perspectives of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff, this study provides insights and perceptions of a population that is rarely the center of research, but who play a critical role in the retention of Chicanx/Latinx college students. CRT and LatCrit were the theoretical foundations for this study, allowing me to examine the salience of racial identity, representation, and sense of belonging within the context of an institution that has a history of exclusion and oppression of racially minoritized groups. The Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments served as a key framework for outlining how interactions between staff and students are nested within multiple contextual levels (institutional, policy, social-historical, and community contexts) that shape the institution's climate for diversity and impact belonging (Hurtado et al., 2012). Through six semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with a total of 13 student affairs professionals who identify as Chicanx/Latinx, this study sought to address the following research questions:

- How do Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals conceptualize belonging?

- How are their understandings shaped by their racialized and marginalized experiences in higher education, as students and professional staff?
- What practices do Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff implement to influence sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students?

The following discussion will examine the overarching findings of the study in dialogue with existing research literature.

Discussion of Findings

Microclimates of Belonging

This research study fills a gap in the literature on the perspectives and experiences of the Chicanx/Latinx student affairs practitioners who support Chicanx/Latinx students at an emerging HSI. The data from this study revealed that the interview participants embraced a situational, individualized concept of belonging that happens in certain spaces within the university, but which is not generally felt at the institutional level. One participant, José, expressed that institutional belonging is problematic when the institution holds historical and current practices of exclusion and inequity. All of the interview participants demonstrated that they are deeply committed to creating microclimates of validation and belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students in their own spheres of influence and across student life spaces. Indeed, the emphasis that they placed on situational belonging within spaces, but not to the university as a whole, echoes the research indicating that microclimates may have a greater impact on belonging for both Chicanx/Latinx college students (C. E. Garcia, 2019; González, 2002; Villalpando, 2003) and Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff (G. A. Garcia, 2016; Mayhew et al., 2006) than the overall campus climate. While existing literature on microclimates focuses primarily on students of color, and there are a few articles on microclimates for staff, this study makes a key contribution

by examining the relationship between Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff's experiences as undergraduates and as professionals.

Undergraduate Experiences of Marginalization

The interview participants' concepts of belonging have been shaped by their racialized and marginalized experiences in higher education, starting as students and continuing into their professional career roles. Reflecting on their undergraduate experiences, many participants highlighted feelings of isolation, academic invalidation, and cultural starvation. First-generation Chicanx/Latinx students not only have to contend with being one of few students of color in the classroom, invalidation, and White-centered curriculum, but they also must learn the bureaucracy of the university on their own. This finding aligns with existing literature on how Chicanx/Latinx students often face racial microaggressions and hostile campus climates, intensified by low representation of Chicanx/Latinx students, staff, and faculty (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Marquez Kiyama et al., 2015; Yosso et al., 2009). Interpersonal microaggressions led Chicanx/Latinx students to feel "othered," and this negatively impacted their sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Yosso et al., 2009).

The extent of these negative experiences varied by institutional type (PWI, emerging HSI, or full HSI). While most of the interview participants attended PWIs or emerging HSIs (and a few attended UC Davis – the same institution where they now work), Rosa described feeling more widespread belonging and greater opportunities for success when she transferred to an HSI with a high percentage of Chicanx/Latinx students. This finding points to research that shows that compared to their peers at non-HSIs, Latinx students at HSIs may experience greater growth in academic self-concept (Cuellar, 2014). Furthermore, these findings align with research that shows emerging HSIs often struggle to change the institutional culture to better serve the varying

needs of Latinx college students – simply increasing enrollment of Chicanx/Latinx students is not enough (Doran, 2015; G.A. Garcia, 2017; G.A. Garcia, 2018).

Seeking Spaces of Belonging, Counterspaces

In response to experiences of academic invalidation and social isolation, many of the interview participants navigated to find spaces of belonging within the university. They often became involved in ethnic-based student organizations or social justice activities, volunteered to support local Chicanx/Latinx communities, took Chicanx/Latinx Studies classes, and sought support from staff or faculty who share similar backgrounds or hold marginalized identities. Research shows that culturally relevant programs build community across common experiences and identities, provide validation, and offer opportunities for holistic mentoring (Andrade, 2019b; Maramba and Palmer, 2014; Salas et al., 2014, Tachine et al., 2017). Several participants indicated that their undergraduate involvement in ethnic-based student organizations and programs provided social counterspaces that "cultivates students' sense of home and family, which bolsters their sense of belonging and nurtures their resilience" (Yosso et al., 2009). This finding echoes the literature that Chicanx/Latinx students take specific actions to "culturally nourish and replenish themselves in response to marginalizing campus climates" (Yosso et al., 2009). Several participants noted that such spaces of belonging helped them to persist and succeed in their higher education goals.

Experiences of Marginalization and Belonging as Professionals

In their professional careers, the interview participants continued to experience a lack of belonging at the institutional level, but they worked to develop networks of professional belonging across the university. Many found belonging within departments and clusters of Student Life centers that have a diverse workforce and are oriented toward educational equity.

This aligns with G. A. Garcia's (2016) research that shows that positive microclimates are compositionally diverse and often have staff who are dedicated to supporting students of color. While there was only one instance of lack of belonging at the departmental level, this participant's experience reflects the literature on how negative microclimates can have a significant impact on staff perceptions of campus racial climate (G. A. Garcia, 2016; Mayhew et al., 2006). Staff affinity groups and equity-focused campus committees also provided participants with additional spaces of affirmation, mentorship, and support. These findings further support research on how staff of color benefit from positive microclimates that challenge structural inequities, and provide support, validation, and belonging (G. A. Garcia, 2016).

Structural and organizational factors also impacted participants' perceptions of belonging while working at UC Davis. Several participants expressed feelings of being overburdened and undervalued, with only a handful of staff and limited funding dedicated to supporting a large and growing Chicanx/Latinx student population. Some participants also volunteered to serve on campuswide committees to advance equity and inclusion efforts, which adds to their already heavy workload. This data aligns with the literature that describes how staff and faculty of color often feel an unspoken obligation to go above and beyond their job duties to support students of color, uncompensated work that is not expected of their White counterparts and could lead to racial battle fatigue (Gomez et al., 2015; Steele, 2018; Turner, 2002). As one of the focus group participants articulated, the institution is "constantly asking the people who've been oppressed to make changes within a structure of oppression" (Margarita). Reflecting on the university's efforts to achieve HSI status, many focus group participants expressed frustration at perceiving that the institution continues to prioritize increasing enrollment of Chicanx/Latinx students, and the potential of grant funding, over deeper issues of retention and supporting the students coming

in. These participants expressed that they want to see meaningful change. Such change involves equitable investment in Chicanx/Latinx student retention and ensuring the institution is held "accountable to continue to grow alongside the student population, and alongside the student needs" (Sofia). The various institutional and structural challenges that many participants face lead to burnout and high rates of turnover for Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff (Buttner & Lowe, 2017; Gomez et al., 2015).

Practices of Student Affairs Professionals

Motivated in part by a desire to improve Chicanx/Latinx student experiences in higher education (Linder & Simmons, 2015; Urrieta, 2007), participants embedded their concepts of situational, individualized belonging into their everyday practice. Five primary themes describe the ways in which participants influenced belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students: 1) representation matters, 2) holistic interpersonal support, 3) culturally relevant structural support, 4) collaboration and advocacy, and 5) assessment and adapting to students' needs. Many participants demonstrated that they deeply understand the value of representation as a first step toward belonging and equity. This finding resonates with current literature that indicates representation as a critical factor influencing belonging for Chicanx/Latinx college students (C.E. Garcia, 2009; González, 2002; Museus et al., 2018; Nuñez, 2009). Yet, nationally, Hispanic/Latino and Asian student affairs professionals are underrepresented compared to their student populations (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Several participants also noted that representation goes beyond simply looking at the numbers; it has implications for the institution's culture, curriculum, and physical structure.

Holistic Interpersonal Support

Thus, this study found that many participants provided holistic interpersonal support to Chicanx/Latinx students. Holistic interpersonal support is broken down into five subthemes that describe the various ways that participants interact with Chicanx/Latinx students to foster belonging: 1) being one's authentic self, 2) being inviting and available, 3) building relationships, 4) supporting the whole student, and 5) mentoring. Participants showed that they made efforts to be visible and available, presented their authentic selves, and drew students into welcoming spaces. These spaces of belonging are crucial for Chicanx/Latinx students within an institution that continues to center White culture and norms. By humanizing themselves, staff become more approachable and foster spaces of inclusion and belonging (Museus & Mueller, 2018). Anthony noted that as an undergrad he unconsciously gravitated toward Chicanx/Latinx peers and staff, and now as a student affairs professional, he is aware that his presence and what he shares about his experiences has an impact on the Chicanx/Latinx students he interacts with. These findings speak to the existing literature on how Chicanx/Latinx college students indicate a stronger connection with institutional agents of color, especially within culturally-affirming spaces (G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; González, 2002; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015).

Validation and Mentorship

Once drawing students in, the participants then worked to develop relationships, support students holistically, and provide validation and mentorship. Research has shown that building positive lasting relationships with students fosters engagement, learning, and belongingness (Brooms, 2020). At the heart of holistic student support is the recognition that students are individuals who have personal, social, professional lives beyond the boundaries of the university (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Participants' approach their work with the knowledge that students' ability to thrive academically are impacted by their lived experiences, shaped by the institutional,

community, and socio-historical contexts (Hurtado et al., 2012). This finding follows Luedke's (2017) research, which showed that staff of color nurture various forms of capital that students bring with them, promote authenticity, and form personal connections in mentoring relationships. Many of the interview and focus group participants articulated the importance of mentoring Chicanx/Latinx students, and the various ways they help students to navigate their undergraduate experience and prepare for grad programs and careers. According to Torres & Hernandez (2009), Latinx students who have an identified mentor consistently demonstrated higher levels of academic integration, cultural affinity, and encouragement.

Culturally Relevant Structural Support

The data showed that participants provided culturally relevant structural support, and this was key to fostering belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Culturally relevant structural support includes co-curricular programming that builds community, represents marginalized communities, fosters a critical consciousness, and provides resources tailored to the needs of students. This finding aligns with the research literature on how co-curricular spaces offer validation through cultural programming, and allow marginalized students to build community with peers and staff of similar experiences (Andrade, 2019b; Maramba and Palmer, 2014; Salas et al., 2014; Tachine et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2019). The participants of this study can be described as empowerment agents who provide resources to minoritized students and are committed to sparking critical consciousness (G. A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In developing culturally engaging co-curricular programming, participants create counterspaces and positive microclimates that foster greater belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students (Museus et al., 2018). Through their holistic interpersonal support and culturally

relevant structural support, Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff serve as agents of transformational resistance (Ek et al., 2010).

Collaboration, Advocacy, and Assessment

Participants also engaged in various collaborative activities to bolster belonging and retention at different levels, which is one of the significant contributions of this study. On an individual level, participants leaned on their professional networks to provide warm referrals for students and connect them with resources. The collaborative programming efforts of the participants created efficiencies and developed more intersectional, holistic programming and resources, but participants indicated that collaborative efficiencies only go so far in supporting and retaining Chicanx/Latinx students. It is not a replacement for adequate infrastructure and institutional support. Participants collaborated across campus with various partners to coordinate retention efforts and advocate for institutional support. While there is very little related research on how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff strategize to advance institutional change, this finding resonates with literature on the ways that institutional agents work to dismantle oppressive systems that prevent students of color from accessing opportunities (G. A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Nienhusser, 2018). Finally, participants sought to understand and meet the changing needs of Chicanx/Latinx students through assessment practices. Using a CRT lens, this study shows that the assessment practices, collaborative retention efforts, and advocacy of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff demonstrate a commitment to creating more inclusive spaces of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, and transforming the institution to become more socially just and equitable (Solorzano, 1997).

Summary

This study's data on the promising practices of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff in creating spaces of belonging can help higher education practitioners take action to improve Chicanx/Latinx student retention. Just as important, the data revealed key themes on participants' perceptions of belonging within their departments (but not necessarily to the institution) and the structural challenges they face, both of which impact Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff experiences of burnout and attrition. Given the important role that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff play in supporting the retention of Chicanx/Latinx students, it is essential that universities seek to improve the well-being and retention of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff. Furthermore, participants' critical perspectives on the university's efforts to achieve HSI status provides important insights on how institutional priorities need to shift to better support retention and truly aim to *serve* Chicanx/Latinx students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Recruit and Retain Chicanx/Latinx Student Affairs Staff

This study has immediate policy and practical significance for UC Davis, as well as institutions that are seeking to become HSIs, or advance other educational equity initiatives. One of the key findings of this research, representation matters, underscores the importance of having student affairs staff who reflect the student body. This has implications for the recruitment and retention of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals and staff diversity more broadly. Ensuring that Chicanx/Latinx students can engage with staff members they identify and share similar experiences with is essential to cultivating spaces of belonging. As the data revealed, Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff often serve as role models for Chicanx/Latinx students, mentoring and guiding them on how to navigate the university, both academically and socially. Thus, one policy implication from this research is for the university to continue improving

equitable staff recruitment and hiring practices to ensure that implicit and overt biases are checked, and that we are attracting a diverse pool of talent. In 2019, Dr. Lyndon Huling in UC Davis Human Resources launched a website with resources and best practices on how to attract, select, and hire diverse candidates. Under Huling's leadership, the Staff Diversity Ambassadors Program conducts recruitment and outreach to underrepresented and diverse communities. These are excellent institutional level resources.

The challenge lies in operationalizing these promising practices within a large, decentralized campus to ensure each department and unit utilizes these tools and resources. UC Davis's Staff Diversity Administrative Advisory Committee (SDAAC) has made key recommendations over the last several years to address equity in recruitment, such as: 1) mandatory diversity training for current and new supervisors/managers, with specific sections dedicated to equitable recruitment practices, 2) require all members of recruitment selection committees to complete the "UC Hiring for Success" and "Managing Implicit Bias in the Hiring Process" eCourses, and 3) develop a process to audit the results of recruitments that uses and expands on existing campus data dashboards. To further address issues of inconsistency in equitable recruitment practice across a decentralized campus model, SDAAC recommends the expansion of UC Davis Health's Inclusion, Diversity, Anti-Racism, and Equity Taskforces (IDARE) Initiative to catalyze departmental DEI taskforces that are charged with assessing efforts in critical processes, such as hiring and retention. SDAAC also encourages greater communication and collaboration between these departmental DEI taskforces with their college or higher-level units to strengthen both horizontal and vertical communication, align DEI efforts and strategies, and foster accountability.

Address Turnover, Invest in Staff Development

The high rates of turnover noted by Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff in this study indicates university attention is further needed to better retain, develop, and equitably promote the talented staff we currently have. To better understand and address the high turnover rates, the university needs to regularly review staff attrition data across race/ethnicity, gender identity, and other marginalized identities, and critically examine the root causes of why staff leave the university or transition to other departments. UC Davis Human Resources recently launched a staff exit survey to capture the reasons for leaving the university, although it does not yet capture transfers within the university across departments. A system of accountability needs to be developed so departments who frequently lose staff of color undergo climate reviews and continued diversity training. There exists greater staff diversity in the entry- and mid-level professional positions at UC Davis, thus promoting from within could be one strategy to increase retention of staff of color and diversify higher professional levels.

More needs to be done to improve professional development, mentorship, and sponsorship opportunities for Chicanx/Latinx and staff of color. A few of the campus employee resource groups, led by staff volunteers, have worked over the years to offer development, networking, and mentorship opportunities for staff of color. For example, the Latinx Staff & Faculty Association (LSFA) has hosted professional development speaker series to highlight opportunities and tools to enhance professional goals, as well as LSFA Mentorship Brown Bags where leaders shared their professional journey and offered mentorship on an individual level, and in a culturally affirming space. These kinds of culturally relevant mentorship and development opportunities for Chicanx/Latinx and staff of color should be further established, expanded, and institutionalized through greater support from campus leaders and the DEI office.

Increase Staffing and Resources for Targeted Support of Chicanx/Latinx Students

This study found that many of the participants generally felt overburdened and undervalued. The university thus needs to address critical infrastructure strains that are causing burnout and impacting turnover for Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff. Specifically, participants indicated that they are only a handful of staff supporting a large and rapidly growing student population, and that the continuous demand to do more with less is unsustainable. Thus, institutional support needs to materialize in the form of adequate funding and staffing to sufficiently meet the needs of our current Chicanx/Latinx students as well as the anticipated increase in enrollment for this population. Such support should target units that are dedicated to Chicanx/Latinx students, or that advance educational equity and serve high numbers of Chicanx/Latinx students. Staff expressions of feeling undervalued echo national data that finds women of color in postsecondary institutions have the lowest median pay of all groups compared to White men (McChesney, 2018). In response, the university should continue to conduct regular salary equity reviews and address inequities in pay across race/ethnicity and gender identity. In addition, staff who go above and beyond in participating in campuswide equity initiatives when it is not part of their regular job responsibilities should be recognized and compensated for their contributions.

Expand Promising Practices

Student affairs practitioners at UC Davis are dedicated to ensuring all students have equitable access and opportunities to succeed, and this study presents invaluable data on factors and practices that influence belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. First, the holistic interpersonal practices of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff in creating community and spaces of belonging can be broadly applied to all staff who interact with students, such as: being authentic and inviting, building relationships, supporting the whole student, and providing

mentorship. Chicanx/Latinx students need multiple spaces of belonging, as Luna shared, "folks may feel like they belong in a certain space… but you know, we have to get them to feel good everywhere." Trainings for student services staff should highlight the importance of holistic interpersonal practices that foster belonging for Chicanx/Latinx and all students. Student-facing departments should consider evaluating their service practices to ensure a holistic approach to supporting students.

Second, the findings present a need for increased culturally relevant programming and support. The limited annual programs centered on Chicanx/Latinx identities feels inadequate and tokenizing to some participants. To truly create a welcoming space for Chicanx/Latinx students (and staff), there needs to be substantially more programming that centers diverse Chicanx/Latinx communities and engages in critical dialogue on equity topics. Thus, the university should increase funding and staffing to increase culturally relevant programs and events offered. Another implication for supporting Chicanx/Latinx students is creating structured mentorship programs for Chicanx/Latinx and other students of color. Finally, the university should invest in offering stipends or fellowships for students with financial need, so they are able to participate in valuable experiential learning opportunities, such as research or internships, without worrying about the necessity of taking a paid position instead. As G. A. Garcia and Okhidoi (2015) contend, universities should move culturally relevant programming from the margins to the center, and work to institutionalize equitable support practices across the campus.

While a central finding of this study was that representation of Chicanx/Latinx staff is necessary to increasing belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, participants made it clear that the work of retaining our Chicanx/Latinx students is a campuswide responsibility – it should not be on their shoulders alone. Thus, some of the key takeaways of promising practices are applicable

to all areas of campus. For instance, increasing culturally relevant programming is a practical strategy for the institution to implement with all campuswide events, distinguished speakers, performances, and art exhibits in areas such as the Mondavi Performing Arts Center, the Manetti Shrem Museum, and the Pitzer Center. In addition, the university should consider ways to make the physical environment of the campus more welcoming, such as having buildings named after Chicanx/Latinx campus or national leaders. More importantly, departments and units at all levels should take the time to consider the impact their current policies, practices, and culture have on Chicanx/Latinx students and staff. Are they creating inclusive spaces of belonging? How are they supporting the needs of Chicanx/Latinx students and staff? Departments should review the recent HSI Task Force Report and incorporate the goals and recommended actions into their operational practices.

HSI Initiative Recommendations

Finally, this study has important implications for the university's HSI initiative. First and foremost, the university must reflect deeply on what it means to truly *serve* Chicanx/Latinx students. Participants indicated that the institutional focus must shift beyond the numbers to emphasize instead the university's critical issues in retaining Chicanx/Latinx students. This work will require institutional investment in retention infrastructure (i.e., sustained and equitable funding and staffing). In buttressing the retention infrastructure, campus leaders must work to provide greater clarity in the developing organizational structure, including the responsibilities and expectations across various units. Several focus group participants indicated that the HSI Task Force should continue its robust stakeholder involvement and communication, and leadership should integrate stakeholder perspectives more intentionally throughout the process. The campus should recognize and value the efforts of those who serve on this critical task force

through award nominations or stipends. One participant made it clear that campus leadership should also consult with HSI experts to guide the process, provide more direction, and improve coordination. Lastly, the Task Force should develop a strategic plan for campuswide action that includes metrics, a process for measuring outcomes, and structure for accountability.

Future Research

While there is a growing body of literature on the factors that contribute to belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students, the existing literature focuses on overall campus climate, academic validation, involvement, and peer engagement. While there are a few studies on the role institutional agents play in empowering and mentoring students of color, they often combine faculty, administrators, and staff. This research study fills a gap in the literature on the perspectives and experiences of the Chicanx/Latinx student affairs practitioners who provide co-curricular programming and support to Chicanx/Latinx students, within the context of a four-year public research institution that is an emerging HSI. However, future research can expand to examine and compare the perspectives and practices of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff across various types of institutions (i.e., predominantly White institutions, fully designated HSIs, or other Minority Serving Institutions, as well as across two-year colleges, and private four-year college and universities). This might be helpful in exploring how Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff navigate different institutional contexts and adjust their strategies and practices.

Additionally, more research is needed to examine the impact of microclimates for Chicanx Latinx student affairs staff, as well as other student affairs staff of color. This qualitative study only scratched the surface of the impact of microclimates, pointing to units with greater compositional diversity and equity orientation as factors influencing positive microclimates of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff. The one instance in which a participant did

not feel belonging in their department could use further investigation. What factors distinguish this department from the others that were described as welcoming and inclusive for staff of color? More research should also be done to examine the role of employee affinity groups and equity committees in fostering belonging and mentorship for staff of color and other marginalized identities. Does involvement in these groups mitigate experiences of marginalization or discrimination that staff may feel in their departments or other areas of campus? Is participation in affinity groups correlated in any way with staff retention or promotion? Future research could also explore how student affairs staff experiences and concepts of belonging vary across race/ethnicity and other intersecting identities, such as socio-economic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability status.

This study examined practices that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff implement to foster belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students. Further assessment could examine the efficacy and impact of their practices and programs to see if there are correlations with data on the retention and success of Chicanx/Latinx students. In addition, some of the focus group participants illuminated how the Chicanx/Latinx Network has collaborated to support Chicanx/Latinx student retention and collectively advocated for institutional change over the years. This points to a rich history of the campus Chicanx/Latinx community working together to advance social change within the institution and affect educational equity. An examination of the CLN over time could highlight effective strategies for change and preserve a valuable part of the institution's history. Finally, it would be interesting to explore the involvement of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals in current HSI initiatives.

Conclusions

As Chicanx/Latinx college student enrollment rises, higher education institutions must work to transform the structural inequities that have impeded retention and success for this student population. Research shows that emerging HSIs struggle to change their culture to better serve the varying needs of Latinx college students (Doran, 2015; G. A. Garcia, 2017; G. A. Garcia, 2018). Achieving compositional diversity is not the same as achieving equity. Chicanx/Latinx college students need an inclusive, welcoming environment that centers their identities, cultures, and values.

This research study has found that Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals at UC Davis go above and beyond to provide holistic interpersonal support and culturally relevant programming that fosters spaces of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx college students. They also develop strong professional networks to collaborate and advocate for greater institutional investment in critical retention efforts. Yet they face significant structural issues, including being overburdened and understaffed in serving growing numbers of Chicanx/Latinx students with limited resources. They also expressed feeling undervalued and a lack of belonging at the institutional level. These issues lead to burnout and frequent turnover of Chicanx/Latinx student affairs professionals. Walter A. Robinson, the late associate vice chancellor for Enrollment Management at UC Davis, often shared with colleagues that "retention is the best recruitment strategy." As UC Davis moves forward as an emerging HSI, it is my hope that this research will inform strategies and practices to address these structural issues related to retention, and ultimately cultivate a campus culture that supports Chicanx/Latinx student affairs staff and serves the needs of Chicanx/Latinx students.

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APPENDIX A: PROTOCOLS

Pre-Interview Survey

- Name:
- Pronouns:
- Job Title:
- Department:
- Please briefly describe the primary functions of your job.
- How long have you served in this position?
- How long have you worked at UC Davis?
- Have you served as a atudent affairs professional at other universities? If so, please briefly list your previous role(s), institution(s), and length of service.
- How do you identify? (participants will have the option to fill-in a response to each item below)
    - Race/Ethnicity:
    - Gender identity:
    - Sexual Orientation:
    - Ability:
    - Languages:
    - Religion/Spirituality:
    - First-Generation (first in your family to attend college):
    - Are there other important aspects of your identity you'd like to share?
- Education Level (Select highest level)
    - High School Diploma/GED

    - Associate's Degree or Certificate Program
    - Bachelor's Degree
    - Master's Degree
    - Doctoral Degree
- Undergraduate institution(s) attended:
- What aspects of your identity are most important to your sense of self? (select top 3)
    - Race
    - Ethnicity
    - Gender identity
    - Sexual Orientation
    - Ability
    - Languages
    - Religion
    - Other (please describe)

Interview Protocol

About your post-secondary experiences:

- Can you tell me about your experience as an undergraduate student in higher education?
- Tell me about a time when you felt a sense of belonging as a student on campus. What about that moment sticks with you the most, and why? Where/with whom did you feel that belonging?

About your work at UC Davis:

- Who or what influenced you to become a student affairs professional? What continues to motivate you?
- What does belonging mean to you now? How does your understanding of belonging inform your work as a student affairs professional?
- In what ways do you interact with Chicanx/Latinx students in your role as a student affairs professional?
    - How do you engage with students on an interpersonal level?
    - What programs, events, and other structural supports do you provide to students in your role?
- Tell me about a time when your work impacted a Chicanx/Latinx student.
- How do you know when your work influences a student's sense of belonging?
    - In what ways do you measure or assess the impact of your work?
    - Do you collect data or anecdotes from students?
- How do you think the various identities you hold influence sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students?
- Do you support Chicanx/Latinx students in ways that are not required by your job function (for example, mentoring students, formally or informally)? If so, please provide a few examples.
    - What do you think are some evidence-based practices for supporting Chicanx/Latinx students?
- How has COVID-19 and the national reckoning with racial injustice impacted the ways you support Chicanx/Latinx students? How do you create community within a remote environment?

Focus Group Protocol

- What are your thoughts and feelings about the institution's efforts to become Hispanic-Serving?
- Have you read the HSI Task Force report? If so, what part of the report did you find most interesting/important/compelling? How has this information influenced the way you approach your work?
- What challenges do you face as a professional supporting Chicanx/Latinx students at an emerging HSI?
- What supports do you receive (from your department/campus partners/campus leadership) for this work?
- What additional resources or institutional changes do you feel are necessary to better foster belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students and ensure their success?