
No Ways Tired

The Journey for Professionals of Color in Student Affairs

Volume III
**We've Come a Long Way:
Senior-Level Professionals**

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CHAPTER 12

TESTIMONIOS OF SENIOR- LEVEL LATINO¹ STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

Donde Hay Gana, Hay Maña

Ricardo Montelongo
Sam Houston State University

Ray V. Plaza
Santa Clara University

The authors entered the field of student affairs at a time when college campuses were focal points in the growing multiculturalism movement of the early 1990s. We felt empowered being involved in college student organizations and our leadership was strengthened by working to improve conditions for our Latinx peers and communities. These factors guided us to student affairs careers and eventually led to us to reach upper-level administrative positions in higher education. To share our advice and strategies, we use testimonios to represent the complexities in our careers. We were not only trying to find our place in student affairs where few Latinx were present, but we were also Latino males trying to understand what our new professional identities entailed.

Before we go into our thoughts and reflections of our combined 50 years in the student affairs profession, we would first like to ask two important questions: What is the representation of Latinx professionals in higher education student affairs? How can we retain our Latinx new professionals and mid-level colleagues when, according to Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, and Lowery (2016), over half are likely to leave within the first 5 years?

We ask these two questions because we see ourselves quite literally as survivors in a field that 25 years ago had miniscule representation of professionals who look like us—Latino males. In fact, Sagaria and Johnsrud (1991) stated, at the time we entered the field, approximately 1.6% of all student affairs professionals were Latina/os. One percent. Two percent if you kindly round it up. While an approximate figure, you can imagine what it was like being a new Latinx professional entering a field where it was rare to see others like yourself. For us, being Latino males made it even more challenging.

We offer our advice through the form of *testimonios*, or first-person narratives, that provide the complexities of the lived experienced for Latinx professionals (Espino, Vega, Rendon, Ranero, & Muniz, 2012). In using this format, we would first like to honor our Latina colleagues who established storytelling as theory in the flesh (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 2002; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). We share our testimonios as senior-level Latino student affairs representatives to inform and hopefully motivate. Can we say that representation has improved? We firmly believe that it has, but we still need to actively advance and promote student affairs professionals of color into higher ranks.

RAY'S TESTIMONIO

As I reflect on my career as a Latinx professional in higher education, it feels like it was yesterday that I was starting my first full-time position in residence life, but it has now been 20 years. My journey has been filled with numerous ups and downs, but it has demonstrated my perseverance and resolve in the face of adversity. As a first-generation college student, born to Puerto Rican parents, I faced my share of challenges. As I think about my personal journey, I realize that as professionals that we must reflect and understand how our journeys shaped who we are as individuals and how that influences the work we do.

Becoming a Student Leader and Graduate Student

When I entered college, my initial plan was to focus solely on academic coursework to graduate in 3 years to get a degree to become a journalist

or to go to graduate school to become a history professor. As I completed my first year at the University of Florida, I felt that something was missing in my experience. When I took advantage of an opportunity to do a study abroad program in history and English at Cambridge University in England, I realized what was missing. When I returned from that experience in Cambridge, I became more active within my residence hall.

My hall council involvement served as catalyst to additional campus leadership roles. As I was pondering the next steps in my academic journey, I knew I wanted to attend graduate school and pursue a career in student affairs. However, the process of going to graduate school was not easy. My biggest challenge was knowing I was not a strong standardized test taker. I had to take the GRE four times to improve my scores. In addition, I had to prove myself academically before the graduate program in counseling and student personnel would formally accept me. I spent a year as a post-baccalaureate student taking courses to show that I could handle academic rigor. Once I proved myself academically with the graduate coursework, I was formally accepted in the graduate program to attain a master's degree at the University of Florida.

Navigating My Professional Experiences

As a new professional in higher education, I certainly faced my share of challenges as graduate school does not fully prepare you for some of the organizational nuances that you face when navigating campus/organizational politics and other issues related to supervisors. In my own professional experiences, there was a point in my career where I was so focused on doing my work that I was not paying attention to the hostile climate that was enveloping me within an organization. I was not fully aware of this until this hostile climate affected me as an individual. It affected my self-esteem, my self-confidence as well as how others were perceiving me as a professional. I overcame the challenges, but this experience provided a valuable learning and reflective opportunity.

Another significant professional experience took place as I faced uncertainty when my full-time position was eliminated due to budget cuts. It is one of the toughest professional challenges when you lose your job and are not sure of the next steps. At that time in 2010, I was not ready nor was I prepared to leave the area or even undertake a formal job search. I decided to work two part-time jobs, one as a cashier at Wal-Mart and the other as a worker in the dining halls in order to stay in the area and remain connected to the institution as I was still working on my graduate degree. I learned many valuable lessons during this time, but it has helped me in my future roles. I managed to survive as I was willing to be flexible and to learn from

my experiences. As professionals, we have to be willing to be flexible in managing our challenges.

Understanding My Latinidad and Expanding My Engagement

In my personal journey as a Latino/a/x professional, one of my challenges has been this notion of not being Latino/a/x enough both within the Latino/a/x community and outside of the community. This concept of not being "Latino/a/x enough" continues because I can pass for being "White," or people assume that I can't speak or understand Spanish, and/or I am not part of the correct Spanish-speaking group, or when I speak Spanish, I speak it with a more traditional Spanish accent instead of a more Puerto Rican accent.

When I started working at Virginia Tech, I became more involved with issues affecting Latino/a/x students, faculty, and staff. The dean of students asked for my assistance in supporting the growing Latino/a/x student body and to become the liaison to *Circulo Hispanico*, the primary Latino/a/x student organization at the time. This opportunity allowed me to establish the first Hispanic Caucus of Faculty and Staff at Virginia Tech and, eventually, be involved in the development of the Hispanic/Latino Achievement Ceremony.

It would be these direct experiences with Latino/a/x issues that helped to shape my own reflections on my Latinidad and would be essential components in the work that I would do in future roles at other institutions and professional association involvement. I understand and appreciate how my identity as a Latinx professional and, as a professional of color, is central to my work in higher education.

Pursuing the PhD

In the midst of my professional work and involvement, I decided to start a PhD program in Fall 2000 at Virginia Tech. After 16 years of twists and turns, I finally walked across the stage with my degree in Fall 2016. It was a journey that started as a part-time student, as I was working full-time. It was not as easy process as I was working over 40-hour weeks and not making much academic progress until the job elimination happened in 2010. The job situation forced me to rethink my priorities and allowed me to better focus my efforts in trying to make more academic progress.

I was certainly dealing with imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978; Harvey & Katz, 1984) in thinking that my writing was not good enough,

but fortunately, I was able to reframe my thinking and, by the time that I left Virginia Tech in 2012, I defended my dissertation proposal. Reflecting, I could have easily given up on the dream of the PhD, but I was committed and when I started my new opportunity at Santa Clara University, my supervisors were supportive of my desire to complete the PhD. The support and new environment provided motivation that I needed to practice self-discipline in order to finish the dissertation. It is still surreal that it is completed and having the opportunity to walk across the stage was beyond words on many levels. I joined an exclusive club of Latino/a/x professionals with a doctorate degree.

Overall Thoughts

As a Latinx professional, I learned about the important role and obligation to make a difference for the next generation of Latinx professionals. I also have a much better appreciation for understanding the organizational challenges that higher education professionals face. Writing this critical review of my experiences, my testimonio, has provided some valuable lessons.

As a professional, we need to acknowledge not only our successes but also our failures and to understand our own missteps as part of the learning process. I gained better insight about myself and about why I continue to do this work within higher education. The last 20 years as a professional went by quickly, but I am honored and privileged to be in roles to help mentor the next generation of students and peers and to serve as a colleague to individuals from around the world. I know there will be other further leadership opportunities for me and I am excited for the challenges and opportunities that await in my desire to continue to make a difference.

RICARDO'S TESTIMONIO

I am a "born again Chicano." In my personal and professional identity, I have been on a constant quest to understand my place in society. As an undergraduate, my involvement with Latinx college student organizations allowed me to overtly express my culture through celebrations, programming, leadership, and activism. As a graduate student, I was exposed, finally, to writings that spoke directly to me regarding my history and representation in education.

My educational journey led me to a goal to help others like myself create a new sense of self within a college environment. As someone who has 25 years of experience in student affairs, it surprises me still that I identify closely with the "born again Chicano" label coined by Trevino (1992). Even

as I entered the field of student affairs, I was not always fully aware of the past injustices placed on the Chicana/o/x community, especially in higher education access, retention, and success. I find that I am in a constant process of defining and redefining myself as a lifelong learner.

In a similar fashion, I believe the student affairs profession has been "born again" in how it has responded to the evolving nature of college campuses. As I entered the field in the early 1990s, finding other Latinx administrators who chose this profession were very rare. I began to question how my future career was going to support my professional goals since there were few others who looked like me. Despite these initial feelings, I was optimistic for my career. As I start my narrative, I first want to state that I believe student affairs has made great strides in responding to diversity and social justice. I have witnessed not only an amazing growth of Latinx representation in the field, but also action-oriented initiatives and leadership focused on making college campuses agents for social change. Much has improved since I started my first position in student affairs.

The Rearview Mirror

I had a mixture of excitement, anxiety, and nervousness the morning I drove to Ohio for my first professional position in residence life. Having lived all my life in Texas, my first career goal was to find a job out of state so that I could make myself more marketable for the future. Prior to taking this first position, I had only been outside of Texas two or three times. What I did not realize was the impact the decision had on one of my strongest support systems—*mi familia*/my family.

For me, the impact was beautifully symbolized by something my dad did that morning. Dad was never one to be late for work and despite being my last day at home, he still planned to leave early to get to his warehouse job before his shift. When I said goodbye to him, he didn't get emotional, but I sensed the difficulty he had knowing his son would soon be driving 1,000 miles away to work in an unfamiliar place. After our last hug, he reached into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. He proceeded to give me some cash and told me, "Here *mijo*, for your trip." He then left. When I looked at the cash in my hand, I noticed that it was an odd mixture of bills totaling \$33. I immediately got a lump in my throat. It was then that I realized my father literally gave all he had as a gesture of support for my new career in higher education.

To this day, I still vividly remember when I pulled out of my parent's driveway to head north to my new residence life position. As I looked at my rearview mirror to see my mom give a final blessing for my Ohio trip, I realized the path I chose would forever change me. Saying goodbye to friends

and family is difficult. Saying goodbye to parents is even more challenging. Saying goodbye, as I reflect on my many years in student affairs, comes with career advancement. When you decide to move up the administration ladder, you must consider the impact your career decisions have on the family. As you start in the field and move upward, realize you have a professional identity that will constantly change. Many more goodbyes will occur. As you move forward to your next career phases and develop your professional identities, never forget the contributions of *familia*, however you define it.

“Hey Ponch”

My first administrative role as an assistant director of residence life at a small Quaker college in Ohio was equally rewarding and challenging. Rewards came with experiencing campus life at a small, liberal arts college. The personal student interaction that inspired me to work in student affairs was magnified compared to most of my experiences at large research universities. To this day, I remain in close contact with some of my former residence life student staff. Despite rewards like this, I also learned what it meant to be one of few Latino men working in the field in the mid-1990s.

“Hey Ponch!” was a phrase I heard quite frequently coming from one of the students I supervised in my residence life student staff. Innocuous at first, the more I heard the phrase, rather than my actual name, gave me notice that something else was meant by this statement. The name “Ponch” was the nickname given to the Latino character Frank Poncherello, portrayed by Erik Estrada, in the TV series “CHiPs.” The student who said it was a White male. During a staff outing, I advised the student I preferred my actual name in our interactions and informed him his preferred nickname for me lacked respect to my administrative position and identity. When I brought this to his attention as his supervisor, the student smiled at me and said, “Sure thing . . . Ponch.”

Experiences like this occurred quite frequently during my time living in the Midwest. Hearing microaggressions were a regular part of being a Latino male living in a rural area not familiar, at least during that time, with the Latinx community. Student affairs provides new professionals abundant career opportunities to experience life in different regions of the country. While the realization of possibly being one of a few professionals of color on campus, you might also be one of a few from your ethnic cultural group residing in the surrounding community. How will you prepare for such an environment? Reflecting on these opportunities, I found out that for professionals of color in student affairs, they come with caveats that should be considered when accepting a position. Advice like this was not taught in my graduate preparation program.

Finding Mentorship

One of the most rewarding positions in my student affairs career was serving as an academic advisor in a TRiO Student Support Services (SSS) program. After completing my doctorate, I decided to work as a practitioner to advance my goals in supporting underrepresented students. In the TRiO SSS program, I advised the most “at-risk” students who not only had extreme academic difficulties, but also personal challenges that followed them to college. For many of these students, messages that they would never succeed were heard throughout their education. The program provided them an opportunity to prove otherwise. Working with these students helped me understand the importance of establishing trust in our practice. This lesson was provided by one of my most challenging student cases in my professional career to this day.

I vividly recall my student Andre (name changed for this narrative) walking into my office emotional and angry. Long story short, I found out quickly that one of his close high school friends was murdered in a drive-by shooting the previous evening. In comforting Andre, I provided my condolences. He quickly responded by asking how I felt if he left campus to “go straighten things out.” Asking what he meant by this, he told me I knew exactly what he meant. Taking this as an opportunity to provide intense intervention, we spent the next two hours sorting out feelings and emotions. During this discussion, I shared with Andre that I truly believed in his future and that he could be a positive change for his home community—if only he stayed in college.

Andre trusted me with his challenges and from that day onward, I mentored him until his graduation. Seeing this young African American male eventually succeed as a college graduate reminds us that we need to have mentoring relationships no matter how high up the career ladder we reach. My career in student affairs includes several intensive mentoring relationships with men of color. These men range from recent graduates to those who will soon be receiving graduate and professional degrees. I want to make sure that these young men have vision, knowledge, and compassion. I see mentoring as a crucial strategy in career development. As professionals ourselves, interacting with a trusted colleague through mentoring allows us to understand the challenges we face in the field as well as an outlet to celebrate our achievements. Without mentoring, career burnout could occur along with thoughts of leaving the profession. For my Latinx student affairs colleagues, I mentor them extensively because I am aware of how difficult the profession can be for them. We all have hopes and aspirations for ourselves, students, and campuses through our work. To lose that would be indeed tragic.

Onward

As of this writing, I have accumulated 25 years of professional experience as a Latino professional in student affairs and I plan to stay in the profession. I have held two director-level positions, supervised new and seasoned professionals, and coordinated programs which have served thousands of students when all is totaled. I have written countless student recommendation letters to top graduate programs, received first blessings at an episcopal ordination, been invited to white coat ceremonies at medical schools, celebrated new teacher jobs, and for a select few, provided motivation to work in student affairs. The profession provided me a mixture of successes and difficulties in my years in the field. Even now, I find myself still dealing with microaggressions on campus, explaining Latinx higher education issues to colleagues who should have learned about these in graduate school, and even justifying the use of the term *Latinx* in a field that claims to be “woke.”

The legacy left from student affairs professionals of color who reach the senior ranks of administration is *value*. Value is shown when new scholarship produced by researchers of color are commonly used in courses in our graduate preparation programs and when our new programs providing mentoring, leadership, and student success are led and directed by student affairs professionals of color who share the similar experiences with their students. In the end, I reflect on what my legacy will be in student affairs. I remember that young professional driving away to his first position in the Midwest and the nervous excitement of what could be ahead in his career. These are truly exciting times in student affairs. Hence, my last strategy to offer professionals of color in student affairs is simply put into one powerful word—*onward*.

NOTE

1. The authors use the terms *Latinx* and *Latino* interchangeably within this chapter. The term *Latinx* is gender neutral and provides a frame in which to capture the diversity found within the group. *Latino* is used to identify issues specific to being a Latino male.

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