

# Student Involvement & Academic Outcomes

IMPLICATIONS FOR DIVERSE COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATIONS

**Donald Mitchell Jr.**

**Krista M. Soria**

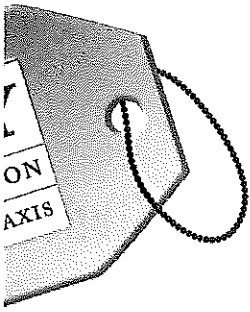
**Elizabeth A. Daniele**

**John A. Gipson**

EDITORS



Foreword by Robert D. Reason | Afterword by D. Jason DeSousa



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**Donald Mitchell Jr., Krista M. Soria, Elizabeth A. Daniele, John A. Gipson**  
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## CHAPTER SIX

# Latina/o Students AND Involvement

## Outcomes Associated with Latina/o Student Organizations

RICARDO MONTELONGO, HELEN ALATORRE, ANGEL HERNANDEZ,  
JOE PALENCIA, RAY PLAZA, DAMARIS SANCHEZ AND  
STEPHEN SANTA-RAMIREZ

Extracurricular involvement found in college student organization participation can become a significant factor in a student's college experience. Affective and cognitive changes resulting from extracurricular activities can contribute to intellectual, social, and emotional development in students over time (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Outcomes associated with participation in college student organizations include cognitive development or higher intellectual processes such as critical thinking, knowledge acquisition, synthesis, and decision making, as well as personal or affective development of attitudes, values, aspirations, and personality disposition (Astin, 1993). While participation in extracurricular activities has been described as providing these impacts on the college experience of students, problems in generalizing these student outcomes to minority student populations can occur.

Extracurricular involvement outcomes need to be examined further when applying results to diverse student populations. For some studies, researchers failed to provide racial and gender breakdowns of their samples and expressed caution when generalizing to other groups, mainly because White student leaders and predominantly White college student organizations were investigated (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Kuh, 1995). In addition, focus is often placed on identifying statistically significant findings for White students despite researchers' acknowledgment of racial differences in their discussions (Smith & Griffin, 1993). Stage and Anaya (1996) note the difficulty in generalizing studies to all

college students because study samples comprised mostly of middle-class Whites provided the "norms" for these experiences where "diverse persons and diverse experiences often appear other than 'normal'" (p. 49). Trevino (1992) adds that it was "particularly problematic [when researchers] use predominantly and traditionally White student organizations such as fraternities, sororities, student government, religious groups, choir groups, and intramural groups" (p. 24) as the focus for their studies. When this occurred, researchers failed to consider the contributions of minority college student organizations present on many campuses (Stage & Anaya, 1996).

When studying student extracurricular opportunities on college campuses, minority student organizations are fairly recent opportunities for extracurricular involvement. These organizations largely came into presence on many predominantly White colleges and universities within the past 45 years (Baker, 2008; Johnson, 1997; Parra, Rios, & Gutierrez, 1976; Rooney, 1985). The more established minority college student organizations can trace their origins to the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s in which "minorities were struggling for identity within society," as well as for "identity, recognition, and integration into the majority community" (Chavez, 1982, p. 15) within higher education. Research investigating minority college student involvement in these organizations indicates that there are many benefits; for example, students' adjustment to college and peer support levels are facilitated by these groups (Benner, 1999; Hernandez, 2002). Involvement in these organizations also promotes community, cultural, and ethnic awareness (Delgado-Romero, Hernandez, & Montero, 2004; White, 1999) and membership in other campus organizations (Montelongo, 2003; Rooney, 1985). Minority college student organizations have provided generations of minority students opportunities to become involved with campus student life, as well as in community service and leadership development.

## LATINA/O STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Latina/o student organizations in this chapter are defined as any student or administratively sponsored campus groups that are established for the expressed purpose of representing Latina/o interests and culture in a particular area. According to Davis (1997), Latina/o college student organizations generally include a combination of the following objectives: (1) to support students and increase academic achievement, recruitment, and retention; (2) to provide cultural awareness and education activities for members, the campus, and the larger community, increasing pride and understanding; (3) to provide service activities, for example, tutoring, literacy, mentoring, and other volunteer efforts, for students, youth, and other community members; and (4) to conduct political education and advocacy

about issues of concern to Latina/os to improve conditions for them on campus, in the community, and in the nation. Since their initial inception into colleges and universities in the United States during the 1960s, Latina/o campus organizations have provided "a rich legacy of activism, community service, advocacy, and naturally, leadership development" (Davis, 1997, p. 231).

Latina/o college student organizations, like most minority student organizations, gained prominence at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the high levels of youthful energy and activist commitment directed at social and educational issues (Parra, Rios, & Gutierrez, 1976). Latina/o college student organizations addressed a wide array of issues ranging from civil rights and farm laborer rights to concerns regarding the disproportionate number of minorities fighting in the Vietnam War. In response to the rising number of Latina/o students enrolling into colleges and universities at the time, these groups also advocated for more campus counseling and support services for Latina/o students, as well as for increased campus awareness on issues and concerns pertinent to the Latina/o community.

Latina/o students' involvement in college organizations at predominantly White institutions will be investigated in this chapter, with emphasis on the impact of Latina/o student organizations on educational outcomes that enhance academic success. By providing this specific focus, higher education administrators will become aware of the potential effect these groups have on Latina/o identity, leadership, and cognitive development. Practitioners and researchers will also be able to examine these activities with regard to their influence on academic performance, retention, and graduation. Latina/o student organizations at predominantly White institutions have increased and grown, are diverse in their goals and activities, are committed to social change, and provide culturally relevant support systems for Latina/o college students.

## LATINA/O STUDENT ORGANIZATION INVOLVEMENT

Latina/o student organizations explicitly educate the campus on issues pertinent to their members, and they advocate for the maintenance of cultural identity in a predominantly White college environment (Davis, 1997). By providing interactions both within and outside the campus, involvement in these groups gives Latina/o college students a feeling of belonging and being at home within their campus community. Participation in Latina/o college student organizations was also reported to provide students a mediating element to handle the effects of hostile adverse educational environments that can sometimes be found at predominantly White institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Trevino, 1992). The intersection of culture and learning seen through the lens of involvement



is important to enhance college environments that are conducive for student success.

Three outcomes that ensue from Latina/o student organization involvement are addressed in this chapter. Outcomes in cultural identity, leadership, and academic engagement connected to Latina/o students' involvement in Latina/o and minority organizations at different institutional types are considered. The selected outcomes are investigated for their potential impact on student learning. First, the social change model of leadership will be analyzed with regard to how Latina/o student organization involvement impacts outcomes of the model. This is a model designed for college students and advocates for leadership practice that is grounded in social responsibility and change on behalf of others for the common good (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996). Second, Latina/o student organization involvement will be examined for its influence on identity development within students. First-generation Latina/o college students' identity development will be highlighted, with special interest on the role Latina/o Greek organizations play with identity development. Jehangir (2009) found that student support networks, much like those found in student organizations, allow ethnic first-generation students to reflect on and address cultural conflict and cognitive dissonance, which is a clear example on how alternate support networks help students navigate the system at PWIs. When investigating the possible influence involvement has on academic engagement, very few student involvement studies have focused directly on Latina/o organizations. Trevino (1992) found that Latina/o students who were active in co-curricular activities perceive themselves as having strong academic skills. Latina/o student organizations have a deeper purpose and mission than providing social outlets for students. They should be examined for their role in promoting campus involvement and student learning.

### Cultural Identity

A majority of Latina/o students attend institutions where they are the minority and as a result often associate with other Latinas/os (Stearns, Watanabe, & Snyder, 2002). Oseguera, Locks, and Vega (2009) found that ethnic identity and culture have a strong interpretive influence on students' meaning-making process. Furthermore, the quality and quantity of connections that students of color make with both individuals and organizations determine their likelihood of success (Museus, 2010). Torres (2003) found that students from geographical areas where Latinas/os are a critical mass did not see themselves as in the minority until they arrived on a predominantly White college campus. This change in their environment prompts a stronger tie to their ethnicity rather than assimilation.

Providing Latina/o college students with multiple involvement opportunities that reflect their identities and backgrounds will allow Latina/o students to excel at their college or university (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). As stated by Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999), "Deep conscious immersion into cultural traditions and values through religious, familial, neighborhood, and educational communities instills a positive sense of ethnic identity and confidence" (p. 39). For example, a student in Torres' (2003) study who self-identified as bicultural talked about her experiences joining the Latina/o student group on her campus and meeting a friend she related to. She stated:

As I was growing up, I never really thought of myself as a Latina. Like it wasn't very important in life, and I am just realizing how important it is, and how I want to learn more about the culture, and just to learn more about my family, and my ancestors, and what not. (p. 543)

Extracurricular involvement has been described as assisting identity development for Latina/o college students. Environments that encourage positive identity development for minority college students tend to enhance academic success. Latina/o student organizations have continuously allowed Latina/o students to find their social outlet, learn more about their individual cultures and educate others on them.

According to Guardia and Evans (2008), "One way in which Latina/o college students become involved [and learn more about their identity] is by participation in fraternity and sorority life, specifically Latina/o Greek letter organizations" (p. 168). Guardia and Evans explored various factors that influence the ethnic identity of Latina/o fraternity members at a Hispanic serving institution (HSI), finding that membership in a Latina/o fraternity at an HSI may enhance the ethnic identity development of students. When Latina/o students establish strong connections with fellow ethnic minority members, these connections have a positive impact on academic achievement (Conchas, 2001).

Latina/o students' college success also influences how they navigate hostile campus environments where racism and discrimination still unfortunately exist (Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Longterbeam, Sedlacek, and Alarcon (2007) found that many Latina/o college students cope with these challenges by connecting with the Latina/o community on campus as a means of support in order to maintain their Latina/o cultural identity. Baker (2008) noted that many underrepresented students rely on the support of minority-based student organizations while attending college. Latina/o college students who become involved in activities that promote their Latina/o identity are more likely to graduate in comparison to those who are not involved in similar activities (Hernandez, 2002; Longterbeam et al., 2004). The strong familial influences within the Latina/o community should be taken into consideration when speaking about Latina/o students in higher education.

Family connections and similar strength relationships are key characteristics for Latina/o academic success, especially since Latina/os tend to be first-generation college students. According to Ortiz and Hernandez (2011), "Many Latina/os are the first in their families to participate in higher education, with only 13.2% of all Latina/o holding a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 29.5% of the total population" (p. 94). With limited guidance, first-generation Latina/o college students often have no one to turn to for support, and many do not have role models to help them understand the expectations and complexities of the higher education system (Abrego, 2008). According to Roberts and Rosenwald (2001), family support and relationships between first-generation students and their parents commonly suffer when the students go to college. This relationship strain is a result of the lack of commonality that develops between first-generation students and their parents who are unable to relate to the contexts that have become such a key aspect of their children's lives (Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001).

In a qualitative study at a large Midwestern public research institution on first-generation Latina/o students' identity development, Schlossberg (1989) found that similar to the theory of marginality and maturing, participants experience the shift from marginalization to belonging. Students who felt marginalized early in their college experience began to feel as if they matured after meeting other Latina/o students, joined Latina/o-oriented student organizations, and developed relationships with Latina/o-identified mentors (Carrasquillo, Martin, & Santa-Ramirez, 2011). The students maintained regular communication with their families when they began their collegiate career. Many of the students sought out student organizations that allowed them to express their cultures and share similar college experiences with others whose families did not fully understand the collegiate experience. Although the students sought out other avenues to find where they mattered on campus, the students maintained supportive family relationships, which is among the most important aspects of transition for the student and their persistence toward graduation (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

The establishment of family-like bonds and sense of belonging among Latina/o student organization members was mentioned in studies studying identity development among Latina/o college students. Guardia and Evans (2008) conducted a study on Latin-oriented fraternities and their members, and one of the findings includes the students having feelings that the organization provides the members with "a family atmosphere and Latina/o unity" (p. 177). Torres (2004) highlighted one student's thoughts about being associated with a Latina/o student organization, saying, "I don't know if more comfortable is the word, but I just feel like it's a warmer setting" (p. 465). Latina/o student organizations tend to serve this purpose of establishing and offering a potential home away from home for Latina/os who seek connection and place on campus.

## Leadership

As college leadership programs and activities are directed at a larger cross section of the student body, it is particularly important for educators to pay attention to different social identity groups and their distinct leadership needs (Bordas, 2007; Hoppe, 1998). Diverse groups of students present unique developmental needs and influences (Harper & Quayle, 2009) and understanding the nuances is crucial to develop a future generation of leaders that is inclusive of an increasingly diverse student body.

Some research indicates that Latina/o students involved in ethnic associations have a broader purpose of contributing to a Latina/o community than solely individual academic or social gains (Reyes, 2012). When considering Latina/o students' involvement, much of the literature shows that Latina/o college students join Latina/o student organizations to link up with others, creating a greater sense of belonging (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004); however, Reyes (2012) found that many Latina/os see their membership in such organizations as a way of giving back to other Latina/os through political, personal, or professional means.

Considering Reyes' (2012) findings, a leadership model pertinent to this area is the social change model of leadership (HERL, 1996). The social change model is designed for college students and advocates for leadership practice that is grounded in social responsibility and creating change on behalf of others for the common good (HERL, 1996). This model could be used to further understand the leadership experiences of students in Latina/o student organizations or to create programs and activities that support their way of leading. For instance, Latina/os who perceive themselves as activists more likely participate in college extracurricular activities (Davis, 1997; Montelongo, 2003; Johnson, 1997); however, being an activist is often met with stereotypical characteristics that use unpleasant depictions of angry protests and hostile boycotts to describe their involvement (for examples, see Moscoso, 1995; Navarrette, 1993). While these prejudiced descriptions fail to capture the true intent of activists, Latina/o student organizations do provide a leadership opportunity for those whose aim is to make others aware of Latina/o issues and concerns both on and off campus. Latina/o activists likely use college extracurricular involvement to achieve this goal (Davis, 1997; Montelongo, 2003).

Other studies have examined Latina/o students' leadership activities and involvement. Baker (2008) examined the effect of involvement in six different types of student organizations, as well as involvement in a co-ethnic student organization for underrepresented college students. Baker found that political organizations were the most beneficial type of organizational involvement for the academic performance of minority college students. This finding should be noted in that many Latina/o student organizations have a political focus or emphasis. Baker states that political involvement had a positive influence on the academic

performance of Black males, Latinos, and Latinas and political involvement was the only type of organizational support that had a positive effect on the grades of both Latinas and Latinos. It was thought that the benefit might be related to increased levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Baker, 2008).

For students, involvement in a Latina/o student organization is like rejoining *la familia*—the Latina/o student organizations becomes a place where the student can feel welcomed and supported within an otherwise challenging environment. Being a part of *la familia* becomes a critical piece for Latina/o student leadership. It is through *la familia* that students can begin to cope with the stressful environment of college (Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010). Latina/o students that perceive a hostile climate on campus express more difficulty in adjusting academically, socially, and emotionally. Through involvement opportunities in Latina/o student organizations, Latina/o students find a place where they can be themselves and begin to use each other for support. The Latina/o student organization becomes a place where the students can rebuild that sense of connection to the campus, which can then lead to a more positive learning environment. Academic confidence and skills are increased for Latina/o students when positive interactions with other peers occur (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). *La familia* provides Latina/o students a way to become connected and a way for them to get involved and give back. This engagement is critical in helping students adjust to a new environment but also in helping them to become more academically successful, which further highlights the importance Latina/o student organizations play in creating that *la familia* atmosphere for students.

While being a part of *la familia* is important, taking on a leadership role within *la familia* takes on greater meaning. Becoming a leader within a student organization has been shown to be linked to greater educational involvement, better life-management skills, and increased cultural participation (Foubert & Granger, 2006). While there is a positive impact in becoming a leader within a student organization, this positive impact is further heightened when this leadership takes place within *la familia*. The Latina/o student leadership in *la familia* takes on a deeper meaning as these students become role models for their peers as well as spokespersons for their community. Due to these additional roles, this increased level of responsibility challenges positive impacts. It is critical that those working with these students leaders are aware of these heightened expectations.

Fischer (2007) explained that “for minority students, greater involvement in formal social activities such as school clubs and organizations, was positively related to college grades” (p. 144). After all groups of students were compared, Fischer found that “having more formal (i.e., extracurricular) and informal (i.e., friends) social ties was positively and significantly related to higher levels of satisfaction” (p. 145). Thus, Fischer found higher levels of satisfaction can begin to impact a

student's ability to perform better in the classroom as well as reducing the likelihood of leaving college.

When considering leadership and leadership development activities, students involved in leadership activities have higher levels of educational attainment than students who do not participate in these activities (Astin, 1993). Scholars have linked increases in leadership development to varied college outcomes, including academic persistence, career aspirations, academic and work-related performance, the ability to combat stereotype threat, adaptability, and self-efficacy (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Wolniak, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012). These outcomes may be especially relevant for students of color attempting to navigate predominantly White institutions.

### Academic Development

Astin (1993) postulates that the quality and quantity of a student's involvement in their college experience has a proportional effect on a student's learning and development. Such involvement contributes to intellectual development by promoting awareness of both the educational environment and the resources and learning opportunities available for students to meet academic standards. There are many factors, such as cultural, economic, and social expectations and/or pressures that Latina/o students experience in their educational experience. These external barriers can play a role in decisions on the type of institution Latina/os attend for their higher education. As previous sections note, Latina/os encounter a variety of struggles while attending college; however, Latina/o student organizations provide programs that reaffirm students as capable learners (Gandara & Contreras, 2010). The more confident Latina/o students are in their strategies to succeed academically, the greater their levels of academic achievement.

Montelongo (2003) and Montelongo and Duran-Guzman (2011) surveyed Chicana/o and Puerto Rican students at two large Midwestern PWIs about the nature of their involvement with college student organizations. When comparing Chicana/o students with Puerto Ricans, Chicana/os reported that college student organizations provide members opportunities to become more independent within their educational environment more so than Puerto Ricans. This finding highlights the importance of addressing within-group differences in studying Latina/o college student populations. The difference is explained in part due to the larger number of Chicana/o students within the total Latina/o undergraduate student population.

Culturally relevant factors associated with Latina/o students' involvement also were found that had potential effects on educational outcomes. Students that used cultural activities (i.e., Latina/o student organizations) to establish campus



connections and perceptions of the beneficial aspects of Latina/o student organization participation were found to be significant predictors of both satisfaction with college and participation in college extracurricular activities (Montelongo & Duran-Guzman, 2011). Involvement in campus life has a positive effect on Latina/o students' learning, and their perceptions that Latina/o student organizations are supportive of their academic development likely carries over to actual improved academic performance (Montelongo, 2003).

Montelongo found that participation in Latina/o student organizations appear to lower Latina/o students' grade point averages (GPA). If students are members or officers of these organizations, then there may be an increased likelihood that their GPA will be negatively influenced; however, students remarked that academic support is one of the most important functions of minority student organizations. It seems that these organizations would have a positive effect on this outcome. Previous researchers have already shown that holding a leadership position is a negative predictor of undergraduates' GPAs (Astin, 1993). The effect may be the consequence of a high or low GPA, rather than a cause (Astin, 1993). Latina/o students looking to improve their GPA may initially seek help and resources with Latina/o student organizations.

### LATINA/O STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

To effectively increase the positive impacts of cultural identity, leadership, and academic engagement, student affairs professionals must understand the cultural factors that shape Latina/o college student involvement. Understanding these factors can help campuses in developing learning environments that are conducive to academic success. The three outcomes that were examined—cultural identity, leadership, and academic development—have direct effects on academic performance, retention, and graduation. In addition, campus satisfaction, sense of belonging, and community engagement are enhanced, which indirectly can influence academic performance by providing a campus environment where validation and support are recognized.

Latina/o student organizations can help students navigate their own identity by providing supportive elements that allow cultural expression and interactions with others from similar backgrounds. Involvement with these groups produces much needed social capital that can be used to promote student success, despite typically being the minority, especially at predominantly White institutions. The continued rapid growth of Latino-affiliated fraternities and sororities on college campuses highlights the importance belonging has with Latina/o student involvement. Within these groups, members find family-type bonding, which allows for the exploration of their place on campus and in society in general.

Latina/o student organizations are important tools for leadership development. Campus leaders can promote academic success for Latinas/os. While some negative perceptions still exist with regard to the political activism of such groups (Montelongo, 2003), political activism is sometimes a response to incite social change. Leadership is also further promoted by instilling a sense of la familia, a cultural characteristic of Latina/o student involvement where opportunities for family-like connections with peers are considered when determining organizational involvement. La familia is crucial especially for first-generation college Latina/o students in that this helps in successfully navigating the complex college academic environments.

Latina/o student organizations promote academic engagement in that members use such groups to find academic resources and peer support. Since students rely on these groups to help them make sense of the academic environment, involvement may be directly related to the academic support that these organizations tend to offer to their members. Latina/o student organizations can also be a helpful tool to direct students toward when encountering academic difficulty.

Today, Latina/o college student organizations on predominantly white campuses have increased in number and have become extremely diverse in regard to their activities and purposes (Delgado-Romero, Hernandez, & Montero, 2004). Presently, numerous Latina/o college student organizations exist on campuses to provide more than social outlets for students (Davis, 1997; Delgado-Romero, Hernandez, & Montero, 2004). These groups have become campus entities whose functions have expanded to advance goals for academic support, career development, and fraternity and sorority life, just to name a few. Despite the diversity apparent among the types of Latina/o college student organizations and their activities, their roots are firmly planted in social change, commitment to the Latina/o community, and the common goal to be student resources for social and emotional comfort and adjustment at PWIs (Davis, 1997; Trevino, 1992). The origins and functions of Latina/o student groups reflect both cultural and sociohistorical factors unique to the Latina/o experience in the United States. It is important for campuses to create supportive niches for Latina/o students to transform college environments into one that welcomes these students. Latina/o student organizations are campus resources where such supportive niches can be found.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# First-generation College Students' Leadership Experiences AND Academic Outcomes

KRISTA M. SORIA

Scholarly inquiries about first-generation college students—those who are the first in their families to attend higher education in pursuit of a four-year degree—and their experiences in higher education continue to be underrepresented in the literature (Pike & Kuh, 2005). It is encouraging that more and more first-generation college students are enrolling at college campuses across the nation each year (Choy, 2001); yet, persistent concerns about first-generation students' adjustment, academic engagement, retention, and inclusion in the fabric of campus life (Housel & Harvey, 2009; Jehangir, 2009, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2012) have led many scholars to critique the system of higher education as one that reproduces existing social-class disparities (Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013–2014; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Researchers have demonstrated that first-generation college students have lower grade point averages and greater academic challenges (Soria & Gorny, 2012; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001), are more likely to withdraw from college than students with college-educated parents (Ishitani, 2006), tend to come from backgrounds with fewer financial resources (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1990; Soria & Gorny, 2012), and often struggle with the cultural and social norms of higher education (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Consequently, it is important for colleges and universities to