

**Thriving Latino Males in Selective Predominantly White Institutions**

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### **Abstract**

Researchers focus disproportionately on factors that contribute to low enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates among Latino males in higher education. Instead of examining factors that undermine the success of these undergraduates—which often perpetuates deficit-oriented discourses about Latino male college students, their families, and communities—this scholarly paper explores how participants conceptualized and embodied success at two selective, predominantly White institutions. Using qualitative data available from The National Study on Latino Male Achievement in Higher Education, this scholarly paper reveals how Latino male undergraduates exhibited five qualities associated with the thriving quotient: 1) Engaged Learning, 2) Academic Determination, 3) Positive Perspective, 4) Social Connectedness, and 5) Diverse Citizenship. Implications for research, policy, and practice focus on creating and sustaining college environments that promote thriving among Latino males in higher education.

Latino males are capable of thriving at selective U.S. colleges and universities. Although researchers contend that Hispanics<sup>1</sup> continue to be underrepresented at selective institutions (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), a national study conducted by Melguizo (2008) revealed that institutional selectivity is positively related to college completion rates among racial/ethnic minorities. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88/2000), Melguizo discovered that graduation rates for Hispanics doubled from 45% at non-selective institutions to 92% at selective institutions. This finding suggests that Latino males are more likely to succeed if they enroll at selective institutions. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on the experiences of Latino males in higher education (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), and what research does exist tends to focus disproportionately on factors that undermine the success of Latino male undergraduates (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009; Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009). This gap in our knowledge base at a time of rapidly changing demographics in higher education provides limited insights about how to create and sustain environments that promote thriving at selective institutions for Latino males.

Commissioned for the 2016 American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education's (AAHHE) annual conference, this scholarly paper addresses *how Latino male undergraduates conceptualized and embodied collegiate success at selective, predominantly White institutions*. While a decade has passed since Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates (2005) published *Student Success in College*, the insights imparted by these scholars have not directly translated into research, policies, or practices that address how to increase the collegiate success of Latino

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the terms Hispanic and Latino will be used interchangeably when referring to individuals of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Central American, and South American descent. In addition, we use the terms male and female to indicate the sex of individuals and subcategories within Latino and Hispanic student populations. We chose to use male and female rather than men and women because we do not aim to provide a gendered analysis of the data. When referring to other studies, the use of the terms Hispanic, Latino, and other subcategories (i.e., sex, ethnicity) will be determined by how they are referred to in the literature.

males. Moreover, the extant literature published on Latino males to date has focused on factors that contribute to low enrollment, persistence, and completion rates in higher education (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Carrillo, 2013b; Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013; Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2012; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009). Whereas the experiences of Black male achievers have received considerable attention (Harper, 2013, 2014; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003; Strayhorn, 2013), researchers are also devoting increased attention to successful Latino male undergraduates at a time when the national conversation on males of color is gaining momentum as a result of President Obama's *My Brother's Keeper initiative* (Carrillo, 2013a; Gonzalez, 2002; Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Morales, 2008; Sáenz, Ponjuán, & Figueroa, 2016; Blinded For Review).

Building on more recent studies, this scholarly paper makes a significant contribution to research on student success by accounting for Latino male undergraduates' conceptualizations of collegiate success. Instead of using traditional measures of success (i.e., grades, completion rates), this study focuses on other important college outcomes such as students' learning and development, goal attainment, sense of belonging, and civic engagement. We utilize Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient to explore how Latino male achievers conceptualized and embodied collegiate success. Schreiner's analyses revealed five factors that contribute to college students' academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal thriving. These factors are explored at length through student's own perspectives in this commissioned research paper. Our findings provide new insights to researchers, policymakers, and educators committed to helping Latino males thrive at selective, predominantly White institutions (PWI).

## Literature Review

Our review of the research literature highlights some key theoretical perspectives on student success in higher education as they relate to the experiences of Latino males. In *Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle*, Kuh et al. (2007) summarized sociological, cultural, organizational, and psychological perspectives relevant to creating and sustaining conditions that foster student success in higher education. Although Kuh et al. identified myriad factors (i.e., student background characteristics, pre-college experiences, institutional conditions) that contribute to students' post-college outcomes, less than 5% of the studies cited in this seminal publication focused on Latina/o college students. Whereas most studies focused on how Latinas/os gain access or transition to college, only 3 (out of 24) publications focused on successful Latina/o college students. Building on Kuh et al.'s contributions, we revisit theoretical perspectives on student success, but focus on existing studies relevant to understanding how Latino males succeed at selective PWIs.

Sociological perspectives on student success highlight the role social forces and structures play in college students' decision to persist. Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory, which focuses on students' academic and social integration, is one of the most widely cited sociological theories in higher education. Although this theory explains voluntary student departure, it obscures how Latino males are subtly forced out of higher education. For example, Torres and Fergus (2012) reported striking differences between the experiences of White and Latino males in the K-12 public school system. Whereas a slightly higher percentage of Latino males than White males were suspended and classified with a learning disability, the percentage of White males in gifted and talented programs is nearly double in comparison to Latino males (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Torres & Fergus, 2012). These programs provide students with greater

access to curricula needed to successfully transition from high school to college. This offers one explanation regarding the underrepresentation of Latino males in higher education.

Although Tinto advocated for the integration of college students, Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) argued that racial/ethnic minority students are assimilated and forced to abandon family traditions, customs, and values to gain membership in PWIs. This can have a detrimental effect on the psychological well-being Latino male undergraduates (Gloria et al., 2009). Moreover, [Blinded For Review] found that parents transmitted cultural wealth (i.e., knowledge, skills, resources) in the form of familial, linguistic, and aspirational capital to nurture Latino males' disposition to succeed at a selective institution. This latter finding suggests that fostering the success of Latino male undergraduates is dependent on maintaining strong familial ties and helping students translate their cultural wealth to college.

Cultural perspectives focus on the unique challenges racial/ethnic minority college students experience at PWIs (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Existing studies on campus climate indicate that racial/ethnic minorities are more likely to experience prejudicial treatment than White peers, which contributes to negative perceptions of the campus racial climate at PWIs (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). These negative perceptions can determine whether Latino undergraduates persist in college (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). While Latinas constituted 70% of the participants in this study, Gloria et al. (2009) later examined how cultural fit and coping responses contributed to Latino males' psychological well-being. Their analysis revealed that cultural congruity and emotion-focused coping were most predictive of psychological well-being; however, Latino males still perceived barriers to persisting in college. Although scholars have purposefully explored how Latino males navigate racially hostile campus climates (Carrillo, 2013; Gloria et al., 2009; Blinded For

Review), the findings generally focus on students assuming responsibility for their success. This is not intended to suggest that Latino male undergraduates do not bear responsibility for their success, but serves as a sobering reminder that educators and administrators should be held accountable for fostering conditions that promote student success.

Organizational perspectives draw attention to institutional structures and processes that have an effect on college student outcomes. Factors such as institutional size, selectivity, and faculty-student ratios influence students' attitudes and behaviors (Pike & Kuh, 2005). In comparison to other racial/ethnic groups, Kim, Rennick, and Franco (2014) found that Latino juniors and seniors at highly selective institutions reported the greatest gains in a range of cognitive, affective, and civic outcomes. With exception to grades, Latinos experienced the greatest cognitive gains in the areas of analytical and critical thinking, reading comprehension, as well as written and verbal communication. This refutes claims that racial/ethnic minority students lack the intellectual ability to succeed at selective institutions. On the contrary, Melguizo (2008) found that racial/ethnic minority students are more likely to complete college at highly selective versus non-selective institutions. Whereas less than half (45%) of Latinas/os complete college at non-selective institutions, completions rates increase up to 92% at selective institutions. These gains have been associated with admissions processes, endowments, and expenditures on students (Alon, 2007; Baker, 2013; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006).

Psychological perspectives generally center on the role individual attributes such as perceptions, motivation, and self-efficacy play in student success (Bandura, 1982; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). In response to studies that characterize racial/ethnic minorities as academically unmotivated, Griffin (2006) integrated self-determination, socio-cognitive, and attribution theory to describe the motivations of high-achieving African American college

students. She found that participants motivations were “neither purely internal nor external . . . [but] a multidimensional construct” (p. 395). Consistent with more recent studies on Black male achievers (Harper, 2013; Moore et al., 2003; Strayhorn, 2013), participants relied on internal and external support systems to maintain their academic motivations. Despite the dearth in research about Latino male achievers, these findings suggest that Latina/o college students can succeed if they believe that intelligence is a malleable quality and receive adequate support with challenging learning experiences (Carrillo, 2013a). [Blinded For Review], for example, found that Latino males’ dispositions to succeed at a selective institution were nurtured by parents and college preparatory programs, but sustained by interactions with peers and mentors in college.

Although existing theories on student success account for myriad factors that influence Latino males’ experiences in college, there are several limitations in this body of research. First, the majority of studies do not address the unique experiences of Latino male college students. Despite the proliferation of research on Black male achievers (Harper, 2014), few scholars have focused exclusively on successful Latino male undergraduates (Carrillo, 2013a, 2013b; Blinded For Review), especially across varied institutional contexts. Second, major theoretical perspectives rarely incorporate the voices of racial/ethnic minority students with exception to Harper (2006, 2009, 2013). Instead of inviting college students to share their perspectives on what it means to be successful, researchers have imposed theories that may not align with how Latino males conceptualize success (Blinded For Review). Third, the need for research that utilizes anti-deficit frameworks such as Schreiner’s (2010) thriving quotient to improve the educational outcomes of Latino male undergraduates is much needed. Kinzie (2012) argues, “Contemporary theories must incorporate a range of perspectives to address the complexities of student success and inform practice and policy on behalf of students” (p. xviii). This study

provides a response to this call by inviting Latino male achievers to articulate how they conceptualized and embodied collegiate success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper employs Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient to illuminate how Latino male achievers conceptualized and embodied collegiate success. The term *thriving* is used to describe students who are intellectually, socially, and emotionally engaged in college. In addition to their academic success, thriving college students "experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college" (p. 12). Schreiner's analyses revealed that five factors<sup>2</sup> contribute to college students' academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal thriving.

Academic thriving is characterized by engaged learning and academic determination. *Engaged learning* occurs when students process course material, make connections between what they know and need to learn, and seek new learning opportunities. *Academic determination* is reflected in students' motivations to succeed in college and willingness to invest the effort needed to achieve their goals. Intrapersonal thriving is associated with maintaining a *positive perspective*. Students that thrive are not naïve or overly optimistic; rather, they are able to maintain a positive outlook and cope with adversity. Interpersonal thriving is characterized by social connectedness and diverse citizenship. Whereas *social connectedness* is dependent on having healthy relationships that foster a sense of belonging on campus, *diverse citizenship* manifests in students' openness to diversity and commitment to making a difference in society.

Consistent with the goals of this study, the thriving quotient advances a broader conceptualization of student success in higher education (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> The Thriving Quotient is comprised of five scales: 1) Engaged Learning, 2) Academic Determination, 3) Positive Perspective, 4) Social Connectedness, and 5) Diverse Citizenship.

Rather than relying exclusively on grades and traditional predictors of academic performance (i.e., socioeconomic status, parental education), the perspectives offered by Latino male achievers in this study provides a more holistic and anti-deficit conceptualization of collegiate success. Using Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient as an analytical tool to investigate the experiences of Latino males at selective PWIs reveals how academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal thriving are "amenable to change within students, rather than a fixed personality trait over which we have little control" (p. 4). Thus, educators are capable (and equally accountable) for creating and sustaining educational environments that promote thriving among Latino males in higher education.

### **Methodology & Methods**

Using the phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry, this study focused on understanding and describing the lived experiences of research participants (Patton, 2002). A phenomenological account describes what participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and the meanings they make of their shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study explored how Latino male undergraduates' conceptualized and embodied collegiate success at a selective, public and private research university.

### **Sample**

This study was conducted at two postsecondary institutions, Private University (PU) and State University (SU)<sup>3</sup>, located in the northeast region of the U.S. Both institutions are selective, four-year, residential campuses. During the 2010-2011 academic year, approximately 49,000 undergraduate students were enrolled at each university. Latinas/os comprised 5% of the undergraduate student population with a range of 4.2% at SU to 5.8% at PU.

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<sup>3</sup> The pseudonyms, Private University and State University, are used when referring to the sites of this study.

The twenty-one Latino male undergraduates that participated in this study were nominated by faculty, administrators, and student leaders using a criterion sampling strategy. This involves the selection of participants who meet predetermined criteria needed to identify information rich cases (Patton, 2002). Latino males were eligible to participate in this study if they were: 1) born or raised prior to the age of five in the U.S., 2) traditional-age college students, 3) enrolled as full-time students in various majors, 4) entered the institution as freshmen, 5) had junior or senior standing, and 6) maintained a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher during the time of the study (see Table 1). This study sought Latino males who maintained a 3.0 GPA because similar academic credentials are used to identify and select students for merit-based scholarships, undergraduate research experiences, and internship programs. The mean GPA for the entire sample was a 3.42 (on a 4.0 scale).

Table 1: Profile of Latino male achievers

Names <sup>4</sup>	Ethnicity	Family Income	FGCS <sup>5</sup>	Class Standing	Major	GPA
Adam	Mexican	40k-49k	Yes	Senior	Political Science	3.16
Geraldo	Nicaraguan	70k-79k	No	Junior	Forensic Science	3.33
Gilberto	Puerto Rican	10k-19k	Yes	Senior	Electrical Engineering	3.35
Hector	Salvadoran	80k-89k	Yes	Senior	Political Science	3.15
Leo	Puerto Rican	30k-39k	Yes	Senior	Bio-Behavioral Health	3.05
Luis	Guatemalan	30k-39k	No	Senior	Biochemistry	3.84
Lupe	Puerto Rican	60k-69k	Yes	Junior	Criminal Justice	3.10
Marcos	Dominican	30k-39k	Yes	Senior	Comparative Literature	3.57

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms used for research participants.

<sup>5</sup> Denotes first-generation college student (FGCS), which included students whose parents did not complete a college degree in the U.S.

Mateo	Colombian	20k-29k	No	Senior	Finance	3.37
Melvin	Mexican	80k-89k	No	Junior	Economics	3.45
Micael	Peruvian	70k-79k	No	Junior	Journalism	3.80
Miguel	Puerto Rican	100k +	No	Senior	Economics	3.85
Noe	Cuban	20k-29k	Yes	Junior	Elementary Education	3.29
Oscar	Mexican	10k-19k	Yes	Junior	Psychology	3.25
Rafael	Colombian	60k-60k	Yes	Senior	Info Science & Tech.	3.36
Ricardo	Cuban	100k+	No	Junior	Communications	3.99
Samuel	Cuban	100k+	No	Junior	Mech. Engineering	3.64
Silvio	Cuban	100k+	Yes	Junior	Earth & Mineral Sci.	3.69
Tito	Dominican	10k-19k	Yes	Senior	Health & Societies	3.30
Victor	Puerto Rican	40k-49k	No	Senior	Psychology	3.02
Vicente	Mexican	100k+	No	Junior	Anthropology	3.16

### Data Collection

Data collection was completed during the 2010-2011 academic year. Students were asked to complete an online survey that gathered basic demographic and academic information. Participants also submitted an electronic copy of their academic transcript to verify their cumulative GPA. Additionally, each student participated in a face-to-face interview that ranged between two and three hours. Consistent with Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient, the interview protocol included open-ended questions that explored how students conceptualized and embodied collegiate success. For example, participants were asked to discuss their most significant accomplishments in college as well as to share their definition of collegiate success.

## Data Analysis

Adhering to Moustakas's (1994) recommendations regarding the analysis of qualitative data, the first author on this manuscript used a step-by-step technique was used to analyze the interview transcripts. I began data analysis by engaging in *epoché* to identify my pre-understandings about the phenomenon under investigation. Although Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) contend that it is impossible for researchers to set aside their pre-understandings, I annotated each transcript with reflective comments and questions to become more aware of my pre-understandings and the ways in which they influenced my interpretations. This process allowed me to actively reflect on my positionality as a researcher.

Being [Blinded for Review] Scholar has played a formative role in how I approach the study of collegiate success. Since 1989, the [Blinded for Review] Foundation has prepared “public high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential . . . whom might have been overlooked by traditional college selection processes” to succeed at selective institutions [Blinded for Review, Year]. While my experience at [Blinded for Review] University was positive, I experienced microaggressions that undermine the success of many first-generation, low-income, racial/ethnic minority students at selective PWIs (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). The [Blinded for Review] Foundation provided myriad resources needed to thrive academically, intrapersonally, and interpersonally in college.

After identifying my pre-understandings of collegiate success, I analyzed the interview data by adapting several techniques from Moustakas's (1994) guidelines for phenomenological research. Using a deductive approach, I employed Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient to interpret and develop textural and structural descriptions of each participant's experience of collegiate success. In particular, I used the thriving quotient (TQ) to examine how Latino male

achievers conceptualized and embodied collegiate success, which allowed me to see the interplay between the five scales that comprise the TQ. In other words, rather than studying each scale separately, I considered the five factors collectively to provide a holistic conceptualization of success that aligned with participant's reports.

While reading interview transcripts, I annotated the margins of each transcript with comments and phrases drawn from participants' own words that reflected their experience of collegiate success and aligned with Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient. I compared annotations and developed a preliminary list of codes—or what Moustakas termed horizons of the experience—to guide future data analysis. That is, I identified, abstracted, and labeled participants' expressions that revealed essential aspects of Latino males' experience of collegiate success. This process ultimately resulted in the identification of invariant constituents (i.e., sub-themes) that emerged across participants (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents were helpful in identifying how Latino male achievers conceptualized and embodied success in college. Ultimately, I used the invariant constituents to create a composite description of collegiate success for participants as a whole. Throughout this process, I reflected on my positionality as researchers in order to remain aware of how my identities were influencing my interpretations.

For the findings, I selected two participants to illustrate the breadth and depth of each theme for the group as a whole. Although I present two participants' experiences in detail for each theme to provide a rich, contextualized description, the focus is not on the individuals per se but rather on the convergences and divergences among the participants' descriptions for each theme. To this end, I drew connections to other participants' experiences in each findings section. Through these convergences and divergences, the complexities and nuances of the theme

for the group as a whole emerge. After I present descriptions for each theme, I explain how the theme relates to Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was enhanced in this study by addressing issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Associates, 2002). To establish credibility, I engaged in negative case analysis whereby evidence that disconfirmed or diverged from my initial findings was purposefully examined; this process ensured that counter-patterns were explored within the data. Second, to establish transferability and ensure that “the findings are meaningful to the reader” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 37), I present rich, detailed descriptions of participants and their experiences for readers to determine the extent to which the findings apply to other context. Finally, to enhance both dependability and confirmability, I maintained an audit trail and remained aware of my subjectivities through journaling activities. The second author of this manuscript also served as a peer-reviewer and provided feedback on the reported findings.

### **Findings**

The three overarching themes presented in this section explain how participants conceptualized and embodied success. The first theme—academic thriving—focuses on how participants embodied engaged learning and academic determination. Additionally, the second theme—intrapersonal thriving—addresses experiences that enhanced and undermined Latino male achievers' ability to maintain a positive perspective. Lastly, the third theme—interpersonal thriving—explores how participants experienced social connectedness and diverse citizenship.

#### **Academic Thriving**

Latino male achievers viewed college as an important educational opportunity. In general, participants believed that attending college was essential to achieving their personal, educational, and professional goals. This section addresses how Latino males in this study embodied engaged learning and academic determination.

**Engaged learning.** Learning was not confined to the classroom. In fact, when Latino males in this study commented on significant learning experiences, they rarely involved interactions with faculty in the classroom. Lupe was one of the few participants to comment on the role an instructor played in facilitating his learning. Prior to college, Lupe was diagnosed with a learning disability and placed in special education courses. He was rarely praised by educators, but recalled the first time Dr. Yants told him, “You came a long way.” Lupe was inspired by Dr. Yants and appreciated how she structured his African Literature course. He added, “We sat in a circle, which usually doesn’t happen [in other courses] . . . but she also asked questions and wanted us to answer them—it was more like we were teaching each other.” After completing this course, Lupe planned to take a course in the Latino Studies Department. When Lupe was asked to elaborate on this point, he added, “I don’t know anything about my culture, history, or Puerto Rico. I think that’s kind of sad.” In addition to engaging Lupe as a learner, Dr. Yants inspired him to take greater ownership of his educational experiences at SU.

Despite their commitment to learning, several participants noted how their experiences did not align with their expectations. Based on PU’s selectivity, Adam anticipated that students would be more invested in learning, but he discovered that many of his peers “came for the diploma, not for the education.” Adam desired to learn from his peers, but he found that they were more interested in establishing networks to advance their careers. Marcos believed the “pre-professional experience at PU . . . resulted in [students] sacrificing knowledge and passion for

assumed necessity.” Contrary to Adam, he found peers that supported his intellectual interests in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. Marcos’ peers encouraged him to participate in two additional undergraduate research programs to explore his intellectual interests, collaborate with faculty, and prepare for graduate school.

The degree to which faculty engaged Latino male achievers varied substantially. Although participants emphasized the importance of applying what they learned, less than one-quarter of the students in this study could identify a faculty member that fostered engaged learning. For example, Hector equated academic success with becoming a “well-rounded student . . . [that could] put diverse classes into conversation with each other to understand the world around you, to understand yourself, and your place in it.” Unfortunately, Hector did not receive a positive academic appraisal from faculty when engaging in these activities:

I’ve always been interested in Marx’s ideas about stages of history, slavery to feudalism, and bourgeois capitalism . . . using that lens to analyze art work, which isn’t something we do with the readings . . . it’s really interesting to see those connections in my head, but I can’t write it on my test. But making those connections is what I live for . . . In the end, it sucks because no matter what, I’m still being evaluated and compared to everyone else. And I don’t like having to defend my ‘B.’

These experiences did not deter Hector from engaging in similar intellectual exercises in other courses. However, other participants sought opportunities to apply what they learned outside of the classroom. Victor explained how his background in consumer psychology informed his practice as a student leader:

Being the public relations manager . . . I was able to use [the Latino Dance Troupe] as my petri-dish [and] experiment with different tactics . . . whether it is surveying people about auditions, shows, pricing, or advertising our program in a different manner . . . aside from being a member and helping the organization achieve its goals . . . on a personal level, I benefited from the professional growth and leadership development.

Despite his success, Victor desired more guidance in developing post-college plans that integrated his psychology major and student leadership experiences. He added, “I wish there

would have been more information about pursuing research opportunities . . . but you have to be active about pursuing [this] if you want to attend graduate school.” Whereas faculty engaged Lupe and Marcos as learners, Victor did not receive the same guidance in formulating plans to achieve his educational goals. Similar to Hector, he engaged in this process independently and relied on peer networks to facilitate engaged learning.

In general, most Latino males in this study expected faculty and students to share their enthusiasm for learning, but this was not reflective of their experience. Participants did not speak extensively about their interactions with faculty in the classroom. In contrast, Latino male achievers engaged in educationally purposeful activities on their own, and in many instances, relied on their student leadership experiences to translate what they learned in the classroom.

**Academic determination.** This, by far, was the most prominent theme in this study. Latino male achievers spoke extensively about their motivation to succeed as well as how they managed multiple priorities to achieve their collegiate goals. Initially, Geraldo was preoccupied with “getting good grades, graduating, and getting a job.” His goals evolved as a result of serving in a high-profile student leadership position. Based on this experience, Geraldo desired to be “the ideal college student,” which he likened to “a person who balances their academic and social life . . . [and] who's physically healthy.” Geraldo considered joining a fraternity during his first-year of college, but he discontinued the initiation process after pledges were hazed. In this instance, Geraldo prioritized his academic success and physical well-being over his social life, which was consistent with his goals.

Although Latino males in this study possessed high educational aspirations, several participants emphasized how access to support networks was essential to actualizing their goals. Within the SU’s Honors College, Luis interacted with peers who were invested in maintaining

weekend study groups, engaging in undergraduate research, and attending graduate school. The interactions Luis had with members of his chemistry fraternity were vastly different:

When I got my underage,<sup>6</sup> people told me . . . “that’s really not that big of a deal.” But to me it was a big deal . . . getting a ‘B’ wasn’t a big deal to them [either]. So, it was hard for me to really relate to everyone there . . . There’s a point where you have to fix your own life. And so, the fraternity just led to a lot of issues . . . I thought I could go out with my friends every night and keep working. But I’d fall asleep in lab, which didn’t help . . . I [also] stopped going to some of my classes.

Contrary to his experience, members of Luis’ chemistry fraternity did not support his academic goals. Luis disengaged from the organization during his junior year, but noted how Dr. Sloor played an instrumental role in this decision. She held Luis accountable for falling asleep in her laboratory on two occasions. Luis asserted, “She didn’t give up on me.” In fact, when Luis applied to graduate school, Dr. Sloor noted how they worked through problems in the laboratory. Her assessment of his performance was essential to gaining admission to M.D./Ph.D. programs.

Several participants noted how the relationships they established with faculty and administrators on campus sustained their academic determination. As Gilberto reflected on his collegiate accomplishments, he recounted how staff in PU’s Summer Bridge Program encouraged him to participate in educationally purposeful activities. For instance, an academic counselor told him, “There’s this great research opportunity . . . with your academic background . . . I think it would be great for you.” These interactions helped Gilberto develop the confidence to have candid conversations with faculty about his educational aspirations and shortcomings:

You can do hundreds of things with an electrical engineering (EE) background. My current focus is electromagnetics, which I find so ironic, because as I told you, I failed two EE tests and now I’m majoring in it . . . I sub-matriculated at the beginning of my junior year . . . so I had the opportunity to start working on my master’s degree and it just so happened that because I took so many classes early on . . . I will graduate this May with both my bachelors and master’s in EE.

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<sup>6</sup> Legal citation for consuming alcohol under the minimum legal drinking age of 21.

Gilberto's senior design advisor was also transparent about "failing all his electromagnetic tests . . . [but] now has a Ph.D. in the same field." These conversations helped him view challenges as opportunities to exercise academic determination. With exception to two participants, Adam and Oscar, Latino male achievers aspired to attend graduate school. Only four participants, including Gilberto, achieved this goal during the time of this study.

While Latino male achievers were able to thrive academically, the extent to which they exercised engaged learning and academic determination in many instances was dependent on the support they received from peers, faculty, and staff. Participants anticipated that attending selective institutions would afford them with opportunities to learn and achieve their goals. However, Latino male achievers noted how their experiences did not align with their expectations. This did not deter participants from maintaining a positive perspective.

### **Intrapersonal Thriving**

While the average GPA for participants in this study was high, their academic records masked the challenges they faced gaining admission to and thriving at selective institutions. When Leo was asked to "share a little bit about himself" during the first interview, he offered one of the most memorable accounts related to maintaining a positive perspective:

I never had a bad grade until senior year in high school . . . my girlfriend committed suicide, which is why I got a bad grade. I just stopped going to school . . . when I came to [SU], I had a panic attack in a Sociology class, because we had a discussion about suicide . . . I wasn't really comfortable with it. I guess five years later, makes it a little easier . . . I think that's the reason why I did well here . . . I didn't want to be [home] anymore . . . I just wanted to start fresh . . . Even now, I'm graduating and I don't want to go back [laughter] . . . You're supposed to "start new a new chapter."

It should be noted that Leo faced additional challenges (i.e., mother's chronic illness, poverty) that could have undermined his success in college. Although he preferred to deal with problems independently, Leo attributed his positive perspective to the support he received from his father.

Most participants turned to their parents for emotional support in dealing with challenges they encountered on campus. Although Leo's father advised him to "take it easy," this did not diminish the racial tension he experienced at State University:

There have been some instances where I've gotten into disputes with students because I'm Latino . . . I've actually had fist fights . . . For example, I was talking to my [Mexican] roommate and this White kid said, "You need to learn how to speak English." I told him, "I can speak English better than some of you White people." . . . On a different occasion, I was walking down the hall and [this White male] ran into me and said, "Oh well. This is my hallway." And I told him, "No, it's not. I have just as much right to be here as you. I pay just as much to go here."

It was disturbing to hear Leo and other participants describe the racial climate at their respective institutions. For example, Marcos experienced "all kinds of microaggressions" as he navigated between the queer and Latino community at PU. As one of the few "out Latino men" on campus, Marcos felt compelled to prove himself, but recognized the negative consequences associated with this behavior. He added, "It's been productive in the sense that I really think about my politics . . . But it has also been hard, because I'm always on the questioning table." Mateo also shared how classmates questioned his intellectual competence in the Business School, which influenced how he engaged his peers. He stated, "I always try to be vocal and show people that just because I am Latino . . . I am just as qualified to be here." Mateo did not want his peers to think he was admitted to PU based on Affirmative Action.

The effort participants devoted to debunking negative stereotypes about Latino males resulted in unintended consequences. Whereas Lupe expressed concern about confirming negative stereotypes about Latinos, Ricardo considered this as an opportunity to vindicate himself. Ricardo's engagement in and outside of the classroom was a form of retaliation:

You can call me a 'spic' . . . I don't give a fuck, because I will get an 'A' on that test . . . I'm involved in more things [too] . . . that's the only way I can prove I'm equal or better . . . I'm not one to get wrapped up in misconceptions about Latinos . . . I'm not out to alter

the mindsets of people that are racist . . . But I will continue to blow you away with everything that I'm doing.

Despite his positive perspective, Ricardo was equally susceptible the pressures of maintaining a strong academic record. Ricardo was “terrified” about losing his PU fellowship. Reportedly, he lost twenty pounds during his first year college, because he skipped meals to focus more attention on his academic work. Ricardo acknowledged that his fears were “misplaced . . . and a bit irrational,” but nonetheless detrimental to his physical and psychological well-being.

Most Latino male achievers maintained a positive perspective in response to challenges they experienced in college. However, several participants noted how the campus racial climate undermined their ability to thrive intrapersonally. In most instances, participants assumed sole responsibility for developing coping strategies, which allowed them to reframe negative interactions into positive learning opportunities.

### **Interpersonal Thriving**

Relationships were essential to Latino male achievers thriving in college. In general, participants emphasized the importance of maintaining strong ties to their families, peers, and communities. This section addresses how Latino males in this study experienced social connectedness and diverse citizenship.

**Social connectedness.** While participants spoke extensively about familial support, they emphasized how interactions with Latino peers enhanced their sense of social connectedness. Marcos stated, “I purposefully haven’t engaged the larger White community in comparison to the Black, Latino, Asian, and Queer communities [at PU] as a coping mechanism . . . because every time I engage these dominant, White, hetero-normative spaces, it’s just really hard.” Participants joined student organizations that served Latinos on campus such as Lambda Theta Phi, the

Latina/o Honors Society, and the Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@ de Aztlan<sup>7</sup> (MEChA). Hector derived a sense of “moral support” from his involvement with MEChA. Similarly, Victor considered members his fraternity and dance troupe as part of his “extended family outside of New York City.” He added:

Whether we’re meeting up one random night and cooking dinner for each other . . . decompressing a little before we get back to studying, or just dancing whenever we need to . . . we’re just being there for each other. So, those two organizations became pseudo-families when I came here.

Although he maintained strong social ties within the Latino community, Victor acknowledged how his involvement in these organizations compromised his academic success. During his sophomore year, Victor was elected to serve as president of his fraternity, the dance troupe’s choreographer, and head delegate of the Latino Ivy League conference. Given the support he derived from his peers, Victor felt compelled and honored to serve the Latino community at PU. Participants expressed similar sentiments about their involvement in organizations that served Latinos and other marginalized student populations on campus.

Approximately one-quarter of the Latino males in this study joined predominantly White student organizations on campus. Victor offered thoughtful insights about why he did not get involved in organizations such as the Student Government Association (SGA):

I never felt like I had a vested interest in anything that they were doing. Which looking back, I don’t know . . . SGA is for the whole university. But at the time, I wanted to give my time and energy to a community I am part of . . . I guess, I got more involved in the Latino community, because they initially took an interests in me. Whereas, other mainstream [student] organizations . . . didn’t make me feel included.

Similar to other participants, Victor questioned whether the SGA was responsible for increasing Latino students’ sense of social connectedness at PU. As Miguel reflected on his involvement with SGA, he characterized student leaders in the organization as “self-centered” and “self-

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<sup>7</sup> The Chicana/o Student Movement of Aztlan is one of the oldest and largest college student-led advocacy groups in the United States.

interested.” Miguel served as the SGA speaker to advance his intercultural agenda and to serve underrepresented students on campus. Latino males in this study shared an interest and commitment to serving others.

**Diverse citizenship.** Latino male achievers equated success with the ability to serve their families, peers, and communities. In many instances, participants witnessed their parents make sacrifices and endure hardship, which nurtured their desire to help others. Lupe’s experience with poverty did not diminish his educational and professional aspirations. In fact, these experiences inspired him to become a juvenile police officer. Lupe witnessed how drugs, guns, and violence undermined the success of young men in his neighborhood. He wanted to help youth “trapped in the [vicious] cycle” of poverty. Similarly, Tito drew inspiration from his parents’ experience immigrating to New York City from the Dominican Republic. Tito recalled his mother telling him, “I wish I went to college school, so I could’ve given you a better life.” Tito was considering the possibility of attending law school to fulfill his mother’s wishes of “becoming a lawyer and buying her a house.” In general, participants were driven to succeed as a means to serve their families in the future.

Latino male achievers also served their peers on campus. For instance, Gilberto and Leo served as peer counselors for programs that supported them in making the academic and social transition to college. As Tito reflected on his most significant collegiate accomplishment, he talked about serving as the recruitment chair for the Latino Student Association (LSA):

I think that a lot of work I did through the LSA has opened up the door [and] helped more Latino students come to PU . . . I worked hand-in-hand with the Admissions Office to help bring students here. A lot of it was the programs that we organized and the information that we sent out to the parents in Spanish . . . But a lot of it was just talking to students [and] expressing why PU is a great place for Latinos.

While Tito focused was on increasing the representation of Latinos at PU, participants engaged in a range of activities to enhance the racial climate at their institutions. In collaboration with the Minority Student Association (MSA), Miguel organized a series of campus programs that provided students with a forum to “talk openly about their experiences with oppression, discrimination, and acceptance.” He co-authored a 40-page report that critiqued how the Student Government Association represented the interests of minoritized students on campus.

Participants were not only committed to addressing inequities they observed on campus, but sought opportunities to serve the surrounding community. Miguel based his success on “getting the skills needed . . . to serve the people I want to serve . . . and to do it in a way that is a credit to myself, the people I’m working with, and those who supported me.” As an aspiring healthcare professional, Miguel recounted how helping to deliver a baby was his most significant accomplishment in college:

I don’t think there’s anything particularly special about me . . . it was the fact that I possessed the language skills, clinical skills, and a close relationship with the nurse that I could say, “Let’s try this again” . . . The point is, I was able to empathize and understand where the patient was as a result of her immigration status and various social, economic, and life forces . . . she was in excruciating pain, about to lose her first child . . . bring[ing] her to a point where she was able to deliver this baby safely, healthy, and alive . . . was a very powerful moment. It affirmed that I was where I wanted to be.

Miguel received numerous accolades for his service activities including the Harry S. Truman Scholarship and a graduate fellowship to study global healthcare disparities in the United Kingdom. It should be noted that Miguel was the only participant recognized for working with underserved populations on- and off-campus.

### **Discussion**

Nearly a decade has passed since Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) published *The Vanishing Latino Male in Higher Education*, a seminal article that helped to shed light on this under-

researched group of college students. The urgent tone of this piece served to distinguish the educational experiences of Latino males from other male students of color, and it also called for a renewed research agenda focused on empirical and theoretical understandings that would advance more asset-based approaches to studying this burgeoning student population. Research that examines success factors for these undergraduate students can often perpetuate deficit-oriented discourses about Latino males, their families, and communities. With this critique in mind, our study responds to the call for more critical scholarship by utilizing an asset-based framework to understand the experiences of Latino males that thrive at selective PWIs.

College students that thrive are able to maintain a positive outlook despite academic or social obstacles, and they remain proactive in finding social connectedness among peers as well as maintaining a strong commitment to civic engagement. Using qualitative interview data from *The National Study on Latino Male Achievement in Higher Education* along with Schreiner's (2010) thriving quotient, we identified three key themes that described the experiences of successful Latino male undergraduates in selective, predominantly White institutional contexts.

First, academic thriving is characterized by engaged learning and academic determination, two interrelated characteristics of thriving that focus on seeking out new learning opportunities as well as staying motivated to succeed in college. Most Latino males in this study reported being engaged in learning activities both inside and outside of class. They often relied on student leadership experiences or informal peer networks to identify opportunities to be engaged. As for the role of faculty members in facilitating these opportunities for engagement, there was much less support that was noted by the males in this study. Faculty engagement with Latino males varied substantially, a finding that is also reinforced by prior research on faculty

interactions with racial/ethnic minority students (Cole, 2008; Saénz, Rodriguez, Ortego Pritchett, Estrada, & Garbee, 2016; Schreiner, Kammer, Primrose, & Quick, 2009).

In spite of the inconsistent engagement among faculty, several Latino males in this study exhibited strong academic determination in how they proactively established links to faculty and administrators on campus to sustain their academic motivation. Often these interactions with institutional agents would yield surprising results, with faculty being candid about their own successes and failures as undergraduate students. These authentic exchanges resulted in transparent and positive relationships with these agents, reaffirming participants' own academic determination. Such interactions can help Latino males feel more confident in their academic abilities and more determined to stay engaged, but the reality is that too often such interactions with faculty have to be initiated by students while faculty members within PWI contexts are not held accountable for their role in facilitating academic thriving.

A second theme focused on the intrapersonal thriving of Latino males within selective PWIs. Students reported being self-aware and introspective about the hostile racial climate at their respective institutions. Many detailed the coping strategies they utilized in navigating the campus racial climates that were at times hostile or unsupportive. Participants turned to families for emotional and moral support, a theme evident in prior research on academically successful Latino males in higher education (Carrillo, 2013b; Gloria et al., 2009; Blinded For Review).

Related to this, a third theme of interpersonal thriving also emerged in our analysis of Latino males' experiences within these institutional contexts. While participants spoke extensively about turning to family for support, they also emphasized how interactions with other Latino peers enhanced their sense of social connectedness and diverse citizenship. For example, Latino males joined and led a range of student organizations that served other Latinos on

campus, and they also sought out opportunities to remain connected with the local community. However, participants also decried that too much involvement can compromise their academic success, especially if it affects their level of engagement in the classroom.

### **Implications for Practice**

Our analysis of thriving for Latino males at selective PWIs lead to some important practical implications to consider. We need to be proactive in capitalizing on the assets that students are already bringing with them to our campuses. We also need to reconsider the role of faculty and administrators in facilitating the thriving of Latino male students and hold them accountable for the important role they play. For example, faculty could partner with Latino student organizations on service-learning opportunities or establish long-term partnerships with community-based organizations that serve the surrounding community [Blinded For Review]. Latino males are already pre-disposed towards thriving in these interpersonal ways, and such strategies could yield engaging learning opportunities that these students are already seeking out.

Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success) is one such effort that capitalizes on Latino male students' predispositions towards engaged learning and intrapersonal and interpersonal thriving, using a service-learning course that focuses on mentoring young males of color in the surrounding community (Sáenz, Ponjuan, Segovia, & Del Real Viramontes, 2015). This effort engages undergraduates within a selective PWI by facilitating their learning through a civic engagement project and leverages their intrapersonal and interpersonal thriving through reflective readings on young males of color and weekly mentoring sessions with local youth. Another aspect of this model is the utilization of informal peer networks that can lead to greater social connectedness among students. Such efforts provide for meaningful opportunities to be involved on campus as students engage with each other, build

peer support networks, and facilitate their thriving. While the thriving quotient framework was not part of the originating philosophy of Project MALES, it is nonetheless evident that many of the dimensions of this effort take advantage of the assets that students bring to our campuses.

Another implication for practice that emerged is that PWIs should increase opportunities for undergraduate research with faculty. Students reported needing more timely and transparent information about how to pursue research opportunities with faculty, often relying on their own informal peer networks for such information. Many selective PWIs already have established undergraduate research opportunities, and often these initiatives provide faculty with training on mentoring and seeking supplemental funding. Participants in our study had difficulty in accessing this information, suggesting that it is incumbent on institutions to be more proactive in how they outreach to such student communities on their campus. To this end, Conrad and Gasman (2015) have written about the lessons we can learn from minority-serving institutions in their approaches to engaging students, which can be informative to PWIs.

### **Implications for Research**

Our analysis of thriving has also led us to several implications for theorizing about Latino male students' experiences at selective PWIs as well as to consider future research that is needed on this important topic. As a theoretical framework, the thriving quotient proved to be a useful, asset-based approach to chronicle the experiences of Latino male undergraduates. However, we also considered that perhaps other approaches might serve to complicate our notions of thriving for Latino males. In his recent study of Latino male achievers at selective institutions, [Blinded For Review] merged the thriving framework with a culturally nuanced lens provided by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. The integration of these two frames resulted in the operationalization of multiple forms of capital that Latino male students leveraged to advance

their own educational success. In particular, the infusion of a thriving lens in this work could yield new insights around other forms of capital that Latino male students are employing to their benefit, including the idea of “giving back” or engaging in diverse citizenship [Blinded For Review]. The merging of multiple frameworks is an area ripe for additional research, as thriving could be integrated into other gendered frameworks such as masculinity, gender performance, or intersectionality.

In addition, future research should advance anti-deficit frameworks in studying Latino males across multiple institutional contexts. For instance, applying the thriving framework to the study of Latino males at community colleges could yield important insights about the ways we can support their academic success within this critical sector of higher education. Similarly, future research should focus intently on the role of institutional agents (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) in creating and sustaining environments that promote thriving among Latino males in higher education. Finally, more research is needed on how the campus racial climate could inhibit thriving among minority male college students.

### **Conclusion**

In a recent edited book on the topic of Latino males in higher education, Sáenz et al. (2016) highlighted emerging scholarly voices who have responded to the call for more research on this burgeoning student population. Contributors shared research and theories across the educational spectrum, and they emphasized how we might translate this research for educators and policymakers. This study responds to this call as well, showcasing an asset-based analysis of Latino males thriving within selective, PWIs and also providing implications for practice and future research. Our study findings support the notion that Latino male college students can thrive and succeed academically when they are adequately supported and provided with

challenging learning experiences, both in and out of the classroom. Rather than vanishing (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), we observe Latino male undergraduates thriving at selective PWIs amidst difficult and challenging institutional climates, leveraging their thriving skills to find creative ways to be engaged on and off campus, and maintaining strong peer networks and social connectedness. These are important lessons that have emerged from our work, and educators at PWIs should take note as they seek to improve their approaches to recruit, retain, and graduate Latino males in higher education.

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