

U.S. Central American Students in
Higher Education:
Finding a Sense of Belonging

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Abstract: This paper highlights the overlooked experiences of U.S. Central Americans in higher education. Given the absence of Central American studies departments and various shared experiences with Mexican communities in the Southwest, this study analyzes how Chicana/o/x studies departments can serve as relatable spaces for U.S. Central Americans. This study draws from eight semi-structured interviews with U.S. Central Americans in UCLA's Chicana/o studies department to provide insight into how they navigate and create agency within academia. The findings show that U.S. Central Americans in this study developed a dual sense of belonging as Latina/o/x and U.S. Central American students. As Latina/o/x students, the Chicana/o studies department offered tools and knowledge that affirmed their belonging in a predominantly white institution. However, as U.S. Central Americans, the Chicana/o Studies department lacked a complete inclusion of their specific ethnic and cultural experiences. This research argues that to document these realities is to begin to understand how to facilitate the success of U.S. Central American students to critically assess the multiple academic realities of an increasingly diverse population of Latina/o/x college students.

Keywords: *U.S. Central Americans, Latina/o/x Higher Education, Sense of Belonging, Student Narratives, Latina/o/x Homogenization*

Reaching an astonishing 58 million in 2016, the Latina/o/x population plays a significant role in shaping the future of the U.S. (Flores 2017). This population is tremendously diverse but often generalized as Mexican. Although individuals of Mexican origin constitute 63% of the U.S. Latina/o/x population, to homogenize all Latinas/os/xs as Mexican undermines the intricate and complex realities of this diverse population (Flores 2017). To clarify, Latina/o/x homogeneity or homogenization is the process by which the diverse experiences of Latina/o/x groups are erased, creating one identical or uniform experience that is then assumed to be the shared reality of all Latinas/os/xs. This study insists on challenging Latina/o/x homogeneity because, although Latinas/os/xs may share struggles, they do not all have the same experiences. This paper focuses on the distinct experiences of Central Americans — more specifically, U.S. Central American college students.

Central Americans are the third largest Latina/o/x group in the U.S. However, they have been largely overlooked in academic research (Oliva Alvarado et al. 2017). Consequently, there has been a lack of literature discussing U.S. Central American complexity beyond a migratory experience of the 1980s. In particular, the experiences of U.S. Central American students in higher education have been largely unexplored. This study aims to examine how U.S. Central Americans navigate academia both as an underrepresented group of Latina/o/x students and as shaped by the contextual dominance of Mexican culture and history.

To examine this process, this study utilizes UCLA's Chicana/o studies department as a case study because it currently provides a series of five courses that explicitly focus on Central American realities. These courses provide both access to U.S. Central American college students and an environment in which U.S. Central American and Chicana/o/x students learn with and about one another. This unique academic space reveals how UCLA's Chicana/o/x studies department attempts to include Central Americans and address issues of Latina/o/x homogenization. Thus, this research addresses the following questions: First, what draws U.S. Central American students to the Department of Chicana/o Studies? Secondly, what tools

do they use to enact agency, create a sense of belonging, and navigate higher education? By investigating the experiences of U.S. Central Americans, this study will provide insight on how to better enable the success of these students while also contributing to the complex realities of U.S. Central Americans as multifaceted people that occupy several spaces in society.

It is important to address the use of the term “U.S. Central American” as a political identity that “emphasizes fluidity, multiplicity, and solidarities” and stresses the ways in which this diasporic community asserts and creates a space and identity (Oliva Alvarado et al. 2017). It is crucial to also understand the context behind the U.S. Central American diaspora. Generally, the concept of diaspora is often defined as a group’s involuntary separation or dispersion from their original homeland (Butler 2001; Brubaker 2005). The U.S. Central American diaspora is deeply influenced by the U.S.-funded 1980s civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala that displaced thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans (Oliva Alvarado et al. 2017). Families from other Central American countries were similarly forced to migrate due to decades of U.S. intervention that have led to political, economic, and social instability (Oliva Alvarado et al. 2017). This history informs the realities of U.S. Central American college students.

Higher education is meant to provide students with the necessary skills to become future leaders. However, without assessing how certain groups (in this case, U.S. Central Americans) undergo specific experiences, only a few students will receive the resources to thrive. Nationally, only 11% of Hondurans, 10% of Salvadorans, and 9% of Guatemalans obtained a bachelor’s degree in 2015 (Flores 2017). Therefore, to examine how U.S. Central Americans navigate higher education is to begin to understand how to better facilitate their growth, as well as identify and mend inequalities within academia for different Latina/o/x students.

Literature Review

Mexican Contextual Dominance in Migratory and Educational Experiences

For students of color in predominantly white institutions, developing a sense of belonging is closely tied to retention rates and academic achievement (Gonzales et al. 2015; Lamont Strayhorn 2008). In the case of Central Americans, belonging is also shaped by contextual dominance. Contextual dominance was coined by Karina Oliva Alvarado (2013) and refers to a group's dominance or power in comparison to other groups in a specific setting or space. This perceived dominance depends on the circumstances or background of that setting (Oliva Alvarado 2013). In other words, within a specific setting, a group can be recognized as a dominant population in relation to others if they have a large influence on the historical, economic, political, and cultural background that informs that setting. For instance, in comparison to other Latino/a/x groups, Mexican communities in the U.S. Southwest not only have the largest numbers but also a long history within the region (Oliva Alvarado 2013). As a result, their culture is largely recognized, and they tend to have relatively more representation in the economic and political spheres of the U.S. Southwest (Oliva Alvarado 2013). However, in comparison to the larger U.S. white hegemony, Mexican communities are still marginalized and do not hold the same power. This is evident in their long history of segregation, labor exploitation, and criminalization within the immigration system (Oliva Alvarado 2013). U.S. white hegemony refers to the structural, economic, political, social, and cultural ways in which U.S. society privileges the experiences of white populations over that of people of color (Oliva Alvarado 2013).

This article focuses on the relative dominance of Mexican culture in comparison to Central Americans. As stated, Mexican communities in the U.S. Southwest hold relatively more recognition and dominance in relation to other Latina/o/x groups, causing Central Americans to feel marginalized by Mexican communities. It is important to examine how Mexican contextual

dominance unfolds in different realms of Central American lives.

One of the Central American spheres that Mexican contextual dominance informs is immigration. For example, Arturo Arias (2003) theorizes that Central American migrants often enact a “strategic non-identity” by camouflaging their Central American roots, adopting a Mexican identity that protects them from immediate suspicion, deportation, and allows them access to resources that cater to Mexican immigrant communities. This strategy acknowledges that Mexican individuals hold a higher social standing than Central Americans. However, in enacting it, Central Americans also recycle stereotypes of what a Mexican identity constitutes:

[W]hen a person identifies with someone else, he/she creates an internal image of that person, or, more precisely, who they want that person to be ... An identity is not modeled on concrete others, but on the image of their image, the image of stereotyped Mexicans that popular culture has projected to Central America. Consequently, in the embodiment of ‘acting Mexican,’ Central Americans articulate what they want that ‘Other’ to be, rather than what Mexicans — heterogeneous themselves — really are. (Arias 2003, 179)

Thus, this survival strategy only silences and pushes U.S. Central Americans further into invisibility while creating tensions between these two groups. Central Americans may feel forced to adopt a Mexican identity, but Mexican individuals may feel their culture is being challenged when non-Mexican individuals attempt to “act” it out. Nevertheless, Arias (2003) stresses that a need to enact this tactic in the first place differs from Chicana/o/x individuals who have used their identity to both validate their concerns and reaffirm their worth — an opportunity U.S. Central Americans have been denied. Central Americans then battle with notions that their own origins—unlike Mexican ones—are not sufficient enough to provide them with the necessary resources or protection.

Mexican contextual dominance also unfolds and shapes Central American experiences in education. Lucila Ek (2009) examines just how Mexican contextual dominance permeates the academic spheres of U.S. Central American youth and influences their process of identity formation and belonging. In her ethnography of Amalia, a Guatemalan middle schooler, Lucila Ek observes how Amalia balances the different processes that inform her identity. Ek (2009) focuses on the fact that Amalia must not only become Americanized as a Latina in the U.S. but must also be Mexicanized in a society that homogenizes Latinas/os/xs. By analyzing the life of Amalia, Ek (2009) demonstrates how public institutions (e.g., schools) function as primary sites of socialization and may be harmful to youth who are part of a “subgroup within a minority group” (417). Schools often validate certain experiences while disregarding others by systematically limiting resources and spaces to perform specific ethnic identities (Ek 2009). In examining how Mexican contextual dominance may shape the middle school education of U.S. Central Americans, this study provides insight on how contextual dominance may also manifest itself in higher education.

Sense of Belonging: A Tool of Resistance for all Latina/o/x College Students?

Discussions of Latina/o/x students’ success in higher education often focus on fostering a sense of belonging. Lamont Strayhorn (2008) and Gonzales et al. (2015) analyze how nurturing a sense of belonging is strongly correlated with improving retention rates and academic achievement among Latina/o/x college students. Strayhorn (2008) discusses how a sense of belonging speaks to the support and resources that students perceive and have access to on campus. Strayhorn (2008) elucidates that without a sense of belonging, students feel unimportant. This is especially relevant to Latina/o/x students who are both marginalized in predominantly white institutions and are broadly underrepresented in academia (Strayhorn 2008). As previously mentioned, only 17% of Latinas/os/xs completed a bachelor’s degree in 2015 compared to a 62% completion rate

for Asian Americans and 40% for European Americans (Gándara and Mordechay 2017). It is crucial to identify meaningful ways to foster a sense of belonging and create relevant communities for Latina/o/x students in order to reaffirm their rightful place in academia and ensure their retention.

Although these studies demonstrate the significance of fostering belonging for Latina/o/x students as a tool of resistance in hostile academic environments, simply placing them into a general Latina/o/x category overlooks the complexity inherent in this population. It is crucial to explore how developing a sense of belonging in academia may differ among Latina/o/x groups. Although the dominant Latina/o/x group at a campus may have established a sense of belonging, we must consider that other Latina/o/x groups (e.g., U.S. Central American students) may still lack a crucial academic space. A lack of belonging would subsequently create divergent and unequal educational trajectories and obstruct access to essential academic resources for these students. Therefore, intragroup differences must be acknowledged to avoid forcing students into one “Latino mold” (Torres 2004). Examining how U.S. Central Americans navigate higher education provides insight into how different Latina/o/x groups experience academia. Thus, activists and educators can use this knowledge to ensure that U.S. Central Americans are equipped to succeed as they pursue their degrees.

Methods

To analyze these student experiences, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Respondents were given pseudonyms throughout this paper to preserve their anonymity. The interviews ranged from thirty minutes to sixty minutes, taking place in reserved library study rooms. The interviews focused on belonging, interest in the Chicana/o studies major or minor, and aspects of the department that shaped the students’ college experience. Participants were asked to bring a syllabus or book from a Chicana/o studies course they enjoyed. This activity was included as a means to examine what these students identified as meaningful resources within their Chicana/o courses.

Participants were undergraduate U.S. Central American students and Chicana/o studies majors/minors. Students were recruited through personal networks, flyers, and department emails. Of the eight students, only two were Chicana/o studies majors; the other six were Chicana/o studies minors with majors in the following fields: political science, psychology, Spanish, neuroscience, gender studies, environmental science, Latin American studies, and sociology.

Six participants had a parent from Guatemala, two had a parent from El Salvador, two had a parent from Mexico, and one had a Honduran parent. All participants were born in the U.S. except for one born in Guatemala. Of these students, four identified as Central American and four as Latina/o/x. Some explained that they switched between the two identifiers depending on whom they were speaking with. Although this study uses the term “U.S. Central American,” the participants do not always identify solely with their Central American roots. However, each respondent wanted to share their experiences as Central American college students.

Limitations

This study was largely exploratory, and the findings of this paper must be analyzed in the face of some constraints. The primary limitations include the small sample size and specific focus on one university department. Additionally, for the purposes of this article, participant responses were limited to those that explicitly focused on experiences of belonging as U.S. Central American and Latina/o/x students. Although these student narratives are important, they do not represent the complete and intricate experiences of all U.S. Central American college students. Moreover, the experiences of U.S. Central Americans solely in STEM fields might be different than the experiences of students in departments such as ethnic studies or Latina/o/x studies. Furthermore, this research did not examine the very crucial experiences of indigenous and Afro-descendant U.S. Central Americans. These limitations identify the need to expand research on the various complex realities of U.S. Central

American college students.

Interest in the Chicana/o Studies Department

As the participants in this study demonstrate, U.S. Central Americans occupy diverse academic fields. Therefore, it would be unwise to assume that these students immediately gravitate towards Chicana/o studies. In fact, many of the respondents only chose to engage in the field through a minor program. When asked why they chose to minor instead of major, several explained that they wanted to prioritize finishing their primary majors. Desirae, a neuroscience senior, further explains this:

I was still pretty stubbornly set on keeping my major in the life sciences. By the point I decided to minor in [Chicana/o studies], I was already pretty far into my major ... so I couldn't see myself switching completely from the life sciences without feeling like I wasted half of my undergrad on it. I don't think I ever considered double majoring...

For these students, Chicana/o studies is viewed as an alternative as they attempt to complete their primary majors or further explore their interests. Nonetheless, this study analyzes their presence in this field. Besides California State University, Northridge (CSUN), there are no Central American studies departments within U.S. college campuses. This leaves U.S. Central American students who want to learn about their heritage poorly equipped to do so (Carranza and Cortez 2017). Moreover, Central American and Mexican communities share experiences as people of color or as individuals of migrant, working-class backgrounds. Consequently, U.S. Central American students may seek some form of representation in Chicana/o/x studies.

There were two main characteristics of the Chicana/o studies department that initially drew study participants into the field: its flexibility and its interdisciplinary nature. Desirae's journey with the Chicana/o studies minor provides insight into

these attributes:

I thought it was flexible, and I was able to shape it to what I wanted to study within it ... in the past year, I've gotten interested in public health, and I realized I liked Chicana studies because it was ... very conscious of racial and ethnic issues ... So, I realized that in public health there are some options ... that cater more towards that, and so that's when I also realized the [Chicana/o studies] minor has a class that's ... about public health, but it's looking more about Latinos and their place in public health. I think what's been unique about [the Chicana/o studies minor] ... [is that] it has fed into my interests...

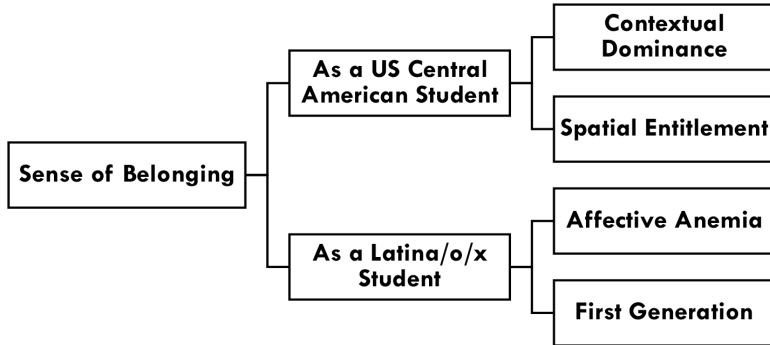
Desirae's experience reveals why the field's interdisciplinary nature and the minor's flexibility would interest students of color. These two characteristics allow individuals to be involved in more traditional fields (e.g., public health) while also exploring specific interests (e.g., the racialization of public health) that might otherwise be unobtainable. Desirae later mentions that she also took Chicana/o studies because it was relevant to her culture, albeit not fully. Her experience reveals an inner struggle that U.S. Central American students face when they are part of a department that is relatable but not fully their own, resulting in a conflicted sense of belonging.

A Dual Sense of Belonging

To fully acknowledge this conflicting sense of belonging, this study argues that the experiences of U.S. Central Americans must be analyzed through two different perspectives: as Latina/o/x students and as U.S. Central American students. Doing so allows one to understand how these students develop a dual sense of belonging as they navigate a predominantly white institution and a predominantly Chicana/o/x department. *Figure 1* provides an outline of the factors that determine how U.S. Central American

students experience a dual sense of belonging.

Table 1. U.S. Central American Dual Sense of Belonging



As U.S. Central American students, belonging was shaped by the participants' experiences with Mexican contextual dominance. Their experiences with Mexican contextual dominance often led to the use of spatial entitlement as a means to enact agency and center their U.S. Central American identities. Agency refers to the students' ability to make choices that partially allow them to overcome the obstacles they face as U.S. Central Americans. In order to enact agency and have a sense of control over their academic lives, these students use spatial entitlement to challenge the lack of representation they experience. Spatial entitlement is a tool that allows Central American students to create both physical and symbolic spaces that they feel entitled to and in which their Central American identities are recognized, valued, and empowered (Johnson 2013).

As Latina/o/x students, the participants highlighted affective anemia and their first-generation status as two main factors that contributed to their feeling of not belonging in a predominantly white institution. Additionally, the participants expressed their feeling of relief when discovering the resources that the Chicana/o studies department offered to counter those negative experiences. Affective anemia as conceptualized by Georgina Guzman (2017) is the emotional indifference that students are forced to adopt as a result of the highly competitive

and ruthless environment academia creates. In the following sections, I will further discuss how affective anemia and the other factors outlined in *Figure 1* inform the dual belonging that Central American students experience.

Belonging as a Latina/o/x College Student: Navigating Affective Anemia

Georgine Guzman's (2017) concept of affective anemia helps to analyze how these students found belonging as Latina/o/x students. This study examines how affective anemia unfurls in more traditional, predominantly white academic fields in comparison to Chicana/o studies and how affective anemia informs the relationships U.S. Central American students establish with their peers. Georgina Guzman (2017) defines affective anemia as a "lack of empathy and ... [lack of] mutual recognition of the underprivileged" that is rooted in a neoliberal economy and ideology (459). In short, much like the medical condition of anemia which is a result of iron-deficiency, affective anemia is an emotional deficiency. It is the result of the individualistic and competitive environment of a neoliberal economy, which views students as a source of capital; furthermore, the neoliberal university views students as a source to gain higher academic prestige (Guzman 2017). These competitive environments foster emotional difference as students are taught to solely worry about their own success (Guzman 2017).

In higher education, affective anemia has replaced humanist and emancipatory ideals with those of a neoliberal economy that minimizes collective social responsibility and emphasizes productivity, cultural uniformity, and individual responsibility (Guzman 2017). Academia teaches students that their success is contingent on their own individual merits. As a result, several of the participants that were majoring in more traditional fields expressed that their majors were very competitive and led to isolated, distant relationships between students. Catherine, a double major in psychology and Chicana/o studies, offers a look into how affective anemia influences her relationships to peers:

Well, in the psychology department ... I would say most times I'm really stressed because over there everyone is very competitive. Others don't feel it, but I feel it's very hostile, like an 'Oh, I need to beat you kind of thing' ... these people are the ones trying to get into the best grad school, so it's like 'if I can beat you, then I'll get your spot.'

Because academia prioritizes the production of specialized workers, higher education encourages competition to increase the institution's prestige rather than nurturing healthy relationships between students. Affective anemia is not simply a passive entity within higher education — it actively forces students to take on this emotional impoverishment if they are to succeed in these competitive environments. This is done at the expense of students and, in particular, students of color who may be the first in their families to attend college.

In response to these alienating practices, the participants in this study expressed relief in finding the Chicana/o studies department — a place where they felt they could interact with their peers more. Desirae draws this comparison as she stresses that within Chicana/o studies “everyone just feels more open, especially because the classes facilitate you being more open. You just learn more about people. In science ... they don't facilitate you trying to get to know each other more because you are kind of there just to absorb.” Desirae and Catherine reveal the importance of having a department and courses that allow one to indulge in conversations between peers. It is crucial to recognize each other's existences as more than competing students but as actual human beings.

Adriana reveals how Chicano/a studies students are more inclined to share resources. She asserts, “I meet a lot of people who have the same type of background as I do ... they're always letting me know of all these resources that UCLA offers. For one, I didn't know there was a bus that UCLA [students] take here.” These interactions with peers in Chicana/o studies starkly differ from Catherine's constant feeling of needing to outcompete her psychology peers or risk being left behind. In contrast, within

Chicana/o studies, students are more empathetic of the struggles they may share as people of color and Latina/o/x students. This is contradictory to the affective anemia in traditional fields that demands students be emotionally distant.

Aside from being able to engage at a deeper level with peers, the course content within the Chicana/o studies department also offers tools that allowed several of the participants to better comprehend their experiences in an institution grounded in affective anemia. For example, Chicana/o studies allows students to intimately engage in course material and connect it to their own experiences. The participants found that they no longer had to detach their lived experiences from what they were learning; they used their experiences to understand what they learned and applied course content to understand their realities. Catherine shares some of the ways her Chicana/o courses have allowed her to better comprehend certain inequalities she sees unfold in her education:

When I took Chicana/o Studies 101, when I first delved into oppression, I was very angry ... I started noticing things that I normally wouldn't in the way that academia and other folks are oppressive towards some folk, and I was just very angry with the world. In this book [Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*] ... it's reflecting on oppression, but then you also have to take action. Reading this is like 'I'm not going to do anything by just being angry at the oppression that exists in society.' In order for it not to exist, I have to actually take a step and do something, so that's why I would like to do something with grad school on that, just like providing a better academic experience for all folks instead of just privileged ones.

Rather than adopt affective anemia (including its emphasis on individual responsibility) and ignore oppression, Chicana/o studies offers critical perspectives that validate these educational

inequality experiences and fosters a sense of encouragement to battle these forms of oppression. The participants demonstrate that they are not merely absorbing the Chicana/o material but attaching their personal experiences to the courses, acting on them, and planning their future roles in society accordingly.

Additionally, Catherine shares an experience she had with a professor in the Department of Psychology. This serves as an example of how her Chicana/o studies knowledge contextualizes certain discriminatory instances she may face in a field that may not acknowledge her right to belong:

I actually gave a presentation in my honors thesis class, and I have a pretty high-pitched voice, it's not something I'm oblivious to ... but then the professor who's male and white ... he's like 'with your voice, you're not going to get a job in psychology.' ... [and] taking all of these Chicana courses, [I know] he has this idea that in order to be a professor, you have to fit this certain mold ... I think had he said this earlier in college, I probably would have taken it more seriously... But I think it was good in the sense that I know it exists, so what am I going to do to make it different, and, if I get to be a professor, what am I going to do differently to not scare students but instead encourage them?

This instance demonstrates the emotional toll that affective anemia can have on Latina/o/x students. More importantly, it reveals the racist interactions that students of color must often endure in predominantly white institutions. Although Catherine's professor does not comment on the value or substance of her work, he immediately strips her achievements from her. As a woman of color and a Latina/o/x student, it does not matter what her work presents — her Latina/o/x voice discredits it. Thus, it is quite clear that a sense of belonging is difficult to achieve in traditional fields when the mere presence of Latina/o/x students is constantly policed — they are presumed to not belong in these

academically rigorous spaces.

Consequently, these U.S. Central American students find very valuable tools within Chicana/o studies that they can use to combat such discriminatory experiences. For example, Catherine states that it is through her Chicana/o/x course knowledge that she knows that her professor's comment is not a reflection of her ability as a student but, rather, a culmination of deeply embedded structural inequalities. She knows such discrimination will continue. Her experience with Chicana/o studies has prepared her to not only navigate such instances but also change these discriminatory practices when she becomes a professor.

Yet another valuable aspect of the Chicana/o studies department that participants appreciated is how their experiences as first-generation college students are addressed. Specifically, all the participants credit the department's student advisor, Eleuteria (Ellie) Hernandez, with helping them navigate their experiences in the Chicana/o studies department and as Latina/o/x students. For example, Francine is specifically grateful for the guidance Ellie has offered her as a first-generation student:

What I like about [the Chicana/o studies department] is ... the advisor that sends us a lot of information ... I think as Latinos and if we are first-generation, we have a huge disadvantage ... it's not like a white family that their parents came to UCLA so they already told their kids 'okay, you have to do this, you have to do that, you have to go here, join here, join these types of clubs' ... [As] first-generation, our parents, my parents in Guatemala barely finished sixth grade ... so they have no idea what it's like to be in a university ... so, I really like that in that department, they are mindful of some of the first-generation [struggles], to have that information because we do need it.

Her response demonstrates how affective anemia overlooks the fact that students have diverse backgrounds and not all experience the same advantages. As a result, for Latina/o/x students, it

may be difficult to find resources that cater to their specific identities, such as “first-generation student.” Therefore, Ellie’s role is crucial because it addresses these specific challenges by constantly offering resources that students would otherwise not have. In a very similar way, Catherine recalls going to Ellie for advice after presenting her thesis and hearing her professor’s bigoted comment:

I talk to my parents every day but certain things because they came from El Salvador so they have this optimism of ‘You can do anything!’ and it’s great and I admire it, but in times like this, they’re like ‘Oh, just ignore people.’ They’re just like ‘look at the bright side,’ and at times I can’t look at the bright side. I need to cry right now but in times like this Ellie has been helpful. I’ve cried many times in her office, and she’s given me a different perspective and been very motherly which has been nice.

In this way, finding a sense of belonging is crucial — it provides students with a space where they can obtain tangible support like the consistent guidance and information Ellie provides. Sense of belonging also provides culturally relevant emotional support, which is especially important for first-generation Latina/o/x students that encounter racism and often feel alone in a new academic environment. Catherine emphasizes her parent’s optimism is admirable; however, it fails to address her situation. In this case, Ellie’s experience as a Latina/o/x individual that caters to Latina/o/x students in academia is especially crucial. This correlates with a study by Gonzales et al. (2015) which reveals how students’ sense of belonging is better established if they have access to spaces with people that share their background. Spaces such as these can emulate an academic family that helps them transition into “culturally different” spaces.

Therefore, U.S. Central American students in this study expressed relief in finding the Chicana/o studies department primarily because it reassured them of their right to be in academia

as Latina/o/x students. For some, the department was a space with faculty and peers from similar backgrounds that made them approachable. Others found that the topics and discussions were broad enough to encompass some aspects of their experiences. These factors motivated them to establish roots in the department and find a sense of community. By being able to adopt a general overarching Latina/o/x identity, these students could tap into resources Chicana/o studies offers and develop a sense of belonging. This allowed them to contest the discrimination and isolation they faced in other fields.

Belonging as a U.S. Central American: Navigating Contextual Dominance

On the other hand, these students' identities as U.S. Central Americans were not as easily included within the Chicana/o studies department. For example, Catherine recalls her first thoughts upon hearing about the Chicana/o studies department:

When I first heard Chicano or Chicana [I thought] 'You have to be Mexican,' and both of my parents are from El Salvador and I identify as U.S. Central American, so it's like 'Where am I in this?' It's a lot closer to learning about myself than any other department on campus, but it's still not necessarily fitting of me in a sense.

We see a conflicting sense of belonging arise as U.S. Central American students cannot fully participate and relate to Chicana/o studies. Therefore, although the department may be the only space they can feel at home as Latina/o/x students, they are left poorly-equipped when it comes to exploring their U.S. Central American identities.

Part of the reason this aspect of their identities cannot be engaged is due to the Mexican contextual dominance that U.S. Central American students encounter in the department. Although the department may offer courses that highlight issues of migration, xenophobia, racialized gender, and

Latina/o/x experiences that are broad enough to include U.S. Central Americans, the identities being affirmed are Chicana/o/x identities. This is not to say that Chicana/o/x courses should not validate Chicana/o/x identities. After all, these experiences have been marginalized by a larger white hegemony. The point here is that Chicana/o/x departments are one of the few departments where U.S. Central Americans can begin to unlearn self-deprecating mentalities taught throughout academia, yet it becomes difficult to fully belong if their specific identity as U.S. Central American is pushed to the side yet again.

In fact, several of the participants disclosed the excitement and joy they felt when they found courses that accurately spoke about their realities. Adriana explains she was determined to take a Central American course, stating that “there’s no way I’m going to leave UCLA and not take at least one course that is Central American.” Catherine also explains, “I always thought I was a Latina but then taking [a Central American] class, the term U.S. Central American came up ... and I’m like ‘That’s me!’ That’s a better identification than Latina/o/x which is just broader.” This allows us to begin to comprehend how important access to narratives and representations of oneself can truly be — Catherine could finally pin down her identity to something she truly felt was hers.

These responses not only reveal the importance of Central American-focused courses in fostering a sense of belonging but also forces one to ask how a lack of adequate courses affects these students. In their own study of Central American identity formation, Hamilton and Chinchilla (2013) explain that college is where Central American students are often introduced to their own histories and encounter issues of ethnic identification for the first time. However, when these Central American students pursue their ethnic identity further, the absence of Central American literature in courses inhibits their exploration (Chinchilla and Hamilton 2013).

In fact, even within the Central American classes that the Chicana/o studies department offers, U.S. Central American students felt silenced by a contextually dominant Mexican culture. Adriana reveals the frustration that can arise during discussions

of Central American presence:

I remember I got slightly annoyed [once] because ... the professor had asked us if we feel that Central Americans are invisible ... and one Chicana girl said ‘No’ because she lives with a lot of Central Americans ... in McArthur Park ... [But,] not everybody lives in McArthur Park and even then ... if you go to Belmont I think one-fourth are Central American ... but, we don’t celebrate Central American holidays ... We celebrate Cinco de Mayo... So, even in an area where we’re big, I still feel like we’re kind of invisible.

The contextual dominance of Mexicanization that Lucila Ek (2009) observed in her study clearly follows students into college. Adriana explains that the culture that was acknowledged institutionally was Mexican culture. During her discussion, she feels frustrated as the course is meant to center upon Central Americans, yet the students speaking on issues are Chicana/o/x individuals. Although these students may find a sense of belonging in Chicana/o studies as Latina/o/x students, they still struggle to fully belong as U.S. Central American students.

Creating Agency Through Spatial Entitlement

Regardless of the several challenges U.S. Central American students experienced, they still enacted agency through various forms of spatial entitlement. Gaye Theresa Johnson’s (2013) conceptualization of spatial entitlement is a strategy of resistance that marginalized groups use to reject social divisions that exclude them from physical and symbolic spaces. Spatial entitlement provides marginalized groups with the ability to reshape, reclaim, create, and occupy both physical and symbolic spaces that previously excluded them or simply did not exist (Johnson 2013). The U.S. Central American students in this study certainly enacted symbolic, literary, and digital forms of spatial entitlement that allowed them to validate their rightful space in

academia specifically as U.S. Central Americans.

For instance, through their Central American courses, these students often find both academic and non-academic literature that emphasizes U.S. Central American experiences. When they encountered such literature, the participants explained they were motivated to look for more literary representation that spoke about their realities, to enact a literary form of spatial entitlement by claiming a space in the realm of literature. For instance, Desirae notes that one of her favorite books from her current Central American course was *The World in Half* by Cristina Enriquez. This is a fictional novel that speaks about the life of a Panamanian woman attempting to reconnect with her father while also uncovering her own Panamanian heritage. Desirae explains why she enjoyed the novel:

A lot of the motifs are geology ... She's talking about rocks and the earth ... and what I got from it was something about how that's ever-evolving. Rocks and things have different phases, and her identity throughout the book has different phases, and she kind of struggles with that but then understands some things about herself more. I feel like it's just super applicable when you're trying to piece together who you are and especially for this class being about Central Americans just trying to piece together your identity especially within the department ... it's kind of that bigger picture of us within academia and academic literary spaces. I thought that was really cool.

Clearly, access to representation, whether it be literary or otherwise, is instrumental for U.S. Central American college students. Desirae's reflection reveals how crucial it is to uncover literary spaces that highlight the complex reality of a U.S. Central American identity, reassuring her that she is not alone and legitimizing her own experience.

Although U.S. Central American college students at UCLA do not have a physical department to call their own, they

transformed the space in Chicana/o studies into something they could call theirs. Oftentimes, they took up the minor rather than the major because it was more flexible and allowed them to take all the Central American courses the department offered. For instance, Desirae explained that half of the courses she took under the minor were about Central Americans, including three official Central American courses and additional classes centered on Central American experiences. In doing so, Desirae transformed a department rooted in Chicana/o/x culture and history into one that also centered upon her own U.S. Central American identity.

Several of the participants also explained that projects within their Chicana/o/x courses allowed them to begin unearthing their Central American roots. Desirae reveals:

Through certain projects here, I've got my dad's mom talking about home a little bit too. I think I did an interview with her, and I think it was for ... [the class] 'U.S. Central Americans in the U.S' ... and I interviewed my grandma, and she ... would talk about the earthquakes in Guatemala that kind of displaced them and made more of a financial strain and that was more of the reason why she came... My grandma had come up here and started working and didn't go back, just kind of sent money and ended up staying here and sponsored my dad to come up here. All of the history of that ... I didn't know.

This shows how U.S. Central American students begin enacting a symbolic form of spatial entitlement. They take courses within the Department of Chicano Studies to emphasize their experiences and begin archiving their own family histories. In this sense, if students lack access to Central American studies, they make their own education program with the resources provided.

U.S. Central American students also enact a vocal form of spatial entitlement as they begin to interject their Central American experiences into Chicana/o/x discussions. Adriana explains that taking her first Central American course allowed her to “speak

up more just because we are talking about us, our parents, our families. It kind of pushes you to speak up....” Similarly, Desirae mentions that “it’s become more of a thing where if I can throw us in as a discussion point, I’m going to do it. It’s become more important for me to include Central Americans and make sure that it’s brought up enough.” In the face of nonexistent physical spaces that would otherwise allow them to do so, we see a more active and urgent need to include Central American realities.

Likewise, these students also take up a digital form of spatial entitlement as they engage in #CentralAmerican Twitter. For instance, Adriana explains that her Central American courses encouraged her to consider the digital platform:

It encouraged me to follow Central American Twitter and ... it’s interesting because in this course I’m taking right now, most of those who speak up [are Chicanos] because most of [the students] are Chicanos, there were few Central Americans who spoke up. But in Central American Twitter ... everyone is speaking up ... For example, Mexican nationalism, it had always made me uncomfortable but then other people are bringing up that it also makes them uncomfortable and then it starts getting into details of how that’s kind of about Central American and Mexican relations ... [Central American Twitter] ... has introduced me into this whole other world of Central Americans speaking about things that I could relate to but just couldn’t really put it into words.

Her response demonstrates new ways to advocate for Central American identity. As Adriana mentions, although the Central American course she is taking may offer access to her history, discussion topics such as Mexican nationalism may be uncomfortable in courses occupied primarily by Chicana/o/x students. Therefore, through this digital platform, U.S. Central American students can engage in discussions about Mexican contextual dominance while also building community and


validating their experiences. These U.S. Central American students have demonstrated that despite the challenges they face, they will not let their Central American identity be pushed to the side — no longer will they be silenced.

Conclusion

This project documents the narratives of U.S. Central American students in higher education, specifically within UCLA's Chicana/o studies department. This study serves as a platform to address how to facilitate these students' success and highlight the multiple academic realities of Latina/o/x college students. The findings conclude that U.S. Central American students develop a dual sense of belonging as both Latina/o/x students and U.S. Central American students. As Latina/o/x students, the department provides tools to combat the affective anemia that unfolds in their traditional and predominantly white majors. Yet, U.S. Central American participants found that the Mexican contextual dominance of the department made it difficult to fully belong. Nonetheless, the participants created tools of agency by engaging in different forms of spatial entitlement and using the department's courses to explore their identity via class projects, discussions, academic literature, and digital platforms.

Thus, the Chicana/o studies department does offer a relevant, safe space for U.S. Central American students, providing them access to tools that allow them to begin to uncover their Central American roots. However, as U.S. Central Americans, they are not fully represented. This dual sense of belonging reveals the urgent need to address Latina/o/x homogenization and to not force Latina/o/x students to fit one mold that erases distinct realities, creating unequal educational trajectories (Torres 2004). This research has primarily contributed to two main sources of scholarship: sense of belonging for Latina/o/xs in higher education and the growing literature on U.S. Central American realities. Both are crucial for the future of U.S. Latina/o/xs. However, these arenas lack discussions on U.S. Central American college students, revealing the need to bring these narratives to light. This is crucial in order to inform the future of U.S. Central

American students, Chicana/o/x students, and Latina/o/x students
in higher education.



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