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Anchor and launching pad: The role of a Latino cultural center in the experience of Mexican American students at a Midwestern predominantly White institution

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Anchor and launching pad: The role of a Latino cultural center in the experience of Mexican American students at a Midwestern predominantly White institution

by

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A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2014

DEDICATION

To my son,

Tomás Joaquín Rodríguez

and my daughter,

Elena Marisa Rodríguez

who mean the world to me

To my mom,

Manuela "Mela" Lozano Galván

for her strength

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank all of the participants in my study. To the students who took time from their busy schedules to meet with me – I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to meet each of you and learn about your experiences at the LNACC and your goals as scholars and emerging leaders. To the staff members who participated in this study – I greatly appreciate your honesty and courage, as well as your commitment to promoting inclusion and social justice at the University of Iowa. To the staff of the Center for Student Involvement and Leaderships at the University of Iowa – thank you for your support, especially Dinette Myers, who patiently fielded my calls and helped secure meeting rooms for my interviews.

My journey to the doctorate has been a long and winding road that concluded at Iowa State University. I have been fortunate to work with various faculty members at three different institutions during my process of pursuing a Ph.D. First and foremost, I would like to thank the members of my ISU doctoral committee: Dr. Larry Ebbers (Chair) for his guidance and encouragement, as well as Dr. Jeffrey Brooks, Dr. Natasha Croom, Dr. Marta Maldonado, and Dr. Robert Reason – for their expert advice. I have the greatest respect for each of you. I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Nana Osei-Kofi, who was unrelenting in pushing me to strive for excellence in my writing, and to Dr. Frankie Santos Laanan under whose direction I completed a capstone research project that I have had the opportunity to share nationally. Also, thank you to Holly Ryan in the School of Education, who provided essential administrative assistance.

I must also acknowledge the following faculty members who have offered guidance at different points in my journey: Dr. Elizabeth Witt (University of Iowa) for teaching me

how to do qualitative research, Dr. Sherry Watt (University of Iowa) for teaching me how to teach, Dr. Timothy Cain (University of Georgia) for offering wisdom and guidance during my coursework at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Dr. Susana Muñoz (University of Wisconsin) whose doctoral dissertation served as a constant inspiration to me during my writing process - unbeknownst to her!

Thank you to my ISU doctoral cohort for their friendship, support, and willingness to provide invaluable feedback as I prepared for my doctoral defense. Special thanks to Cristóbal Salinas who served as my peer debriefer.

My deep and heartfelt gratitude to my mentor and friend, Dr. Florence Guido who told me all those years ago, "Adele, you should get a Ph.D." To which I promptly replied "No way…I'm thrilled just to have my master's degree!" Thank you, Flo, for perceiving me as a scholar before I dared to think of myself that way.

To my older brothers Mike Lozano and Gary Lozano who enrolled at Iowa State University in the late 1960s – for being the first in our family to graduate from college, at a time when the doors to higher education had barely opened to young Mexican American students from working class families. Thank you both for leading by example and showing the rest of your seven younger siblings the possibilities.

I consider myself fortunate to have a group of *mujeres* who have become my sisters and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude: Teresa Garcia—the most compassionate, intelligent, and grounded person I know, who has been both a trusted friend and a role model since grade school; Gabriela Rivera, whom I have come to admire for her strength and wisdom as a professional and as a mom—Gaby, I treasure your friendship and the many hours we have spent talking about our professional and personal struggles and accomplishments; and Evelyn

Acosta Weirich, my RAGBRAI buddy, who embodies the meaning of "home" by always making you feel welcome (anyone lucky enough to have been invited to her house for a meal knows of what I speak). Evie, you were always rooting for me and that meant the world to me.

To my mom and the women of her generation in Fort Madison, Iowa who did not have the educational opportunities that I have had, but from whom I learned more than any institution could teach me about what it means to be human—Agnes Garcia, Guadalupe "Lupe" Martinez, Paula Lozano, and many more.

Thanks to my partner, Tomás, for your constant support as I completed my dissertation. I feel my greatest appreciation to you when I look at our children, Tomás & Elena, who are not only accomplished young adults, but more importantly they are two kind and compassionate young people who have figured out (as members of very large extended families) that human beings are fallible and sometimes fall and then get up again and that's okay. Their unwavering love and respect for all of their aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces is our shared success.

I think of all of the students, staff, and faculty I have had the opportunity to work with at the University of Northern Iowa, the University of Iowa, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Iowa State University. Their energy, passion, and commitment to social justice served as fuel for my own growth and development as a student affairs practitioner. Special thanks to the following student organizations for continually pushing for much needed change at ISU: Latina/o Student Initiatives (LSI), Latina/o Heritage Committee (LHC), Latina/o Graduate Student Association (LGSA), Lambda Theta Phi, Lambda Theta Nu, Sigma Lambda Gamma, and Sigma Lambda Beta. ¡Sí se puede!

And finally, to the founders of the Chicano Indian American Student Union/LNACC at the University of Iowa—Rusty Barceló, Ruth Pushetonequa, and Antonio Zavala—may the courage, perseverance, laughter, and camaraderie that you brought to your experiences as first-generation college students at the University of Iowa 43 years ago continue to touch each student that walks through the doors of the Latino Native American Cultural Center…our home away from home.

ABSTRACT

By 2011, the U.S. Latina/o population had achieved a key milestone in higher education, becoming the largest racial/ethnic minority group on U.S. college campuses. In the past 20 years, research studies on student success have increasingly focused on the Latina/o student population, particularly at predominantly White institutions. Among the many factors related to college success, ethnic cultural centers have emerged recently as an underexamined but potentially influential aspect of the college experience for students of color.

Using a student success conceptual framework, this case study examined the role of an ethnic cultural center in the experience of Latina/o students at a predominantly White institution located in the Midwest. The research site was the Latino Native American Cultural Center (LNACC) located at the University of Iowa. The study was guided by three psychosocio concepts: sense of belonging, thriving, and validation. Eleven undergraduate Latina/o students and six university staff members participated in a series of interviews during a 6- month period. Data collection also included site observations and document analysis.

Five key themes emerged from the study: (a) getting connected, (b) the LNACC "vibe," (c) LNACC as anchor and launching pad, (d) Latina/o presence on campus, and (e) neutral, sacred, and (con)tested space. The first theme, getting connected, provides an understanding of the multiple ways in which the student participants were able to get connected to the LNACC. The second theme, the LNACC "vibe," illuminates how students made meaning of their experiences at the LNACC, a space that many of the participants referred to as having a unique "vibe" or essence. The LNACC as anchor or launching pad

theme represents the various temporal experiences of students as they either moved from frequent to infrequent engagement with the LNACC or continued to have a strong connection to the LNACC. The fourth theme, Latina/o presence on campus, reflects the students' expressed desire for visibility on campus and their perception of the LNACC as a representation of the Latina/o presence. The final theme, neutral, sacred, and con(tested) space, illustrates how students' tacit understandings of the various physical spaces within the LNACC influenced the ways in which those spaces were used and what that means for future use of the center. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

It was because of the cultural center that I and others survived as students,
because of the important space we were provided with—a space
which embraced who we were without explanation.

Dr. Nancy "Rusty" Barceló, 1996

By 2011, the U.S. Latina/o population had achieved a key milestone in higher

education, becoming the largest racial/ethnic minority group on U.S. college campuses,

including four-year colleges and universities (Fry & Lopez, 2012). As Latina/o college

enrollment rates have increased, graduation rates have risen simultaneously; however,

Latinas/os still lag behind all other "non-Hispanic" groups in college degree completion

(Ogunwole, Drewery, & Rios-Vargas, 2012). In the past 20 years, research studies on

student success have increasingly focused on the Latina/o student population, particularly at

institutions of higher education where White students account for 50 percent or more of the

student enrollment—referred to as predominantly White institutions or PWIs (Brown &

Dancy, 2010). Among the many factors related to college success, cultural centers have

emerged recently as an underexamined but potentially influential aspect of the college

experience for students of color.

Ethnic cultural centers first began to appear on college campuses in the Midwest in

the early 1970s following the peak years of campus unrest. It was during this time that many

institutions implemented far-ranging changes related to curriculum, recruitment practices

(students and faculty), facilities, support services, and other issues impacting diverse

populations (Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975). Cultural centers changed the landscape

of higher education at PWIs by creating spaces and places focused on serving the needs of

underrepresented racial/ethnic groups while promoting overall campus diversity. In the

1970s students at Latino cultural centers in the Midwest were hosting nationally known

Latina/o activists (La Casa: Indiana University Latino Cultural Center, n.d.a), advocating for greater recruitment and retention of Latina/o students (Esquivel, 2001), and coordinating national Chicano conferences (Conners, Smeltzer, & Zachert, 1973).

The University of Iowa (UI) established the first Latino-based cultural center in the Midwest in 1971. Within a decade several other midwestern universities had followed suit including Indiana University at Bloomington (1973), Western Illinois University (1973), and the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (1974). Despite the 40-year history of Latino cultural centers in the Midwest, very little is known about the role these centers play at PWIs, how Latina/o college students make meaning of their experiences at cultural centers, or how these centers contribute to Latina/o student success. These questions have not been sufficiently addressed in higher education research, despite persistent and compelling testimony from Latina/o alumni pointing to the significance of cultural centers in their college experiences.

Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991, 2005) comprehensive review of three decades of research on how college affects students confirmed the critical role of institutional environment on student satisfaction and success. As colleges seek ways to improve Latina/o student success, it is important to recognize and examine cultural spaces at PWIs. Reason (2009) argued that "the goal of persistence research must be to explore students within the multiple concentric environments they inhabit, recognizing that different students engage differently within those environments" (p. 676). Latino cultural centers are certainly within one of those "concentric environments," but their role in Latina/o student persistence and success has been mostly overlooked for the past four decades.

Statement of the Problem

Research on the Latina/o student experience in higher education has focused mostly on retention/persistence issues (Gloria, 1999; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004–2005; Torres, 2006) and ethnic/racial identity development (Castillo et al., 2006; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Torres, 1999, 2003, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). A number of studies also have addressed the impact of campus climate on Latina/o student persistence (Gloria, Hird, & Navarro, 2001; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). The findings from these studies indicate that Latina/o college students experience unique challenges negotiating the social, physical, and cognitive domains at large PWIs. However, few studies have focused on the role of ethnic cultural centers in the success of Latina/o college students as they navigate the transition to a PWI and negotiate the various campus domains.

Student affairs practitioners may assume, based on anecdotal evidence, that cultural centers are important spaces for Latina/o students to gain a sense of belonging and empowerment on campus. However, a dearth of research studies focusing on Latino cultural centers makes it difficult to support these assumptions. Two seminal books have been published focusing on ethnic cultural centers in the past 10 years: Hord's (2005) *Black Culture Centers: Politics of Survival and Identity* and L. D. Patton's (2010) *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice*. Both edited volumes provide much needed background, historical perspective, and theoretical frameworks upon which research studies can be constructed. But the fact remains that quantitative and qualitative research studies focusing on cultural centers are scarce. If, indeed, Latino cultural

centers are important spaces in the experiences of Latina/o students, it is crucial to understand how students make meaning of these experiences and how their experiences are associated with student success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of an ethnic cultural center in the experience of Latina/o students at a PWI located in the Midwest. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Understand how Latina/o undergraduate students make meaning of their experiences at a cultural center.

2. Help close the knowledge gap regarding the role of cultural centers in student experiences at PWIs.

3. Provide greater understanding regarding how cultural centers might contribute to Latina/o student success at PWIs.

4. Build on the work of Lori Patton (2004, 2006, 2010) to promote greater understanding of the significance of cultural centers in the college experience of students of color.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Mexican American students become aware of the cultural center?

2. Why do Mexican American students choose to participate in cultural center activities?

3. What role does the cultural center play in Mexican American student success?

Theoretical Perspective

I used a constructivist epistemology and a basic interpretive approach for this qualitative study. Qualitative research includes several key characteristics including: a focus on meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of data, an inductive process of data analysis, and the use of rich description in the final product (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative researchers emphasize "the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). Thus qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people create and give meaning to social experiences.

Assumptions within a constructivist paradigm include (a) the existence of multiple realities, (b) that knowledge is co-created by the knower and the respondent, and (c) a set of naturalistic methodological procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argued that all research is interpretive because "it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood" (p. 19). An interpretive approach to qualitative research assumes that human action is meaningful and that it is possible for the researcher to "reconstruct the self-understandings of actors engaged in particular actions" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 193). The goal of this approach is to interpret the meanings people make of their worlds by focusing as much as possible on the participants' perspectives of the phenomena (Creswell, 2009). The way people make meaning of their world is socially and historically negotiated, so context is important, as is the process of interaction among individuals.

A constructivist-interpretive approach is appropriate for gaining a deep understanding of how Latina/o students make meaning of their experiences within the context of a Latino cultural center at a PWI. The extant literature on cultural centers is presented mainly from the perspective of scholars and administrators. Latina/o student voices are rarely included in studies pertaining to ethnic cultural centers. A constructivist approach to this study allows active engagement with the Latina/o student participants to uncover knowledge regarding the role of the cultural center in their college experience.

Merriam (1988) defined qualitative case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 21). The emphasis is on process and context rather than on outcomes and specific variables, with the goal being discovery as opposed to confirmation. Merriam (1988) argued that a case study methodology is especially suited for "dealing with critical problems of practice and extending the knowledge base of various aspects of education" (p. xiii). Case study methodology was particularly suitable for this study because I was interested in gaining in-depth understanding of how students make meaning of their experiences at a cultural center.

This study was grounded in the literature on Latina/o student success at PWIs. The concept of "student success" encompasses both in-class and out-of-class experiences and includes both cognitive and affective elements. As the body of research on issues impacting the retention and persistence of students of color has grown, some scholars have begun to embrace a more holistic view of student success—one that goes beyond institutional data indices and numerical representations (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Osei-Kofi & Rendón, 2005; Reason, 2009; Schreiner, 2013). As a Chicana who attended a PWI and has worked with Latina/o college students for the past 15 years, I am well aware that some students

persist to graduation without ever achieving a sense of belonging on campus. This is the difference between the traditional notion of succeeding (graduation) and actually thriving in an environment that recognizes and validates cultural differences. For this study, I was interested in the latter as it applies to student experiences at an ethnic cultural center.

This study was informed by Laura Rendón's (1994) validation theory and the construct of sense of belonging based on the work of Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Faye Carter (1996, 1997) and Terrell Strayhorn (2008, 2012). Both concepts use an interactionist lens, which focuses on a student's social interactions with his or her academic and social environment. Although validation theory and sense of belonging share a psychosocial perspective of student experiences on campus, each concept has unique features and origins.

I chose validation theory because it speaks to the needs and strengths of first-generation, low-income students with a focus on student success (Rendón, 1994). Based on a qualitative study of diverse students attending four different colleges, the concept of validation emerged as a critical element to student success. Although the study began by examining Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, Rendón—influenced by the work of feminist scholars—developed the concept of validation to examine "how nontraditional students who came to college expecting to fail suddenly began to believe in their innate capacity to learn and become successful college students" (p. 36).

Validation is a process by which in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty members, students, staff, peers, family members) engage in intentional and proactive affirmation of students "as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community" (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12). Thus, validation may occur at the academic level and the interpersonal level. Rendón (1994) theorized that "for many low-income, first-

generation students, external validation is initially needed to move students toward acknowledgement of their own internal self-capableness and potentiality" (p. 17). I was interested in whether and how student experiences at a cultural center located at a PWI validate students academically and/or interpersonally.

I chose the sense of belonging (SB) model (Hurtado & Carter, 1996) to help guide my study because it was based on a study that examined how Latina/o students view their college membership by "identifying activities that bring about a greater sense of affiliation with campus life" (p. 327). Hurtado and Carter (1996) developed this model as an alternative approach to Tinto's (1993) concept of college student integration. They described sense of belonging as "the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (p. 327). The SB model demonstrates how student background characteristics, college selectivity, ease of transition to college, and perceptions of a hostile climate interact temporally to directly and indirectly affect a student's sense of belonging. Two key findings in the Hurtado and Carter (1996) study are particularly germane to my study. First, for Latina/o students, early experiences in college are key factors influencing their sense of belonging in subsequent years. I believe early exposure to and involvement in a cultural center may help promote Latina/o students' sense of belonging on campus. Second, membership in ethnic student organizations did not significantly enhance the Latina/o student participants' sense of belonging on campus. Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggested that the students in their study who had joined ethnic organizations may have "experience[d] group cohesion and marginality simultaneously" (p. 335). This also was suggested by Loo and Rolison (1986) as they examined ethnic enclaves as part of their study of minority students at PWIs. I was interested in whether students who participate in the cultural center experience a

sense of belonging within the center while simultaneously experiencing marginality within the larger campus environment, because that may situate cultural centers as potential catalysts for bridging the epistemological and cultural chasm Latina/o students experience at PWIs.

The SB model proposed by Hurtado and Carter (1996) was based on a longitudinal quantitative study of 287 Latina/o students using national data. My research was a qualitative case study consisting of a small sample of students and staff members. My intent was not to test the SB model but, rather, to gain a deeper understanding of particular elements of the model relevant to out-of-class experiences.

Strayhorn (2012) expanded on the SB model using an approach grounded in a social cognitive perspective of achievement motivation. He argued that sense of belonging "takes on heightened importance in contexts where individuals are inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible" (p. 10). He defined sense of belonging as:

> students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers). (p. 17)

In outlining core elements of the concept, Strayhorn (2012) asserted that sense of belonging: (a) is a basic human need; (b) is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior; (c) takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, and among certain populations; (d) is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering; (e) intersects with and is affected by social identities; (f) engenders other positive outcomes; and (g) must be satisfied on a continual bases and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts

change (p. 18–23). Strayhorn's (2012) work further guided my study by operationalizing the concept of sense of belonging and offering core elements by which to examine student experiences.

Cultural centers at PWIs in the Midwest are unique spaces that have continually attracted and served underrepresented racial/ethnic student groups for the past 40 years. The concepts of validation and sense of belonging provide a framework to understand the role a cultural center plays in the success of Latina/o students at a PWI. Case study methodology allowed me to gain insight into the context of my study site through multilevel data collection (i.e., historical documents, observations, interviews). A constructivist/interpretive approach allowed me to actively engage with my participants to gain a deep understanding of how they made meaning of their experiences at the cultural center.

Significance of the Study

Latino cultural centers first began appearing at PWIs in the Midwest in the early 1970s—around the same time the Chicano Movement was reaching the Midwest from California. Like their Black cultural center counterparts, the first Latino cultural centers were created as a response to student demands for greater resources to address the needs of Chicano and Latina/o students. Many of these centers served as hubs of activity where Latina/o students engaged in lively discussions regarding issues impacting the Latina/o community, including campus issues such as the need for Chicano studies programs, local issues such as providing Latina/o high school students with college information, and national issues such as immigration. They provided a space for Latina/o students to plan and participate in community outreach, publish newsletters and literary magazines, coordinate political activities, and express themselves artistically (Lozano, 2010).

While the Latina/o student population continued to grow in the 1980s and 1990s, Latino cultural centers in the Midwest continued to serve as critical spaces and places for students to meet and engage in social, cultural, and political activities. In 1992, at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign, Latina/o students staged a historic protest on campus culminating in a list of demands, which included funding and greater autonomy for their cultural center, La Casa Cultural Latina (Student Life and Cultural Archival Program, 2010). Meanwhile, at UI, students used the Latino Native American Cultural Center (LNACC) as a home base to organize and establish some of the first Latina/o-based Greek organizations in the nation: Sigma Lambda Beta Fraternity, established in 1986 (Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity, n.d.), and Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, established in 1990 (Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Inc., n.d.). These are just a few of the seminal events that took place within Latino cultural centers throughout the Midwest in the final decades of the 20th century.

The arrival of the 21st century found many cultural centers at a crossroads. Often located in older, deteriorating houses or buildings, their survival became tenuous as budget constraints and competing political interests made it challenging to secure the institutional support necessary for centers to thrive (Hefner, 2002). PWIs began to grapple with the future of ethnic cultural centers and, in some cases, made the controversial decision to replace them with multicultural centers (Princes, 1994). Meanwhile, cultural center stakeholders argued that cultural centers were vital to the success of marginalized populations.

Latino cultural centers, in particular, were in the precarious position of trying to serve ever-increasing numbers of Latina/o college students while dealing with insufficient resources, which underscores the importance of research to better understand connections

between Latino cultural centers and Latina/o college student success. This study is one of the first to use the SB concept to examine how students experience an ethnic cultural center at a PWI. As such, it will contribute to the understanding of the role of cultural centers in Latina/o student experiences as well as the role of cultural centers in the larger campus environment.

Latina/o college enrollment is projected to increase by 42 percent between 2010 and 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), adding urgency to Ortiz's (2004) call to action for the higher education community to consider the unique needs of Latina/o students and "reconsider our basic assumptions as we construct learning environments and opportunities that allow all students to participate fully" (p. 1). This study contributes to the general knowledge base regarding the experience of Latina/o students at PWIs in three ways. First, it focuses on Latina/o students attending a university in the rural Midwest—an area often neglected because larger numbers of Latina/o students reside and attend colleges in the West and Southwest. Second, it helps to close an existing knowledge gap regarding the role of Latino cultural centers at PWIs. Third, it examines the role of a cultural center from Latina/o student perspectives.

Context of the Study

This study took place at UI's LNACC. UI is a large, predominantly White research university located in Iowa City, Iowa, with a total student enrollment of 30,119 students in 2012–2013. Out of 21,999 undergraduate students, 1,166 (5.3%) identified as Hispanic and 48 (0.2%) identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native (The University of Iowa, 2012–2013). This study focused on Latina/o undergraduate students who were participating in LNACC activities.

The LNACC is one of three ethnic cultural centers on campus, all three located within a few blocks of each other on the west side of campus (see Appendix A for photos of the LNACC). Two of the centers—the LNACC and the Afro American Cultural Center—were founded over 40 years ago. The Asian Pacific American Cultural Center was established in 2003 (Center for Student Involvement and Leadership, n.d.). Each center is located in a stand-alone house, and they all report to the Coordinator for Multicultural Programs and Cultural Centers in the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership.

The cultural centers at UI are somewhat unique among Midwest cultural centers because they are not staffed with full-time professionals. Rather, each center employs a half-time graduate assistant, who serves as a manager, along with several undergraduate student employees. This organizational model of student management has been in place since the founding of the cultural centers and added complexity to my examination of how and why Latina/o students participate in LNACC activities, because most of the programming at the Center is planned and coordinated by students rather than by professional staff members.

Another unique aspect of this cultural center is that it serves both Latina/o and Native American communities. This dual purpose stems from the original founders of the LNACC—two Chicano/a students and one Native American student—who, recognizing their shared experiences of oppression and marginalization, formed a coalition to address issues impacting their communities (Solis, 2011). One of the founders, Antonio Zavala, explained that the rationale behind the coalition was

> to preserve our heritage and our identity, to raise a social consciousness among our
>
> people . . . and to demand that the University of Iowa recruit more Chicano and

Indian students from around the state—a responsibility we feel the state has not met.

("Chicanos, Indians Unite on 2 Campuses," 1971, p. 19)

Although my study focused only on Latina/o students, I recognized the importance of examining how the historical and contemporary context of my research site shaped the experience of my research participants and included this aspect of the cultural center in my research design, specifically in my interview protocol. The next section provides further context to my study by defining some key terminology.

Definitions of Terms

Latina/o: a pan-ethnic term used to describe a diverse and heterogeneous population, members of which trace their ancestral countries of origin to Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba as well as other countries in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. These countries share a legacy of Spanish colonization, which led to the establishment of Spanish as a shared language (Torres, 2004). Not all contemporary U.S. Latinas/os speak Spanish, although they share a common historical connection to the language. Current U.S. Latinas/os represent diverse demographic backgrounds and demonstrate wide within-group differences in terms of generational status in the United States, immigration experiences, educational experiences, language, culture, race, religion, political affiliations, and more. This introduces cultural and social complexities, which must be acknowledged when conducting research with this population.

Chicana/o: a political form of self-identification for Latinas/os, particularly those of Mexican descent. Journalist Ruben Salazar (1970), who was assassinated in 1970, explained

that "a Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself" (para.

1).

Cultural center: for the purposes of this study, a stand-alone, discrete facility (house or

building) whose main purpose is to serve the needs (cultural, social, and academic) of

historically underserved racial/ethnic student populations at a university through

programs and services.

Predominantly White institution (PWI): a college or university at which the student

population is more than 50 percent White.

Sense of belonging (SB): using Hurtado and Carter's (1996) definition, an "individual's view

of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (p. 327), in concert

with Strayhorn's (2012) operationalized definition of SB:

students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of

connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted,

respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others

on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (p. 17)

Summary

In this chapter I set the foundation for my study and situate it within a conceptual

framework. In Chapter 2, I review and discuss current research regarding Latina/o college

student success follow by an examination of the literature on cultural centers. Chapter 3

provides an explanation of the methodology and methods employed for data collection, data

analysis, and trustworthiness. I also discuss the study's delimitations and limitations. In

Chapter 4, I present and analyze the findings. Chapter 5 comprises a summary of the study, a

discussion of the findings as they relate to the research questions, implications of the

findings, and personal reflections.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of an ethnic cultural center in the experiences of Latina/o students at a PWI in the Midwest. The topic of cultural centers has only recently emerged in student affairs literature with Lori Patton's (2010) groundbreaking book, *Culture Centers in Higher Education*, providing contemporary perspectives on theoretical, organizational, administrative, and programmatic aspects of cultural centers. It is important to move forward on the topic of cultural centers to fill the existing knowledge gap regarding how cultural centers impact specific student populations.

The paucity of literature, particularly research studies, on Latina/o student experiences with cultural centers created challenges in conducting a literature review. Therefore, this literature review situates Latino cultural centers within the larger body of research on Latina/o student success. This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section provides an overview of how college student success is defined; the second section examines current understandings of Latina/o student success and the concepts of sense of belonging and validation; the next section investigates "intentional communities" and "ethnic enclaves"; and the fourth section focuses on Latino cultural centers. The chapter concludes with an interpretive summary that demonstrates how the literature informed and contributed to my conceptual framework regarding the role of cultural centers in the experience of Latina/o college students.

College Student Success

An examination of the literature on Latina/o college student success first requires an understanding of how college student success in general is defined. A preponderance of the literature on college student success focuses on retention and persistence—two concepts that

are often mistakenly used interchangeably (Hagedorn, 2012; Reason, 2009). The distinction between the two terms is critical: retention is an institutional measure (institutions retain students), whereas persistence is a student measure (students persist to a goal; Hagedorn, 2012; Reason, 2009). A review of the literature pertaining to persistence is beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, this section of the literature review begins by examining two interrelated and seminal theories upon which much of the literature on college student success is based: Tinto's (1993) model of college student persistence and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. Next, I examine how the concepts of involvement and engagement are used to define and examine college student success, particularly *outside* the classroom. These concepts have influenced much of the literature on Latina/o student success in college. This section concludes with an investigation of how recent scholars are finding new ways to define and measure student success.

Tinto's Persistence Model

Various influential models of persistence and retention have emerged over the past several decades (e.g., Kamens 1971; Bean, 1983; Tinto, 1993; A. Seidman, 2012). One of the most widely cited and critiqued persistence models in student affairs literature is Vincent Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure. Tinto's theory, which he revised several times, features a student integration model, which describes and explains the longitudinal process by which individuals leave institutions of higher education. Tinto distinguished between institutional departure and system departure, arguing that institutional rates of departure reflect the particular characteristics and circumstances of that institution only. He elaborated that student departure serves as "a barometer of the social and intellectual health of institutional life" (Tinto, 1993, p. 5).

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure was guided by the work of social anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep and his study of rites of passage in tribal societies. Van Gennep argued that rites of passage were a way for tribal societies to pass on beliefs and norms to the next generation and that this process was accomplished through three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993). Tinto used these same stages to form a conceptual framework for understanding student persistence/withdrawal. He hypothesized that most college students move from one community (family, high school, hometown) to another (college); therefore, they experience the same three stages as Van Gennep's rites of passage. First they must separate or disassociate themselves from their home communities, then they begin transitioning to their new community, and finally they become integrated or incorporated into the life of the institution.

Tinto (1993) also borrowed from sociologist Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide, which explained that suicide is an act of withdrawal from society, occurring "when individuals are unable to become integrated and establish membership within the communities of society" (Tinto, 1993, p. 101). Tinto applied Durkheim's concept of social and intellectual integration to his interactive model of college student departure. Specifically Tinto argued that social and intellectual integration are essential to college student persistence and that the individual student and the institution are continually in interaction with each other to affect student persistence/ withdrawal.

Tinto (1993) revised his model of student retention several times in response to criticism and studies by other researchers who identified omissions in his model. Much of the criticism focused on problems in applying the model to students of diverse backgrounds. In his revised model, Tinto admitted that student participation in college life does not

necessarily indicate actual integration in social and academic systems. He pointed out that "the mere occurrence of interactions between the individual and others within the institution will not insure that integration occurs" (Tinto, 1993, p. 136). This is an important distinction because, although racial/ethnic minority students may participate in the social and academic life of an institution, it is possible that, due to historic, structural, and institutional racism, they may not feel a sense of belonging or integration in the life of the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1996). Moreover, Tinto used the term "membership" to "connote the perception on the part of the individual of having become a competent member of an academic or social community within the college" (p. 136).

However, the concept of integration and the underlying assumption of acculturation continue to be problematic. Hurtado and Carter (1997) pointed out that students from underrepresented populations who have been historically marginalized in higher education may have a different understanding of the meaning of integration. They also explained that underlying the concept of acculturation is the assumption that students from racial/ethnic backgrounds should adopt the values and beliefs of the dominant culture in order to succeed in higher education. Hurtado and Carter (1997) further argued that Tinto's (1993) measures of social integration exclude certain forms of affiliation utilized by Latina/o students, such as involvement in ethnic student organizations, church activities, community activism, etc. Hurtado (1994) emphasized that "Latino student views and educational outcomes differ substantially by characteristics that are typically excluded from studies of college students" (p. 24).

Tierney (1996) identified two major problems with Tinto's (1993) model: a misinterpretation of the anthropological notion of ritual and the reliance on an individualistic

conception of integration. A rite of passage occurs within a particular culture as a means to
pass on beliefs and values to the next generation. Tierney pointed out that when minority
students enter college they are moving from one distinct culture to another, therefore it
cannot be described as a rite of passage. He further argued that the concepts of "drop-out" or
departure do not exist in traditional notions of rites of passage. The second problem with
Tinto's model involves the conceptualization of college-going at the individual level rather
than at the collective level (Tierney, 1996). This can be particularly problematic for Latina/o
and Native American students, whose cultures emphasize the group over the individual.

Guiffrida (2006) sought to strengthen Tinto's (1993) model and make it more
culturally relevant to students of color. Focusing on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation,
Guiffrida integrated components from two theories of human motivation (self-determination
theory and job involvement theory) to explain how academic achievement and persistence
are impacted by cultural norms and motivational orientation. He argued that Tinto's theory
could be advanced by recognizing the need for students of color to stay connected to their
home communities, replacing the word "integration" with "connection," and recognizing that
cultural connections can be satisfied by both the campus social system and the home social
system.

Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) also focused on the concept of integration in their
critical analysis of Tinto's (1993) theory. They pointed to three conceptual problems with
his social/academic interactionalist theory: (a) an overemphasis on individual responsibility
to change and adapt to the environment; (b) inherent assumptions that "all students,
regardless of background, are ready, willing, and able to get involved" (p. 594); and (c) a
view of the external (home) community as being a separate and mainly negative influence on

student involvement. They argued that Tinto's theory should be elevated to a more sophisticated level—one that promotes a deeper understanding of the retention process of students of color within a complex and multiracial institutional environment.

More recently, Tinto himself acknowledged that the word "integration" is fraught with negative connotations, regardless of how he originally defined the term. In a study examining similarities and differences in the concepts of involvement, engagement, and integration, Tinto (a participant in the study) concluded: "In the current context, the word doesn't make sense. It needs to be gotten rid of" (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009, p. 424). He further suggested, after acknowledging the influence of Hurtado's work on his current thinking, that "sense of belonging" may serve as a good substitute for the term integration. The concept of sense of belonging is examined further in a later section of this chapter (Current Understandings of Latina/o Student Success).

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement was developed and evolved from a longitudinal study of college dropouts conducted over 25 years ago. His study demonstrated a strong positive relationship between student involvement and retention. Astin (1984) found that, in addition to factors such as place of residence, membership in sororities and fraternities, holding a part-time job, and attending a two-year college versus a year-year college, retention is related to institutional fit. Institutional fit is an important factor in his study as it emphasizes the need for students to identify with the institution. According to Astin (1999), "it is easier to become involved when one can identify with the college environment" (p. 524).

Astin (1999) defined student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Involvement, in this case, could include activities such as studying, spending time on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting with faculty and peers. Focusing on the behavioral component, Astin (1999) developed a theory of student involvement, which included five basic assumptions:

1. Involvement is an investment of physical and psychological energy.

2. Involvement occurs on a continuum.

3. Involvement includes both quantitative and qualitative components.

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

5. "The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 519).

Institutional environment and student–environment interaction cannot be ignored when examining student development, student retention, and student withdrawal. Astin (1993) developed the input–environment–output (I–E–O) model as a guide to study college student development. This model defines input as student characteristics upon college entry; environment as "various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed" (p. 7); and outcomes as characteristics of students after they have been exposed to the institutional environment. Based on his study, which analyzed the effect of 135 college environmental factors and 57 student involvement measures on over 80 outcomes, Astin (1993) found that retention was "significantly affected by more

environmental variables than almost any other outcome measure" (p. 195). Astin's (1984) involvement theory, while serving as a foundational model for subsequent research on student development, also was criticized for focusing on traditional, White, middle class students (Rendón et al., 2000).

Involvement and Engagement

Just as the terms "retention" and "persistence" are connected but distinct concepts, the literature also points to distinctions between the concepts of "student involvement" and "student engagement." The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2012) has defined two key components of student engagement:

> Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning. (para. 1)

George Kuh and Alexander Astin offered differing views on the meanings of involvement and engagement. Kuh argued that, although student engagement is grounded empirically in involvement theory, it "differs from involvement in that it links more directly to desired educational processes and outcomes and emphasizes action that the institution can take to increase student engagement" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 414). Astin, by contrast, did not perceive of a significant difference between involvement and engagement, and pointed out that the committee that developed the NSSE instrument did not distinguish between the two terms. Astin further argued that engagement is simply another way of

thinking about involvement, pointing out that both terms are temporal representations of the same thing (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The NSSE survey is widely used nationally by colleges and universities interested in improving policies and practices to promote student engagement. In essence, both involvement and engagement are measures of student success encompassing what the student does in concert with what the institution does over time, making institutional environment a critical component of student success.

The theoretical frameworks developed by Tinto (1993) and Astin (1984) used White male heterosexuals as the universal norm to measure student behavior (Tanaka, 2002). Bensimon (2007) argued that the prevailing view of student involvement and engagement failed to recognize a critical piece: that some forms of engagement have greater social and economic value than do others. Furthermore, access to highly valued forms of engagement is impacted by "racialized practices and the unconscious dynamics of White privilege" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 452). As higher education environments become more diverse, scholars are beginning to examine how communities of color experience engagement on campus. Harper and Quaye (2008) asserted that creating engaging campus environments requires educators and administrators to be willing to shift the onus of engagement from students to themselves. They urged the alignment of espoused campus values with institutional actions while pushing for the "abandonment of empty buzzwords related to multiculturalism on college and university campuses" (p. 2) and emphasized the importance of listening to and understanding the perspectives of the students to determine gaps in engagement before attempting to implement solutions.

New Ways of Examining Student Success

College impact models, such as Tinto's (1993) persistence theory, Astin's (1993) I–E–O model, and (1984) theory of involvement, focus on students as active participants in the change process while assigning a prominent role to the institutional environment. Scholars have recognized the need to expand the way research is conducted to examine student success. In their comprehensive synthesis of more than 30 years of research on college impact, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) noted that traditional quantitative research methods continue to dominate the research, and they called for more studies using naturalistic and qualitative methods. Oseguera, Locks, and Vega (2008) conducted a literature review synthesizing advances in retention theory relevant to Latina/o student populations. They argued that a better understanding of Latina/o student retention requires a focus on sociopolitical, cultural, and psychosocial facets of Latina/o educational experiences, and stressed that "noncognitive factors have strong interpretive influences on Latina/o students' meaning-making experiences and should be considered an important part of both retention research and retention programming" (p. 32)

Recently, researchers have offered new perspectives on college student success, many of which do not focus primarily on retention/persistence but, rather, on the quality of the student experience as the measure of student success. Indeed, Reason (2009) questioned whether persistence is an outcome or a part of the student environment and suggested that "persistence is a necessary, but insufficient, characteristic for student success—not itself an indicator of success" (p. 660).

New studies and theoretical approaches have emerged using strengths-based models, sociocultural frameworks, and critical race theory to explore other indicators of student

success. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) challenged traditional definitions of success that focus on retaining students to graduation. They argued that numerical representations and data indices provide only a partial view of student success while overlooking individual stories of students whose "success" may have come at a personal, social, and cultural cost. Castellanos and Gloria questioned whether institutions can claim success if graduating students leave college feeling dissatisfied and disgruntled with their educational experience. The following approaches offer a redefinition of student success by providing a more holistic view of the educational experience.

Psychosociocultural framework. In the field of counseling, Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) developed a theoretical framework for counseling Latina/o college students that integrates psychological, social, and cultural factors within the environmental context. This framework includes four psychosociocultural constructs (although the authors acknowledged that numerous other issues exist):

1. Cultural environment: which includes issues of cultural incongruence, isolation/alienation, negotiating different cultural contexts and bicultural stress, and unwelcoming university environment;

2. Ethnic identity: knowing about one's ethnic group and about oneself as a member of that group;

3. Acculturation: a bidirectional interactive process between an individual and the host culture; and

4. Social support: which refers to the helpfulness of social relationships, the manner of human attachments, the resources exchanged among members of the support

system, general Latino value of *familismo*, and the importance of role models and mentors.

This framework is based on the authors' work counseling Latina/o college students at a PWI, and they used vignettes to demonstrate the constructs. The authors maintained that "cultural environment, ethnic identity, acculturation, and social support (e.g., family and role models/mentors) are important psychosociocultural constructs to consider when providing holistic, context-specific, and culturally relevant services to Latino university students" (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000, p. 147). This approach has been used in quantitative studies to examine the experiences of various college student groups, including first-year Latina/o students (Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005), Latina undergraduate nonpersisters (Gloria et al., 2005), and Asian American undergraduate students (Gloria & Ho, 2003).

Strengths-based approach. Combining the psychosociocultural framework with a strengths-based approach, Castellanos and Gloria (2007) reconceptualized Latina/o college student success by centralizing culture within the college experience. They pointed out that "Latina/o students who engage in learning settings that are consistent with their cultural values and practices would have an increased sense of connection, well-being, and persistence toward graduation" (p. 385). They further argued that Latina/o student success should be preoperationalized, focusing on the small successes that happen on a monthly, weekly, daily, or even hourly basis. These "microsuccesses" shape the process that leads to academic persistence. Using a strengths-based approach, Castellanos and Gloria applied *dichos* (commonly used Latina/o Spanish sayings) to elements of Latina/o college success including: family and validation, mentorship, cultural congruity, research opportunities, and professional development. In essence, Castellanos and Gloria called for a more balanced

view of student success—one that integrates academic outcomes indices with a PCS strengths-based process that recognizes the importance of *cultura* in Latina/o student success.

Another strengths-based approach to student success is Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model. Yosso used critical race theory to challenge traditional ways of viewing cultural capital. Critical race theory is an interpretive lens that places race at the center of analysis while challenging dominant ideologies that ignore the experiences of people of color (Sólorzano, Villalpondo, & Oseguera, 2005). Yosso conceptualized a model of community cultural wealth, which she defined as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). Thus, Yosso's model shifted the lens from White, middle class culture to a focus on the cultures of communities of color. This model expanded traditional Bourdieuean cultural capital theory.

The community cultural wealth model asserts that communities of color nurture cultural wealth through various forms of capital. Yosso (2005) focused on six forms of capital for this model: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. Aspirational capital refers to "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Linguistic capital refers to skills, particularly intellectual and social skills, attained through communicating in more than one language. Familial capital includes cultural knowledge shared among family members and is marked by a commitment to the well-being of the community (an expanded concept of family). Social capital includes peer networks and other social contacts along with community resources. Navigational capital refers to the skills required to maneuver through social institutions that were not created by or for communities of color. Resistant capital

includes skills exhibited by communities of color when nurturing oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality and resist subordination. Each of the six forms of capital included in the community culture of wealth model draw on knowledges Latina/o students and other students of color bring with them to predominantly White campuses from their home communities.

Drawing on the principles of positive psychology and the concept of "flourishing," Schreiner (2010) offered yet another strengths-based approach to college student success: the thriving quotient. She described thriving as "the experiences of college students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 4). She was interested in shifting the focus of college success from merely surviving (persisting to graduation) to "thriving." She developed the concept of thriving as a distinct construct comprising the following elements: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship.

In a broad study conducted with a cross-section of college students in the United States, Canada, and Australia, Schreiner (2013) found that students' scores on the "thriving quotient" were significantly predictive of traditional success outcomes such as grade point average, intent to graduate, institutional satisfaction, and learning gains. The findings also indicated the existence of a multitude of pathways to thriving, which varied depending on a student's ethnicity. The one factor that had the greatest impact on students—what Schreiner (2010) referred to as the "foundation for thriving" (p. 5)—is creating a sense of community. She offered four key elements of a sense of community: membership, ownership, relationship, and partnership (see Figure 1). Her 2010 study is particularly insightful when considering the experience of students of color at PWIs. First, she found that, although sense of community was the biggest contributor to thriving across all student groups, its predictive

strength varied by ethnicity. Second, regarding membership Schreiner (2010) argued that "membership matters most when one is new to a community and when one is feeling marginalized" (p. 5).

Membership • Sense of belonging and validation • Symbols, signs, rituals, traditions	**Relationship** • Shared emotional connection • Opportunities for positive interactions
Ownership • Student voice and contribution • Mattering to the institution	**Partnership** • Interdependence • Shared goals

Figure 1. Elements of a psychological sense of community. Adapted from "Thriving in College," by L. A. Schreiner, 2013, *Directions for Student Services, No. 143: Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education*, p. 47.

The concept of marginalization, although not new to the field of student affairs, is important to understanding student involvement, thriving, and the importance of sense of community. Schlossberg (1989) developed a "marginality and mattering" construct to specify how involvement can be achieved. Schlossberg explained that marginality and mattering are situated at opposite poles and defined marginality as a feeling that one does not matter, that one does not belong, and of being isolated. Mattering, by contrast, "refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else. This belief acts as a motivator" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 9).

Based on a study of 24 men and women, 16–80 years old, Schlossberg (1989) described five dimensions of mattering:

1. Attention: the feeling that one commands the interest or attention of another person;

2. Importance: the belief that another person cares about what we want, think, or do; or is concerned with our fate;

3. Ego-extension: the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments, or by contrast be saddened by our failures;

4. Dependence: being needed and needing others (something that both influences our behavior and the behavior of others); and

5. Appreciation: feeling that one's efforts are noticed and appreciated.

Schlossberg argued that "all students are concerned with belonging and mattering" (p. 14), thus creating a campus environment that clearly indicates to all students that they matter will promote greater student involvement. Indeed, subsequent frameworks used for examining Latina/o student success, such as Rendón's (1994) validation theory and Hurtado and Carter's (1997) sense of belonging framework, intersect with Schlossberg's concept of mattering.

Latina/o Student Success

The literature on Latina/o student success in higher education has increased significantly in the past 10 years. Numerous studies are grounded in retention/persistence frameworks. Most theories and models of college student retention have utilized a person–environment "fit" or "match" as a key ingredient to student persistence. Although student–institution fit is often described in different ways (integration, involvement, membership, etc.), the main point is that it is important for all students to feel as though they are part of the campus community—to have what Hurtado and Carter (1997) described as a sense of

belonging. This section of the literature review focuses on studies conducted with undergraduate Latina/o students at PWIs. It begins with an examination of two influential conceptual frameworks based on studies with Latina/o students: Hurtardo and Carter's (1997) sense of belonging framework and Rendón's (1994) validation theory. This is followed by a synthesis of research on Latina/o student success conducted mainly within the past 13 years (with the exception of a few influential studies). This section ends with a discussion of how the literature on Latina/o student success provides a framework to interpret the role of a cultural center in the success of Latina/o students at PWIs.

Validation

Rendón (1994) conducted a qualitative study of 132 diverse first-year students attending four different four-year institutions to examine their academic experiences. Although the study began by focusing on Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, Rendón—influenced by the work of feminist scholars—developed the concept of validation to explain "how nontraditional students who came to college expecting to fail suddenly began to believe in their innate capacity to learn and become successful college students" (p. 36). Rendón found that traditional students expressed few, if any, concerns about their ability to succeed in college, whereas many of the nontraditional student participants needed active intervention from significant others to negotiate the institutional environment. Rendón referred to these significant others as "agents."

Validation is a process by which in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty members, students, staff, peers, family members) engage in intentional and proactive affirmation of students "as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community" (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12). Thus, validation may occur at the academic

level and at the interpersonal level. Rendón (1994) theorized that "for many low-income, first-generation students, external validation is initially needed to move students toward acknowledgement of their own internal self-capableness and potentiality" (p. 17). Rendón emphasizes that the institution plays an active role in fostering validation. She provides six elements of validation theory:

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.

2. When validation is present, student feel capable of learning.

3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.

4. Validation can occur both in- and out-of-class.

5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic experience.

6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience. (p. 44–45)

Additional findings from Rendón's (1994) study suggest that first-year success may be contingent upon students getting involved in institutional life, either on their own or through validating agents. Data from her study also indicate that nontraditional students view involvement as a process initiated by external agents reaching out to them. Based on her findings, Rendón argued that even the most vulnerable students can be transformed into powerful learners through the validation process and that validation may be a prerequisite for involvement to occur. Although Rendón recognized that validation can take place in and outside the classroom, she focused mainly on what constitutes a validating classroom and

how faculty members may serve as validating agents. The concept of validation may help illuminate the role of a cultural center in Latina/o student success outside the classroom.

Sense of Belonging

Hurtado and Carter (1997) presented an alternative to Tinto's (1993) concept of student integration. They conducted a national longitudinal quantitative study of 287 Latina/o students that focused on the experiences of Latina/o students from their first through third years of college. They drew their data from the National Survey of Hispanic Students, the ACT Student Descriptive Questionnaire, and the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data Systems. Based on this study, Hurtado and Carter (1997) developed a SB model to understand how Latina/o students view their college membership by "identifying activities that bring about a greater sense of affiliation with campus life" (p. 327). The model demonstrates how student background characteristics, college selectivity, ease of transition to college, and perceptions of a hostile climate interact temporally to directly and indirectly affect a student's sense of belonging. The study indicates that, for Latina/o students, early experiences in college are key factors influencing their sense of belonging in subsequent years.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) examined the extent to which background characteristics and college experiences of Latina/o students in their first and second years of college contributed to their sense of belonging in their third year. Factors contributing to a positive sense of belonging included discussing coursework with peers outside the classroom and participating in religious and social/community organizations. Membership in Greek organizations and student government also had a positive effect on sense of belonging, but it was weaker in the third year. Not surprisingly, student perceptions of a hostile climate had a

negative impact on students' sense of belonging. The study found that students' grade point average was not significantly associated with sense of belonging and, somewhat surprisingly, neither was membership in ethnic student organizations. The researchers were disturbed to find that three particular activities were not associated with Latina/o students' sense of belonging: conducting an independent research project, working with a faculty member on a research project, and being a guest at a professor's home. However, they did not indicate how many of the student participants were first-generation college students. It is conceivable that first-generation college students may have feelings of trepidation when interacting with professors, whether on a research project or as a house guest, particularly if they are the only student of color or first-generation student participating in the activity.

Focusing on the social/peer factors in Hurtado and Carter's (1997) study, membership in ethnic student organizations did not significantly enhance the Latina/o student participants' sense of belonging on campus. However, they found that, among students who reported racial/ethnic tensions on campus, those who participated in racial/ethnic student organizations had relatively higher levels of sense of belonging than those who did not. Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggested that the students in their study who had joined ethnic organizations may have "experience[d] group cohesion and marginality simultaneously" (p. 335). This also was suggested by Loo and Rolison (1986) who examined ethnic enclaves as part of their study of minority students at PWIs. This phenomenon of simultaneous experiences of marginality within the larger campus environment and sense of belonging within ethnic subcommunities might be particularly meaningful when investigating Latina/o student experiences at cultural centers. The SB model (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) has been used by researchers to test its applicability within specific settings such as residence halls

(Johnson et al., 2007), Hispanic-serving institutions (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007), and learning communities (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002–2003).

In a quantitative study of Latina/o and White students attending four-year institutions, Strayhorn (2008) examined the relationship between academic and social experiences in college and sense of belonging for Latina/o students and whether these experiences affect sense of belonging similarly or differently for White and Latina/o students. Using Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure as his guiding framework, Strayhorn (2008) conducted a secondary analysis of data drawn from the 2004–2005 College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) using hierarchical analysis techniques with a nested design. The dependent variable was students' sense of belonging; independent variables were academic factors and social factors. The results of the study demonstrated that White students reported higher levels of sense of belonging, with older White students reporting higher levels of sense of belonging; time spent studying was a positive predictor of sense of belonging for Latina/o students but negative for White students; sense of belonging for both groups was positively influenced by interactions with others from different backgrounds, but for Latina/o students it had the greatest impact of all of the factors; and living on campus did not impact sense of belonging for either group.

Strayhorn (2008) discussed the limitations of his study, including that fact that the analysis relied on self-reported data and that the sample was representative only of those institutions that had participated in the CSEQ. Not mentioned as a limitation was the fact that the final analytic sample consisted of 289 Latina/o students and 300 randomly selected White students as a comparison group. It is unclear why one group was randomly selected and the other was not or what impact this may have had on the internal validity of the study.

Nonetheless, Strayhorn's (2008) study has important implications for understanding Latina/o students' sense of belonging at PWIs. For instance, cultural centers serve as a "home away from home" for specific ethnic/racial student groups, which leads to the assumption that the students who participate in cultural centers are mainly interacting with others who are similar to them. However, the fact that the Latina/o population encompasses significant racial, ethnic, cultural, and political diversity engenders a basic question: What constitutes the factor "interacting with others from diverse backgrounds" in Strayhorn's (2008) study? A middle class Latina/o student from a Cuban background may have a much different view of race, politics, immigration, and notions of the "American dream" than may a Latina/o student from a Mexican background whose parents have been deported because they were undocumented. Yet, it is possible that both of these Latina/o students might interact at a Latino cultural center. Given that "interacting with others from diverse backgrounds" plays a significant role in Latina/o students' sense of belonging and that the Latina/o population itself is so diverse, it is essential that researchers define or operationalize this construct.

Based on his research on sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2012) expanded on the SB model using an approach grounded in a social cognitive perspective of achievement motivation. He argued that sense of belonging "takes on heightened importance in contexts where individuals are inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible" (p. 10). He defined SB as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)" (p. 17). In outlining core elements of the concept, Strayhorn (2012) asserted that sense of belonging:

1. Is a basic human need;

2. Is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior;

3. Takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, and among

   certain populations;

4. Is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering;

5. Intersects with and is affected by social identities

6. Engenders other positive outcomes; and

7. Must be satisfied on a continual bases and likely changes as circumstances,

   conditions, and contexts change. (pp. 18–23).

Strayhorn (2014) further posited that sense of belonging has three components that translate as follows:

1. Cognitive = I think I belong here.

2. Affective = I feel like I belong here.

3. Behavioral = I act as if I belong here.

Strayhorn (2012) asserted that the extant literature is missing references to the connection between sense of belonging and the institutional environment that students experience on a daily basis. He argued that researchers "rarely, if ever, explain the mechanisms by which those environments affect sense of belonging" (p. 14). This study expands on Strayhorn's SB model by examining the mechanisms by which a Latino cultural center affects students' sense of belonging.

First-Year Transition and Campus Environment

Two significant and intersecting streams of inquiry regarding Latina/o student success focus on first-year transition and the campus environment. Attinasi (1996) conducted one of

the earliest exploratory studies on the college transition of Mexican American students to a large public university. He interviewed 18 students after their freshman year. Thirteen of the participants were persisters and five were nonpersisters. Attinasi found two conceptual themes for interpreting the persistence behavior of Mexican American students: "getting ready" (behaviors and attitudes prior to attending college) and "getting in" (behaviors and attitudes after matriculation). "Getting in" behaviors included strategies used to successfully negotiate the large dimensions—physical, social, and academic—of a university environment. These behaviors fell into two categories: "getting to know" and "scaling down."

Getting to know the campus involves developing mentoring-like relationships with upper-class students who serve as guides or interpreters of the geographies. It also involves peer knowledge sharing, in which new students explore the geographies together. Attinasi (1996) described scaling down as a process in which the student narrows down the dimensions of the campus to those components with which he/she *needs* to be familiar, thereby reducing the amount of geography (physical, social, and cognitive) to be navigated. In essence, by developing a cognitive "map" of the university, the students are able to place themselves within each geographical domain. Methods for scaling down the geography included developing support networks with peers, instructors, and advisors—people who might fit what Rendón (1994) referred to as validating agents.

Another study that examined student experiences within three university domains is Gonzalez's (2000–2001) longitudinal ethnography, which examined the experiences of two Chicano students at a large PWI in the Southwest. He developed a grounded, conceptual framework for understanding Chicano student participation and persistence behaviors at a

PWI. His framework consisted of a three-stage process of cultural survival and cultural transformation within the domains of the social, physical, and epistemological worlds. This framework provides insights into the forms of alienation and marginalization experienced within these domains and how they affect Chicano students.

Based on his study of Chicano students, Gonzalez (2000–2001) presented two significant concepts that contributed to a deeper understanding of Latina/o student success at PWIs. The first is the concept of "students as cultural workers," which he used to describe the role taken on by Latina/o students to fight marginalization and transform their cultural environment. For example, the students in his study painted a Chicano mural on the wall of the student lounge, thereby transforming the physical environment. They transformed their epistemological world by creating new spaces on campus to share knowledge and discuss Chicano issues. The social environment was transformed through the students' efforts to recruit other Chicanos to participate in what were previously White-dominated activities. The second concept is "cultural nourishment," which Gonzalez (2002) described as "individuals and material elements that replenish the students' cultural sense of selves" (p. 193). Sources of cultural nourishment include family, friends, language, role models, and existing cultural work (music, art, etc.). These behaviors also can be been viewed as students seeking cultural validation.

Both Attinasi (1996) and Gonzalez (2000–2001) based their frameworks on studies with very small student samples. Also, Gonzalez did not explain how his (2000–2001) study may have been impacted by the fact that his two participants were roommates or how his own presence during observations (e.g., in their dorm room) may have impacted the study. Nonetheless, these two studies provided new frameworks for interpreting the transition

process of Latina/o students attending PWIs and advancing the understanding of Latina/o student success. In fact, Attinasi's concept of scaling down the social, physical, and cognitive dimensions of the campus environment was later used by Hurtado and Carter (1996) in their study on Latina/o students' sense of belonging, as well as by Gloria et al. (2005) in their study of Latina/o persisters and nonpersisters.

Gloria et al. (2005) conducted a quantitative study of 99 Latina/o students attending a research university in the Southwest. They used a demographic survey and 11 standardized instruments to examine the relationships between three constructs: university comfort, social support, and self-belief. They found these three constructs to be significantly interrelated for Latina/o students, with social support and university comfort being the strongest predictors of academic nonpersistence decisions. Although this study did not focus solely on first-year students, it is significant for its contextualized and holistic approach to examining noncognitive factors of Latina/o student persistence and its implications regarding the importance of attending to campus climate and culturally relevant programming.

In another study focusing on Latina/o student persistence, Zurita (2004–2005) interviewed 10 undergraduate students attending a large, highly selective, research university where they had received a scholarship for underrepresented students of color. Five of the students were persisters and five were nonpersisters. Zurita found certain similarities and differences between the persisters and nonpersisters. Similarities included home cultures, lack of social integration, financial issues, parental support, and feeling academically unprepared. Differences between the two groups included their transition from high school to college, high school segregation, anticipatory socialization, initial goals, and first contact with the university. This study, although limited by the selection process (the five

nonpersister participants were the only ones who responded, and the five persisters were the first to respond), is significant for two reasons. First, based on her study, Zurita made a seemingly simple, yet profound, entreaty that "the university systematically examine [its] Latino students and ask the important question, 'Who are our Latino students?'" (p. 320). Second, Zurita stressed the important of early outreach to Latina/o students to ensure they are connected to the university prior to their enrollment.

In a qualitative study examining the first-year experience of 10 Latina/o college students attending a large PWI in a mid-Atlantic state, Hernandez (2002) found four major themes: the perception that high school did not prepare students for college level coursework; the importance of moral support received from students' immediate and extended family members; the abundance of opportunities to get involved on campus; and the contrasting ways students described attending a PWI, from "culture clash" to "already used to it," depending on the type of high school attended. Although this study was not intended to be representative of the first-year Latina/o college experience in general, it is important for insights regarding Latina/o student participation in extracurricular or cocurricular activities. The majority of students in this study indicated that they purposely refrained from getting involved in their first year in college, even though they were active leaders in high school, because of the challenging academic environment. They described this decision as difficult but felt they had no choice. Hernandez (2002) cautioned practitioners from assuming that a lack of participation in student activities means a student is not interested or that it is an indicator of marginality.

Hernandez (2000) also conducted an earlier qualitative study with 10 Latina/o students attending a large PWI in the Mid-Atlantic. The purpose of this study was to explore

how these students' experiences and environmental factors contributed to their persistence.

Hernandez (2000) found 11 major themes depicting a variety of interdependent relationships:

1. I want to do it (a combined sense of motivation and efficacy);

2. Family (a source of support, encouragement, and pressure);

3. Friends and peers (a source of support);

4. Faculty and staff (a positive influence);

5. Cocurricular involvement (as a positive benefit);

6. Finding Latino community (as a motivating factor);

7. Money matters (positive for those who had scholarships, negative for those struggling to meet financial demands of a college education);

8. I'm going to make it within the environment (personal responsibility);

9. Environment equals people (the most important factor in how they defined the environment);

10. Personal experiences shape the perceptions of the physical environment; and

11. Involvement as a way to break down the environment (concept of scaling down).

Hernandez (2000) developed a conceptual model based on the relationships between the 11 categories/themes, with the category "I want to do it" in the center because he identified it as the core retention element. This study is important because it built on Rendón's (1994) validation theory and Attinasi's (1996) scaling down concept, while emphasizing the role of subcommunities. Hernandez (2000) pointed out, "The participants in this study experienced the environment not as a whole but rather through subparts, which included subcommunities" (p. 584).

Intentional Communities and Ethnic Enclaves

Recently, researchers have been examining the concept of ethnic subcultures within the university environment. A subculture is a "sociological construct that denotes groups within an organization whose members share patterns of norms and values that differ from those of other groups" (Kuh, 2001–2002). Three types of institutional subcultures were defined by Kuh and Whitt (1988): (a) enhancing subcultures, which enhance and reinforce academic values; (b) orthogonal subcultures, whose norms generally agree with the institution, although certain values may differ; and (c) countercultural subcultures, whose values conflict with those of the institution.

Based on their qualitative study of Latina/o and Native American students at a large, southwestern university Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) found that ethnic enclaves can play an important role in the social integration of Latina/o students. They proposed that ethnicity can be a critical conditioning agent in the social integration process. Their study demonstrated that ethnicity can limit access to majority enclaves and, when that happens, students may engage primarily in ethnic enclaves. These ethnic enclaves, or subcommunities, then play an important role in the social integration of the student. Therefore, in order to study the social integration of Latina/o students, it is important to use ethnic enclaves as a measurement and include data analysis.

In their study of minority students at a predominantly White campus within the University of California system, Loo and Rolison (1986) argued that it is possible for minority students to be well integrated into their own ethnic subculture while feeling alienated from the larger institutional environment. Ironically, they found that White students viewed these ethnic enclaves as constituting segregation, whereas minority students

perceived them as safe havens from White cultural domination. Based on their study, Loo and Rolison concluded that minority students experience greater sociocultural alienation than do White students and that those experiences are based on feelings of cultural domination and ethnic isolation. They also found a distinction between sociocultural alienation and academic satisfaction for minority students, indicating that, regardless of how satisfied students are with their academic experience, they may still experience alienation within the campus environment.

Villalpando (2003) argued that the concept of "racial balkanization" is a myth and is unsubstantiated by empirical research. In a national longitudinal study of Chicana/o college students Villalpando (2003) used quantitative and qualitative data in the form of "counterstories" to understand the experiences of the students. Counterstories, used to tell the stories of marginalized populations, are a tool for analyzing and challenging the dominant perceptions of race and White privilege. The study revealed that ethnic subcommunities enable Chicana/o students to draw on cultural resources to mitigate challenges and obstacles faced in a predominantly White institutional environment. Furthermore, his study indicates that affiliating with ethnic enclaves increases socially conscious values and community service activities of Chicana/o students.

In her study of intentional communities among female students of color at a predominantly White campus, Aleman (1998) investigated how race and ethnicity inform friendships and affect cognitive outcomes and peer learning. She found that the intentional communities formed by women of color served to both separate and integrate students. Furthermore, Aleman argued that "separation and integration are not antithetical but sympathetic operational positions" (p. 4). In other words, by participating in intentional

communities with other women of color, the students in her study gained a gendered and raced subjectivity, which helped them to more effectively navigate the dominant White institutional environment. Research on ethnic enclaves or subcommunities provides essential information that may help inform the understanding of how and why students choose to participate in cultural centers.

Latino Cultural Centers

A current search for empirical studies on Latino cultural centers revealed a major gap in the research literature on this topic. Two seminal books have been published focusing on ethnic cultural centers in the past 10 years: Fred Hord's (2005) *Black Culture Centers: Politics of Survival and Identity* and Lori Patton's (2010) *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice*. Both edited volumes provide much needed background and insight regarding cultural centers and their role in higher education while serving the significant purpose of providing a foundation upon which to build a knowledge base.

Background on Cultural Centers

The establishment of Black cultural centers began in earnest in the late 1960s as a result of the movement for civil rights and the Black Student Movement (Hefner, 2002). What followed was a proliferation of Black cultural centers at PWIs during the 1970s and 1980s (Hord, 2005). Section II of Hord's (2005) book includes various perspectives on theory as it pertains to the history and evolution of Black cultural centers. Asante (2005) offered five general areas of responsibilities for Black cultural centers:

1. An intense interest in African cultural and psychological location, as shown in symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs;

2. A commitment to discovering the subject–place of Africans in any social, political, literary or religious phenomenon with implications for questions of sex, gender, and class;

3. A defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, dance, education, science, and literature;

4. A celebration of centeredness and agency and a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about Africans or other people;

5. An imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people.

Hord (2005) argued that if Black cultural centers are to survive on campuses, they must be philosophically rooted in Afrocentrism while interacting effectively with other campus units as well as with other communities of color. Another perspective focuses on the synergy between Black cultural centers and Black Studies programs. For instance, Stovall (2005) argued that Black cultural centers should be intrinsically connected to the Black Studies program, stating, "the cultural center should be the practical and social arm: the Black Studies Program should be the intellectual arm" (p. 107). Hord's groundbreaking book, which was published during a time of attacks on affirmative action and a decline in the number of African American students attending large universities (Malveaux, 2005) illuminates the multiple roles Black cultural centers have been expected to play at PWIs since their inception.

A more recent publication, Lori Patton's (2010) *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice* offers multiple perspectives on the role of ethnic cultural centers in the 21st century. Using a critical race theory lens, Yosso

and Lopez (2010) argued that cultural centers at historically White colleges serve as a "physical, epistemological, social, and academic counterspaces for students of color to build a sense of community" (p. 84) while also disrupting the White privilege that permeates PWIs. They contended that cultural centers allow students to choose the margin as a space for resistance. Benitez (2010) argued that shifting from the traditional Black–White binary to a social justice framework would make it possible for cultural centers to serve the needs of minoritized students while also providing space for White students to examine the social construction of power and privilege. He pointed to a historical dissonance between cultural centers and White students and contended that "a more progressive response to the discourse is conceptualizing cultural centers as possible spaces for the social deconstruction of 'Whiteness' and racial superiority" (p. 124). This perspective was certainly not in the forefront during the early years of cultural centers, when students were more focused on their own racial/ethnic identity while strategizing to improve the recruitment and retention of students of color. But the evolution of cultural centers at PWIs requires new questions to be asked regarding their mission and purpose in the 21st century. L. D. Patton (2010) argued for the continued relevance of ethnic cultural centers "where students' feelings, ideas, cultures, and experiences not only matter but receive validation and support" (p. xvii).

Purpose and Mission of Cultural Centers

In addition to the two books mentioned above, various articles and book chapters focusing on ethnic cultural centers have been published in the past 25 years. Much of the earlier literature comprised authors' views regarding the appropriate purpose and mission of an ethnic cultural center. Some of the early literature was written by people who held positions as cultural center directors, including Lawrence W. Young, Jr. (1991) who argued,

An ethnic minority cultural center on a predominantly White campus should be a

clear manifestation of the presence and the validity of a cultural group and a

representation of the academy's acceptance of that group as an important and viable

contributor to the community of teachers and learners. (p. 44)

He went on to present two Afrocentric models for the establishment of a cultural center, one

using a "safe haven" siege mentality (Afrikaners of South Africa) and the other using an

"oasis" (all are welcome) philosophy, arguing that the oasis model is preferable in meeting

the educational mission of both the cultural center and the university.

Based on a survey conducted with cultural center administrators at eight institutions

(private and public) located in the southern to northeastern regions of the country, combined

with six site visits, Tomlinson (1992) concluded that the ideal cultural center would operate

based on three interwoven strands: cultural education, student support, and cultural

entertainment. She also argued,

Of all the possible avenues of activity in which a cultural center might be engaged,

the community outreach concept holds vast potential for the embodiment of the goals

that a culture should ultimately seek to fulfill—the growth and development of its

participants through recognition, sharing, and preservation of their culture. (p. 92)

Tomlinson's chapter is rare in that it actually offered an early study focused specifically on

cultural centers. However, her survey data was drawn exclusively from cultural center

administrators, leaving a gap regarding student voices and experiences.

More recent articles have offered frameworks for delivery of programs and services at

cultural centers. Jenkins (2008) provided a five-pronged cultural programming framework

based on Pennsylvania State University's Paul Robeson Cultural Center. Her framework,

which used multiple approaches to facilitate deep learning, included: cultural education, cultural engagement, cultural student development, cultural community building, and cultural environmental enhancement. L. D. Patton and Hannon (2008) provided a rationale for enhanced collaboration between cultural centers and student activities offices with the goal of promoting cross-learning and multiculturalism. They recommended collaborating on the following programming efforts: orientation, leadership development, programming boards, diversity education, and overall campus engagement. They also pointed to factors that may hinder collaboration between cultural centers and student activities offices, including: an institutional culture that discourages collaboration, misperceptions regarding both entities, separate policies and procedures, and fear of consolidation. They urged administrators to identify and work to overcome challenges to collaboration. Like most of the more current literature on cultural centers, L. D. Patton and Hannon recognized the need for cultural centers to expand their role on campus beyond serving as a safe haven to being fully engaged in the academic, social, and cultural life of the institution.

Research focusing on Latina/o cultural centers is almost nonexistent except for the occasional unpublished conference presentation or dissertation. *Creando una Casa: Embracing Space, Containing Space in the Definition of a Latina/o Community at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign* (Esquivel, 2001) documented the history of the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign cultural center and the struggle of the students at that university. A paper presented at a meeting of the Midwest Consortium for Latino Research, entitled *The Perceptions of a Latino Culture Center* (Montelongo, Ortiz, & Asker, 1998), described one of the few studies conducted that used data gathered from interviews with student affairs administrators, cultural center staff members, and undergraduate students

to examine the role of a Latino cultural center in student involvement, persistence, and ethnic identity development. Using a "cultural audit" framework for their study, which included interviews, observations, and document analysis, the authors found that the support provided to students through the cultural center appeared to "alleviate the persistent effects of negative climate at a predominantly White institution" (p. 36). The concept of a "family unit" permeated every aspect of the cultural center in this study but, at the same time, the authors found that "the introduction of Latina/o Greek-letter organizations has challenged the very core of what had always been a close knit family at the Center" (p. 37). This is another example of how Latina/o cultural centers continue to evolve as various student groups claim space within the center.

Conclusion

This literature review began by examining two theoretical frameworks that have been used to define college student success: Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. Alternative views of student success also were explored with special emphasis on two frameworks that were developed based on studies with Latina/o students: Rendón's (1994) validation theory and Hurtado and Carter's (1996) SB theory. Studies examining Latina/o student success were then reviewed, particularly those using qualitative methods. The final section of the literature review focused no ethnic subcommunities and cultural centers.

The literature points to three themes that may be significant in understanding the role of cultural centers in the experiences of Latina/o students attending a PWI. First is the importance of Latina/o students getting connected to the institution early in their college experience. Researchers concluded, based on their findings, that early connections were

critical to students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1996), validation (Rendón, 1994), and persistence (Zurita, 2004–2005). Second, sense of belonging and validation are key elements to Latina/o student persistence and success, particularly at PWI's. Strayhorn (2012) argued, "Sense of belonging is important and it takes on heightened importance in contexts where individuals are inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible" (p. 10). Third, cultural centers have traditionally served as a home away from home while also providing a supportive and validating space for marginalized and underrepresented student populations.

I included these three themes in my research design by investigating how early in their college experience students are establishing connections with the cultural center (LNACC), what those connections consist of, how students make meaning of their experiences at the LNACC, and how these experiences influence their success as Latina/o students at a PWI.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of a Latino cultural center in the experiences of Latina/o students at a PWI. Additionally, this study sought to understand how Latina/o students make meaning of their experiences within a cultural center. Three main research questions guided my study:

1. How do Mexican American students become aware of the cultural center?

2. Why do Mexican American students choose to participate in cultural center activities?

3. What role does the cultural center play in Mexican American student success?

In this chapter, I present the methodological approach and philosophical assumptions that undergirded my study followed by an explanation of my research approach. I then describe the research sample, provide contextual information regarding the research site, explain my data collection and data analysis process, and discuss my role as the researcher. Finally, I discuss strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, ethical issues, expected outcomes, and delimitations and limitations of the study.

Methodological Approach

I chose a qualitative research approach for this study. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding or interpreting how people make meaning of phenomena by studying participants in their natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research is exploratory and particularly useful when researching topics that have not been previously studied or when extant theories do not apply to the population under study (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach was appropriate for my study because I was seeking to understand the role of a Latino cultural center from the perspective of students actively involved in the center. Latino cultural centers have rarely been a focus of research, resulting in a lack of

theories and models addressing the role of cultural centers in Latina/o college student success.

Creswell (2013) outlined four philosophical assumptions that convey the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological beliefs supporting qualitative research: (a) the existence of multiple realities; (b) the subjective experiences of individual participants in natural settings is how knowledge is known; (c) the values and biases of the researcher are present in the study; and (d) inductive logic and an emerging research design, which is shaped by the researcher's strategies of data collection and analysis, is used. A qualitative approach assumes that "objective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5).

Qualitative research includes several key characteristics including: a focus on meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of data, an inductive process of data analysis, and the use of rich description in the final product (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative researchers emphasize "the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). Thus qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people create and give meaning to social experiences.

For this qualitative study I employed a constructivist-interpretive approach to gain a deep understanding of how students at a PWI make meaning of their involvement and experiences at a cultural center. An interpretive approach to qualitative research assumes that human action is meaningful and that it is possible for the researcher to "reconstruct the self-understandings of actors engaged in particular actions" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 193). The

goal of this approach is to interpret the meanings people make of their worlds by focusing as much as possible on the participants' perspectives of the phenomena (Creswell, 2009). The way people make meaning of their world is socially and historically negotiated, so context is important, as is the process of interaction among individuals. A constructivist-interpretive approach to qualitative research assumes that people do not make meaning of or interpret their experiences in isolation but, rather, "against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). A constructivist-interpretive approach to this study allowed me to actively engage with the student participants to construct knowledge based on how they made meaning of their experiences at a cultural center, which may not fit the typical models of student involvement.

Research Approach

I chose an interpretive case study approach for my study. Merriam (1988) defined a qualitative case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 21). Merriam (1988) posited that researchers using case study design are interested in gaining in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and what it means for those involved; the emphasis is on process and context rather than rather than on outcomes and specific variables, with the goal being discovery as opposed to confirmation. She argued that a case study methodology is especially suited for "dealing with critical problems of practice and extending the knowledge base of various aspects of education" (p. xiii).

Merriam's (1988, 1998) approach to case study, which is explained in more detail below, worked well for this study because it allows for multiple methods of data collection within a specific "bounded" system. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding

or interpreting how people make meaning of phenomena by studying participants in their natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research is exploratory and particularly useful when researching topics that have not been previously studied or when extant theories do not apply to the population under study (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach using case study methodology was appropriate for my study because I was seeking to understand how students make meaning of their experiences within a specific bounded context—a cultural center at a PWI.

Merriam (1988) identified three types of case study based on the nature of the end product of the study: descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative. Descriptive case studies provide a detailed account of the phenomenon being studied with the purpose of providing deeper understanding (rather than theory building). Interpretive case studies also contain rich description, however the researcher goes a step further by using descriptive data "to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering (Merriam, 1988, pp. 27–28). Evaluative case studies contain rich description of the context as well as an explanation of interventions and causal links and judgment regarding interventions. I chose interpretive case study methodology because I was interested in interpreting how students make meaning of their experiences at a cultural center and how these experiences may be associated with Latina/o student success at a PWI.

One defining characteristic of case study research, which distinguishes it from other methodologies, is the existence of a "bounded system"—in essence, "the case." A bounded system is a single entity or unit that has boundaries, such as a specific place and time (Creswell, 2013). This may include a program, a process, an individual, an event, an institution, or a social group (Merriam, 1988). Stake (2000) stated, "In the social sciences

and human services, the case has working parts; it is purposive; it often has a self. It is an integrated system" (p. 436). Merriam (1988) identified four additional key characteristics of case study: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. Creswell (2013) agreed with Merriam (1988) and added the following defining characteristics: a varied approach to data analysis, varied ways of organizing themes (chronologically, across cases, or theoretically), and the inclusion of "assertions" by the research at the conclusion of the study.

This case study was bounded within a specific place (a Latino cultural center at a PWI) and time (6 months). It also encompassed the four features of case study outlined by Merriam (1988): particularistic—I studied a particular group of people (Latina/o college students) in the context of a particular program/institution (Latino cultural center at a PWI); interpretive—the collected data were analyzed and conceptual categories emerged that either supported or challenged my conceptual framework; heuristic—the study sought to provide greater understanding of Latina/o college experiences and reveal previously unknown meanings regarding their experiences at a cultural center; and inductive—concepts and generalizations emerged from the data and were grounded in the context.

Participants

The student participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling, the investigator selects participants from whom the most can be learned regarding the central issues of the research problem (Merriam, 1998). This study focused on the role of a cultural center in the experiences of Latina/o students; thus, the participants were Latina/o students who were participating in LNACC activities. I focused specifically on undergraduate Latina/o students for three reasons: (a) the undergraduate college experience is inherently different from graduate college life; and (b) my research interests were focused on

undergraduate college students; and (c) based on my past experience with and research on cultural centers, I was aware that undergraduate students frequent cultural centers in greater numbers than do graduate students. I did, however, strive for maximum variation within my sample in terms of the participants' year in college (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), college major, generational status in the U.S. (first generation, second generation, etc.), permanent residency (in-state vs. out-of-state resident), and current residence (on campus vs. off campus). Maximum variation sampling "increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives—an ideal in qualitative research" (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). Maximum variation also can increase the accuracy of findings by illuminating shared patterns common across the sample, making them significant because they emerged from a diverse sample (M. Q. Patton, 2000).

I used multiple strategies to recruit a diverse sample of Latina/o undergraduate students for this study. First, I reached out to key informants to assist with recruitment of participants. Creswell (2013) described a key informant as an individual from the study site who will allow the researcher access to a sample population within the site. I contacted student affairs colleagues at UI to inform them of my study and requested their assistance in recruiting participants. Three key informants were particularly helpful in sharing information about my study with students. They included two staff/administrators at the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership and one staff member at the Center for Diversity and Enrichment. They forwarded my recruitment e-mail (Appendix B) to various Latina/o undergraduate student listserves.

Second, I posted flyers at the LNACC (Appendix C). The flyers provided brief information about the topic of my research study along with instructions to contact me if

interested in learning more about participating in the study. Before posting the flyers, I requested and received permission from the director of the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership, who oversees all of the cultural centers on campus.

Third, I used snowball sampling, which involves "asking each participant or group of participants to refer you to other participants" (Merriam, 1998, p. 63). Participants who were juniors or seniors often suggested sophomore students, which helped increase the diversity of the sample. Students who were members of specific student organizations often suggested peers from the same organization. My key informants were also helpful in suggesting students who were regular participants in LNACC activities. I defined regular participant as a student who was attending LNACC programs/activities on a monthly basis or more often (weekly or daily basis).

Participant demographic information is provided in Table 1. It was especially important that the sample was representative of all four college classes (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) to examine differences in how students perceived the cultural center, for example, whether the center had a different meaning for freshmen than it did for seniors. A student's home residency state (in-state vs. out-of-state resident) might also shape their view of the center, particularly if a student grew up in a large, multicultural urban environment as opposed to a rural predominantly White environment. In order to protect the participants' identities, I have not matched any of the demographic data points for any individual students (e.g., male, senior, out-of-state resident, etc.). I also was interested in achieving ethnic diversity in the sample; however, because all but one student identified their ethnic background as Mexican or Mexican American I was not able to achieve an ethnically diverse Latina/o sample. Again, due to the need to protect my participants' identities, I have

Table 1.

Student Participant Demographics

Characteristic	*N*
Sex	
Males	3
Females	8
Residency	
In state	6
Out of state	5
Year in college	
Senior	4
Junior	3
Sophomore	3
Freshman	1
Course of study	
Double major, minor, and certificate	1
Double major and certificate	3
Double major	2
Major and minor	2
Major and double certificate	1
Major	2
Generational[a]	
Second generation	9
Third generation	2

[a]Second generation: born in United States, with at least one foreign-born parent; third generation: born in United States, with both parents born in United States.

not disclosed the ethnic background of individual participants (other than Latina/o). Finally, "course of study" is included in the table to demonstrate that the student participants were challenging themselves academically. Nine of the 11 student participants were pursuing more than just one major.

I also interviewed six full-time professional staff members, three of whom were directly affiliated with the LNACC and three of whom were indirectly affiliated. I used purposeful sampling to recruit the staff members. I knew all six individuals through my

work in higher education and considered them to be my colleagues. Three of the staff participants were working within the Division of Student Life and three were working within the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost. They agreed to participate after I contacted each of them individually and explained the purpose of my study. In order to protect their identity, I have not provided any additional demographic information about the staff participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Key components of a good qualitative case study include the presentation of rich description and in-depth understanding of the case, which requires the researcher to collect multiple forms of data (Creswell, 2013). Merriam (1998) argued that "any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study" (p. 28). I used three different data collection methods for this study: interviews, documents, and observations. In this section I provide a description of my data collection procedures.

Institutional Review Board Approval

This study took place at the UI, a large, predominantly White, research institution located in Iowa City, Iowa. On August 6, 2012, I met with a UI administrator who oversaw several student affairs units, including the cultural centers, to discuss my research plans. He expressed support for my research and was excited that I planned to use one of their cultural centers for my study. After providing him with information about my plan for collecting data, along with a general timeline for conducting interviews, he offered to provide me with a key to the LNACC so that I could conduct student interviews there in the evenings or during the weekends after I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I also visited with the IRB office at UI to inquire about its requirements. IRB office personnel indicated that I

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was not required to submit an IRB form to that office provided I received IRB approval from Iowa State University (ISU). I received an e-mail from the IRB Office of UI on August 4, 2013, confirming that I would not be required to submit an IRB request to that institution (Appendix D). I received IRB approval from the ISU Office for Responsible Research on August 13, 2013, and began collecting data shortly thereafter.

Interviews

My data collection consisted of interviews with students and staff, observations of the physical environment of the research site, and document analysis. The purpose of a qualitative research interview is to gain in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the subjects and how they make meaning of those experiences (I. Seidman, 2006). I adopted a modified version of Irving Seidman's (2006) "three-interview series" model. Although this model is commonly used for phenomenological research, it was appropriate for my research approach because I was seeking in-depth understanding of how students make meaning of their experiences at a cultural center. In Irving Seidman's model, the first interview puts the participant's experience in context by revealing background characteristics and experiences as they relate to the research topic. The second interview centers on concrete details of the participant's lived experiences related to the research topic. During the final interview the participant reflects on the meaning of their experiences.

I conducted individual interviews with 11 self-identified Latina/o undergraduate students and six staff members affiliated with the LNACC. Each student participant was interviewed twice for approximately one hour. The first round of student interviews were conducted face-to-face at the LNACC or other locations convenient for each participant. The interview began with structured questions regarding the participant's background, followed

by open-ended questions regarding the how the participant was introduced to the LNACC and how he or she was participating in LNACC activities. The second round of student interviews were conducted either face to face or by telephone. These interviews focused on what the LNACC experience meant to the participant and explored concepts that emerged from analyzing the transcripts from the first interviews. The second round of interviews also was used to conduct member checks. An open, semistructured interview protocol was used for the student interviews (Appendix E). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I transcribed the first round of interviews; I used a transcriptionist to transcribe the second round of interviews.

Consistent with the particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic nature of case study research, in which a holistic view of the case is essential (Merriam, 1998), I also interviewed six staff members who were directly or indirectly affiliated with the LNACC. Three staff members directly affiliated with the LNACC were interviewed twice. So, I conducted a total of nine interviews with six staff members. All first-round interviews focused on the staff member's position at the university, his or her role with the LNACC, and his or her perceptions regarding the purpose of the LNACC and how students use it. These interviews took place in the offices of the staff members. The second round of interviews, which took place either in person or by telephone, explored how staff members made meaning of their role with the LNACC, their interactions with students who participated in LNACC activities, and the role of the LNACC in Latina/o student success. An open, semistructured interview protocol was used for the staff interviews (Appendix F). Each interview was transcribed verbatim by me (first round) or a transcriptionist (second round). I conducted a total of 31 interviews with 17 individuals (students and staff members) for this case study.

Observations

Merriam (1998) pointed to observations as a major form of collecting data in qualitative research, emphasizing that observation "offers a firsthand account of the situation under study and, when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allow for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 111). I visited the LNACC several times to conduct student interviews. Those site visits provided an opportunity for me to examine physical aspects of the center including size, geographic location, artwork, furniture, technology, etc. I also attended one student meeting and one social event at the LNACC.

A researcher may assume one of four stances when conducting observations: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer (Gold, as cited in Merriam, 1998). I assumed an observer as participant stance during my observations, which means that my role as a research observer was known to the participants and that my participation in the activity was secondary to my role as a researcher gathering information. When I attended the social event at the LNACC, I interacted with other participants, but my main focus was on observing the physical setting, participants, interactions, and my own behavior. Gaining access to the site was not an issue, because the LNACC was open to the public and the events I attended were not private. During my site visits, I was cognizant of my role as an observer/participant and the ambiguity of being both a participant and an observer. My observations during the student organization meeting and the social event lasted approximately 20 minutes. I was not completely comfortable being the only middle-age person (and non-UI student) in attendance. I believe this was more my own discomfort than that of the students. The observations I conducted during the one-on-

one interviews were more productive because the setting and situation felt more natural to me.

I used Creswell's (2013) observational protocol to record information about my observations. This protocol template includes the following components: a header providing information about the observational session, a section for descriptive notes, a subsection within the descriptive notes section for chronological summarizing, and a section for reflective notes. Maintaining a systematic approach to recording observational data is important because "what is written down or mechanically recorded from a period of observation becomes the raw data from which a study's findings eventually emerge" (Merriam, 1998, p. 104).

Document Analysis

In addition to interviews and observations, I also collected documents related to the LNACC. Merriam (1998) pointed to documentary data as a particularly good source for case studies "because they can ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated" (p. 126). I examined the LNACC website and Facebook page, campus newspaper articles, and LNACC archival materials located in the UI Main Library. Document analysis provided context to the case site in three ways: (a) background information on the LNACC's history and original purpose, (b) insight into how the LNACC is currently portrayed in public media outlets, and(c) understanding of how current students perceive the LNACC.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis Procedures

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In general, qualitative data analysis procedures include coding data, creating broader themes or categories based on the codes, and making comparisons between the themes and

categories using graphs, charts, and tables (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research requires simultaneous data collection and analysis. Merriam (1998) argued that "data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating" (p. 162), and offered four guidelines for knowing when to end the data collection phase: sources have been exhausted, categories have been saturated, regularities begin to emerge, and over-extension becomes evident.

I used Merriam's (1988, 1998) process for analyzing case study data and category construction. Once the data collection phase ended, I organized the data to begin intense analysis. All collected data were organized in files according to topical schemes (interviews, observations, document analysis, etc.). The first level of analysis involved rereading transcripts and other data combined with memo writing, which helps the researcher "hold a conversation" with the data—asking questions about what is missing, making connections between the interview transcripts and making comments about the data (Merriam, 1998). This first level of analysis illuminated preliminary themes and patterns.

The second level of analysis involved coding of the data into units, which became conceptual categories. Merriam (1998) emphasized that "categories are abstractions derived from the data, not the data themselves" (p. 181). Due to the large amount of interview data, I elected to use the software program NVivo10 for coding purposes. The third level of analysis consisted of developing broader themes. Merriam (1998) stated that this level of analysis moves the researcher toward the development of a theory that "seeks to explain a large number of phenomena and tell how they are related" (p. 146). For my case study, rather than generating theory, I was interesting in developing a conceptual model for understanding the role of the LNACC in the experiences of Latina/o students at UI.

In serving as the research instrument, I conducted my analysis in a manner that was guided by a conceptual framework but still allowed for new concepts to emerge from the data using the above-described method of coding for categories and themes.

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

Several strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness of the data. First, triangulation of the data was built into the research procedures through a combination of participant interviews, researcher observations, and document analysis. I also conducted member checks with the participants to ensure accuracy and credibility of the case study account. A third technique to ensure trustworthiness and authentic research was using rich, thick description in my written account. Throughout the data analysis process, I also utilized a peer debriefer to gain an outside perspective regarding my rendering of conceptual categories and themes.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves "corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). The student interviews served as the main source of data for my study because the students' perspective and voices were essential to understanding the role of the LNACC in their college experiences. Staff members provided historical perspective and insight regarding LNACC policies and procedures. This was especially helpful when students made reference to a particular policy or if they shared concerns about space issues within the LNACC. My observations of the LNACC facility contributed to my understanding of the physical space, particularly the artwork to which many students made reference during their interviews. Finally, document analysis provided

context regarding the history of the LNACC and how it was portrayed in media outlets (e.g., Facebook, website, etc.).

Member Checks

Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to member checking as the most essential method for establishing credibility and described it as a process "whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected" (p. 314). For this study, member checks were conducted with the student participants in two ways. First, I provided the interview transcripts to each of the participants to give them an opportunity to review and correct any of the data from their interviews. I also used the second-round interviews to ask clarifying questions regarding any information that I did not understand from their first-round interviews and to present the preliminary findings for feedback. Second, I met with two of the student participants to share my rendering of the analytic categories from which I developed five themes. These two students were able to provide crucial feedback that helped me to develop a more nuanced perception of the themes.

I also provided each of the staff participants a copy of their interview transcripts. This provided them with an opportunity to review and make any corrections to the data. For the staff members who were interviewed twice, I was able to use the second-round interviews to ask clarifying questions regarding comments they made during their first interview.

Thick Description

I have conveyed the findings for this study using rich, thick description to help "transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (Creswell, 2009, pp. 191–192). Numerous quotes from all student participants have been

used to give the reader a deep understanding of student perspectives of the LNACC and to illuminate each of the themes in the study's results.

Peer Debriefer

Peer debriefing is a process whereby the researcher shares his or her analytic process "for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). This process enhances the accuracy and trustworthiness to the study by "involving an interpretation beyond the researcher and invested in another person" (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). Cristobal Salinas, a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at ISU, served as the peer debriefer for my study. Cristobal's research explores the economic, social, and political context of educational opportunity for Latino male students. His research focuses on social justice and higher education, particularly as it applies to male Latina/o students. His experience with and understanding of Latino/a fraternities and sororities allowed him to provide keen insights regarding student involvement.

Cristobal provided feedback through written notes, which outlined his interpretation of student quotes, particularly regarding the physical space of the research site. His feedback helped deepen my analysis of the data as I was forming my initial conceptual categories. I also met with Cristobal after I had developed the five themes from my findings. He provided feedback on each theme and pointed to additional information that could help render the themes in a more nuanced manner. Cristobal also communicated with me by e-mail to share additional information that could add depth to my analysis.

Role of the Researcher

Consistent with an interpretive research approach (Conrad, Haworth, & Lattuca, 2001), I—as the researcher—served as the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of data. Various metaphors, including bricoleur, quilt maker, montage creator, and jazz improviser, have been used to describe role of the qualitative researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In essence, the interpretive researcher collects, assembles, and edits pieces of reality together to create psychological and emotional unity to complex and multiple voices and experiences. In my role as the researcher, I understood and acknowledged that the interactive process of interpretive research was shaped by my own personal history, values, and biases together with the participants of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In my role, the advantages of serving as the primary instrument included the ability to immediately respond and adapt to data, use verbal and nonverbal communication to expand understanding, process data immediately, conduct member checks with participants to ensure accuracy of interpretation, and explore unexpected or unusual responses (Merriam, 2009). Interpretive research in general (and case study in particular) requires the researcher to be involved in sustained and intensive interactions with participants, which introduces various ethical and personal issues into the research process (Creswell, 2009). Thus, I understood that it was imperative that I explicitly identify the values, biases, and personal background issues that might shape my interpretation of the data.

My previous position as an assistant dean and director of La Casa Cultural Latina at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign presented both challenges and benefits in my role as a researcher in this study. I brought knowledge and understanding of the history of Latino cultural centers in the Midwest as well as personal insights regarding their impact on

Latina/o students. However, the assumptions and beliefs I held about Latino cultural centers were based on the particular contexts of the centers with which I have had personal experience and may not hold for different institutional environments. I was aware that the LNACC I knew as a young college student in the 1970s was very different from the current LNACC in several ways: In the 1970s, alcohol was allowed at parties held at the LNACC, the legal drinking age was 18, the manager of the LNACC was an undergraduate or graduate student who physically resided there, Latina/o fraternities and sororities did not exist at UI, and the LNACC was mainly used for political activities. The fact that the LNACC, in many ways, had changed immensely since the 1970s increased my ability to view it with fresh eyes and reduce possible bias.

At the same time, my experience with cultural centers was an important part of my own identity and has fueled my passion for understanding the role they play in Latina/o college success. I first became aware of the existence of Latino cultural centers as a teenager visiting a university campus in the Midwest. As a third-generation Mexican-American high school student living in small town Iowa during the early 1970s, I was unaware of the Chicano Movement, the United Farmworkers' Movement, or other significant social justice movements impacting Latina/o populations at the time. It was through my exposure to the Chicano/Indian American Cultural Center (LNACC) at UI that I gained my most valuable education, began the transition from holding an assimilated Mexican American identity to a self-aware Chicana identity, and began to consider how historical oppression impacted both Latina/o and indigenous populations. This cultural center was the impetus for my enrollment as a college student at UI.

My involvement at the center as a first-generation college student impacted my later decision to pursue a career in student affairs focusing on Latina/o college student development and retention. Subsequently, as a student affairs professional, I have built and strengthened my connections to Latino cultural centers, which led to my position as the director of La Casa Cultural Latina at the University of Illinois. My own seminal experiences with cultural centers, combined with my interactions with students who use these centers, have convinced me of the urgent and critical need for examination of the role and impact of cultural centers at PWIs.

<div align="center">**Delimitations**</div>

This study was narrowed by its focus on Latina/o undergraduate students. Although students from other ethnic groups may have participated in Latino cultural center activities, the purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of Latina/o students. Latina/o graduate students were not included in this study because I was specifically interested in the experience of undergraduate students as they begin to develop a leadership identity in college. It also was narrowed by its focus on one particular university in the Midwest. Although many large, predominantly White research universities in the Midwest share common characteristics, they are also unique in their particular histories, traditions, and campus environments. The results of this study may not be generalized to cultural centers located at other institutions. I was limited in my selection of a research site by the small number of Latino cultural centers. I chose the cultural center located at UI as the site for my study based on its proximity and the vitality of its cultural center.

Limitations

The limitations of this study pertain to the research design and inherent challenges of qualitative research. The student participants were asked to recall feelings and impressions from the first semester of their freshman year. It is possible, particularly for the juniors and seniors, that their memories were unclear or influenced by later experiences. I allowed ample time for the participants to reflect on their experiences before answering questions, and I followed up with questions to ensure I understood their reflections. Another limitation inherent in qualitative research is possible researcher bias. My previous history with the research site as well as with other Latino cultural centers was both helpful and a possible source of bias. During data collection I wrote memos to process what I was seeing, hearing, and feeling. This helped me to examine and recognize any possible biases that might be emerging in my analysis. The member checks conducted with the research participants, combined with peer debriefing, also helped to limit researcher bias.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this case study was to examine the role of an ethnic cultural center in the experiences of Latina/o students at a PWI. The study site was UI's LNACC. Three research questions guided this study:

1. How do Mexican American students become aware of the cultural center?

2. Why do Mexican American students choose to participate in the cultural center activities?

3. What role does the cultural center play in Mexican American student success?

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from interviews, document analysis, and observations, which is followed by an analytical discussion of the themes. The analytical discussion is grounded in a strengths-based student success perspective focusing on the concepts of sense of belonging, thriving, and validation.

Five key themes emerged from the study: (a) getting connected, (b) the LNACC "vibe," (c) LNACC as anchor and launching pad, (d) Latina/o presence on campus, and (e) neutral, sacred, and (con)tested space. The first theme, getting connected, provides an understanding of the multiple ways in which the student participants were able to get connected to the LNACC. The second theme, the LNACC "vibe," illuminates how students made meaning of their experiences at the LNACC, a space that many of the participants referred to as having a unique "vibe" or essence. The LNACC as anchor or launching pad theme represents the various temporal experiences of students as they either moved from frequent to infrequent engagement with the LNACC or continued to have a strong connection to the LNACC. The fourth theme, Latina/o presence on campus, reflects the students' expressed desire for visibility on campus and their perception of the LNACC as a

representation of the Latina/o presence. The final theme, neutral, sacred, and con(tested) space, illustrates how students' tacit understandings of the various physical spaces within the LNACC influenced the ways in which those spaces were used and what that means for future use of the center. A comprehensive discussion of each of the five themes is presented next.

Theme 1: Getting Connected

The student participants in this study described multiple paths to getting connected to the LNACC. A majority of the students had participated in various college-bound programs for racially/ethnically underrepresented or first-generation students. These programs coordinated purposeful activities to intentionally introduce students to the campus cultural centers prior to their enrollment at UI. Two students connected to the LNACC through a UI scholarship program for underrepresented and first-generation students, which required them to attend a certain number of activities throughout the year. One student was introduced to the LNACC through a family member who is an Iowa alumna, whereas another was encouraged to visit the LNACC by a campus mentor. One student discovered the LNACC through information received at a student organization fair. Though the students may have taken different paths to their introduction to the LNACC, the experience influenced each of them to return to the center and become active participants as described in the scenarios below.

Connecting Through College Bound Programs

Four students learned about the LNACC while participating in The Iowa Edge, a week-long precollege program at UI that serves African American, Alaskan Native, American Indian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Latino/a, and first-generation college students. The program takes place the week before classes start in the fall semester of the

freshman year and seeks to promote a successful first-year transition to UI. According to

The Iowa Edge website, students who participate in the program: "meet faculty and campus

leaders who will support you during your college experience; build community with a group

of peers before the semester begins; and develop leadership skills for success in class, on

campus, and in life" (*Get the Iowa Edge!*, n.d.). For these four students, getting introduced to

the LNACC did lead to connecting with a group of peers.

Noel participated in The Iowa Edge program. He described his introduction to the

LNACC, which occurred the week before classes began his freshman year:

> During that week they showed us a lot of resources on campus and the cultural
>
> centers . . . was one of them. They took us to each and every [cultural center] house,
>
> but I significantly remember the LNACC more because it was the first house that they
>
> took us to.

His first impression upon walking into the house was striking:

> I definitely remember, like, walking towards the center, towards the front door. Like,
>
> this house was a little old and it was a little . . . it seemed like it was outdated. But it
>
> was a really big, nice house. And as I was walking in, I kind of [hesitates], I kind of
>
> got the vibe and just the, like, the essence of it being, like my grandma's house, my
>
> *abuela's* house.

When asked what led him to get involved in LNACC activities after visiting the center the

first time, Noel pointed to his continued connection with his peers from The Iowa Edge

cohort: "To be honest, a lot of the friends in Iowa Edge, I still hung out with, talked to, and

we'd always go to the LNACC, whether it'd be just to study or just to hang out." Noel also

developed a strong connection to the LNACC through his membership in a Latino fraternity:

"With Sigma Lambda Beta, my fraternity, they'd always have events or meetings there, so that also led me to go to the LNACC even more." In fact, Noel's introduction to the LNACC enabled him to build community through a group of peers, as he recounted: "The first time I went to the LNACC . . . they had like a presentation about their fraternity, and right then and there I think that's when I started interacting with them, just talking with them, getting to know them."

Jocelyn also was introduced to the LNACC through The Iowa Edge program in the same manner as Noel. She laughed as she recalled thinking that the LNACC was a house in which someone actually lived:

I thought somebody lived here and we were just coming in and, I don't know, we were gonna meet somebody. And they told us that it was a cultural house. And then I started looking around and there's like paintings, like different cultural things. I felt . . . I felt like it was nice just because it felt homey . . . it didn't feel like a building or a classroom.

Like Noel, Jocelyn also connected with a group of peers who were part of a student organization during her introduction to the LNACC:

When we were [at the LNACC], there were students from different organizations. And then ALMA, the Association of Latinos Moving Ahead, they gave like a little mini-presentation of what they were about. So then, I came back for those meetings. I was in ALMA my freshman year and my sophomore year.

The Iowa Edge program matches peer mentors with a small group of program participants. According to one of the staff members interviewed for this study, The Iowa Edge peer mentors participate in training prior to the program and are paid for their work

during the week of the program. They are not required to continue serving as peer mentors once classes start, but some mentors continue to do that on a voluntary basis. For example, the staff member cited one peer mentor who went beyond expectations by meeting with his mentee group throughout the year: "He did a lot of other stuff that he wanted to do on his own because he was just that type of student who's very dedicated and engaged."

Elisa connected to the LNACC through her Iowa Edge peer mentor who was also a Latina student:

So they took us to all the cultural centers, and they told us how this one is for like the Latinos, and the Afro House is more like for African American . . . and because my peer leader is Latina, she told me how she would like come [to the LNACC] all the time.

The first thing Elisa noticed upon entering the LNACC was all of the photos of Latina/o students, which helped her to realize that there were other Latinas/os on campus. Like Noel and Jocelyn, Elisa was drawn back to the LNACC because of the opportunity to connect with a group of peers:

I usually just come here to study or just like, because I know sometimes there are people here that I know and we can just like communicate without any distractions, and it's a good way to feel like there *are* Latinos on campus. So I get away from all the craziness and just kick it and relax.

Victor also was introduced to the LNACC through The Iowa Edge program the week before classes started during his first year. Similar to other students, he was somewhat surprised that the university would have cultural centers: "So my first thought was, 'Whoa, this is super cool' [laughs] just because, like you know, I didn't think that a university would

have something so focused on. . . I guess, kind of the individual cultures." His first impression was similar to other participants who weren't quite sure what to make of this "house" the first time they walked in:

> I mean, the place kind of looked old. It looked like it used to be a house. So . . . I was just kind of like, "Why are we going to this person's house?" It was like, "No, no, no—it's a cultural center!" I was like "Ohhh."

Unlike the other three students, Victor did not return to the LNACC until late in the second semester of his freshman year. He explained that it wasn't until he joined the student organization ALMA that he began frequenting the LNACC on a regular basis:

> The next time I was here after that was my first ALMA meeting that year, and that was really my reason to go back. It wasn't like some particular interest in coming. And it's not that I wasn't interested in coming. It's just that most of . . . the area I spent my first year here was on the far northeast side cause that's where my dorm was, so coming here was quite a trek and the weather was getting colder.

The issue of the LNACC's location and how that influenced students' decisions to frequent the center will be discussed later as part of Theme 3: LNACC as anchor and launching pad. What is significant about Victor's initial participation in LNACC activities is that it was based more on his interest in gaining leadership experience within a Latina/o student organization, in contrast to the other three students who were first drawn to the comfort and cultural familiarity of the center. Victor was an out-of-state student who grew up in an affluent, predominantly White neighborhood with parents who were college graduates. He was the only student participant who was not a first-generation college student.

Precollege programs with a summer bridge component were instrumental in exposing two of the students to the LNACC. Patricia participated in Upward Bound during high school. Upward Bound is a federal TRIO program which, according to the UI Upward Bound website,

> provides fundamental support to participants in their preparation for college entrance. The program provides opportunities for participants to succeed in their precollege performance and ultimately in their higher education pursuits. Upward Bound serves high school students from low-income families and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education. (*TRIO Upward Bound*, n.d.).

Patricia was also part of The Iowa Edge program. She was initially introduced to the LNACC during participation in Upward Bound, but her memory of that initial exposure was faint: "I feel like Upward Bound sort of, we had like a dinner at the cultural centers . . . they always try to like, make us more aware of the facilities on campus, and I feel like it was some type of dinner." She remembered more clearly her introduction to the cultural centers through The Iowa Edge program: "That was like, my first experience where I met people affiliated with the center, organizations like ALMA and [Sigma Lambda Gamma], and so that was my main, like, how I found out about it."

Patricia described her first impression of the LNACC: "I never really heard about a cultural center. And then . . . when it said 'Latino Native American' I was like . . . 'I guess this is a center where I could kind of like, relate with since it relates with my identity.'" She

was drawn back to the LNACC because of the opportunity to connect with a group of peers in ALMA:

> I'm really big on like, identity and so, like, I wanted to find a group that I could be involved with, and I found out about ALMA, and so I decided to go to the meetings, and they always have them [at the LNACC] every Wednesdays at seven. I remember my freshman year I automatically got involved with ALMA, so me and my friends would always make it to meetings.

The importance of the LNACC to Patricia was evident when she spoke of the great effort she made to attend the ALMA meetings every Wednesday during her freshman year, even though she lived on the far opposite end of campus and had another meeting she was required to attend immediately prior to the ALMA meeting: "We knew that Wednesdays was reserved for ALMA [meetings] and so, even though it was quite hard because I lived at Mayflower [laughs] and we would always be rushing. It was like, 'Oh, we have to get there!'"

Monica also was introduced to the LNACC through participation in a precollege program with a summer bridge component. The Iowa Talent Project, a partnership between UI's Belin-Blank Center, Des Moines Central Academy, and the AmerUs Corporation, "is a four-year program that allows talented minority eighth-grade students to enroll in an accelerated high school and college curriculum" (The University of Iowa, 1998, para. 2). According to the UI website, the Iowa Talent Project seeks to "identify talented and gifted students from underrepresented populations who are taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses as they progress through secondary school. Iowa Talent Project participants attend a residential summer program at The University of Iowa that focuses on college preparation" (The University of Iowa, n.d., para. 12).

Monica explained:

> Because of my scholarship, we were required to come every summer for at least a
> week when we were in high school. . . . It was a very diverse group, so they showed
> us like all the different cultural centers, so that's how I was exposed to the houses.

Monica's first impression of the LNACC was that perhaps it was a house for the Latina
sorority. She liked the fact that it was located next to the Law School because she planned to
become an attorney. During her first semester, Monica was searching for a student
organization to join and tried getting involved in several different clubs, but none of them
seemed to "fit." Eventually she learned about ALMA:

> I didn't find out about [ALMA] till late my first semester freshman year, and then I
> really enjoyed it, and I felt like this was a place where I felt like some sort of sense of
> community, so that's why I would keep coming [to the LNACC].

In Monica's case, although she was exposed to the LNACC during her summer bridge
program, she did not begin frequenting the LNACC regularly until late in her first semester.
Unlike the students in The Iowa Edge program, which selects at least 100 students to
participate each year, Monica may not have had a large cohort of peers with whom she could
explore the cultural centers early in the semester.

Connecting Through a Scholarship Program

Two of the students in this study were exposed to the LNACC through their
scholarship program, Advantage Iowa, a merit- and need-based scholarship for first-year
students of color who are U.S. citizens or permanents residents and/or first-generation
college students (*Advantage Iowa Award*, n.d.). According to a staff member interviewed for
this study, AI students are required to attend a certain number of programs on campus for

which they earn scholarship points. Omar, an AI scholar, explained that he attended a
program at the LNACC to obtain points for his scholarship:

> Well, I remember . . . I think, I needed one more AI credit and it was Cinco de Mayo
> my freshman year and I was like, "Hey, free food—I'm definitely gonna show up." I
> came in here and I *liked* it. Like, it was like—boy, I didn't know this was here . . .
> why wasn't I told this before?

Although Omar learned about the LNACC later than the other students in this study did, he
believed it was inevitable that he would find his way there:

> I feel like, at some point or another I would have ended up here, regardless, just
> because . . . I love my culture, I love every aspect of it and . . . I feel like this is a
> place where I can . . . . .share it with others as well.

Omar was struck by the welcoming atmosphere of the center, the artwork, and the
sense of history portrayed through photos of Latina/o students from previous years.
However, he was somewhat resistant to get involved in LNACC activities at first: "I wasn't
sure what to expect—like if this was actually, like, what I was looking forward to or if this
was just going to be some like, pseudo-cultural thing, if you know what I mean." Eventually,
a friend persuaded him to join ALMA:

> One of my really good friends, he was really involved in ALMA. He kept talking
> about ALMA—ALMA this, ALMA that. I was like . . . Yeahhh, I don't know. I was
> kind of [resistant] to, you know, come to this. And finally he was like "You know
> what . . . just come. You don't have to keep coming. You can just like, show up. At
> least give it a chance." I was like, "All right, fine."

Soon after attending his first meeting, Omar was selected to serve on the ALMA Executive
Board, which meant he was attending ALMA meetings twice weekly at the LNACC.

Andrea also belonged to the Advantage Iowa scholarship cohort. Advantage Iowa
was located in the Center for Diversity and Enrichment. She related that one day early in her
first semester, she and her roommate (another Latina) were at the Center for Diversity and
Enrichment, and they saw a flyer for an event at the LNACC:

> We were like, "Oh, we should probably . . . find where this place is." . . . Originally,
> we were going to find more Latinos there. We're going to find more people because,
> literally, it was just me and my roommate and then our other friend that came [to UI],
> that we knew were Latinos on campus. And we were like, "Well there has to be more
> . . . we can't be the only three on campus, like it's impossible!"

Andrea and her roommate were seeking other Latinas/os on campus and hoped to find them
at the LNACC. She recalled how she felt being in the LNACC for the first time:

> There was a lot of music. . . . It helped me feel more at home. . . . It was a nice place
> to be because it was like the first time we were on campus that we were with other
> people we could relate to.

At that same event, Andrea reconnected with a Latina student whom she had met
during the UI summer orientation program. This student was already familiar with LNACC
activities because her older sister was a UI student. So she encouraged Andrea to get
involved in ALMA:

> She pretty much was really familiar with campus so she just told me that I should go
> on Wednesdays for ALMA. . . . And she's like, "Yeah, like this is a great org to be

part of. Like, most of these people come every Wednesday," so like that's why I

started coming to ALMA because of [my friend].

After talking with her friend during her first visit to the LNACC, Andrea joined ALMA and

began attending the weekly meetings. So, Andrea first learned about the LNACC from

seeing an event flyer while she was at the office that housed her scholarship program, but she

got involved in LNACC activities (ALMA) through the encouragement of a Latina friend

during an LNACC social event.

Other Paths to the LNACC

Three students in the study connected with the LNACC differently than did the

others. Sandra visited the LNACC when she was a senior in high school. She was

accompanied by an extended family member, a UI alumna who had spent a significant

amount of time at the LNACC during her undergraduate years. Sandra recounted,

When I came to visit [UI], she went with me. And so one of the stops was, obviously,

. . . going [to LNACC], and she like told me all about like the memories she had had

here and how it was like her second home and so . . . I knew about it pretty early on.

Similar to some of the other students, Sandra had never heard of a cultural center and did not

know what to expect, but her first impression was positive. When she started her freshman

year at UI, Sandra decided that she would like to visit the LNACC again with a friend, but

had forgotten how to get there. She shared what happened:

And so I tried to put it in the GPS, and it took us to like the Hawk Lot, which is like

two miles away from here, and we walked over there. . . . So we took the bus back

and I called [my family member], and I'm like, "I don't know where it is." 'cause I

really wanted to like see it again 'cause I remember it being like a place where you

could just relax and stuff. And she told me it was behind Slater and the dorms, and I

felt really dumb 'cause I live in Quad which is right across the street [from] Slater.

Unfortunately, after Sandra finally made her way to the LNACC, it was closed. She did not

return to the LNACC until her second semester. Her family member (the alumna) had

convinced Sandra to join the Latina sorority, Sigma Lambda Gamma (also referred to as the

Gammas). The founders of this sorority had used the LNACC as their home base as they

were getting established on campus. The sorority had since become too large to use the

LNACC for meetings, but they had a space in one of the rooms on the second floor that

housed their supplies as well as a "signature wall." Sandra explained why she decided to join

the Latina sorority:

> We met with all the sororities in the Multicultural Council and the Gammas really
>
> stuck out. . . . And I went to one of their recruitment events, and I got to know more
>
> of the girls, and I just really felt like I could fit in with them. . . . I went to a private
>
> school . . . so I've always gone to a school where it's majority Whites. . . . I guess I
>
> just wanted to immerse myself more into the culture. And I never got to do that in
>
> high school or anything.

Similar to several of the other students in this study, Sandra was searching for something.

She wanted the experience of immersing herself into Latino culture and felt she could

accomplish that by joining the Latina sorority. Her connection to the Gammas also

connected her to the LNACC—the Gamma's historical and symbolic "home."

Sofia also was seeking to connect with Latina/o students when she learned of the

LNACC while attending the student organization fair:

> I was just walking around with like a girl I had in one of my classes. . . . We were
>
> trying to see if there was anything for like Latinos because, you know, it's a
>
> predominantly White campus. . . . We stopped by the ALMA table, and they're like
>
> "Oh yeah, you know, we have the LNACC, and you're always welcome to come and
>
> do homework or just hangout."

Sofia joined ALMA early in the first semester of her freshman year; she explained:

> I . . . just started coming to the meetings every Wednesday, and that's how I made
>
> most of my friends—through ALMA. I mean it's like a Latino group. . . . Anyone's
>
> welcome, but like everybody that was there was with a Latino background. . . .
>
> Mostly everyone's like first-generation too, so we all had things in common.

Through the connections she made with other Latinas at the ALMA meeting, Sofia decided

to join Sigma Lambda Gamma. So she became a member of both groups her freshman year.

The final student participant, Teresa, was a transfer student who had attended a

community college for two years before enrolling at UI. She had made several campus visits

but was never made aware of the cultural centers; she explained:

> I had come to Iowa before, but I hadn't felt like, that connection on just regular
>
> campus visits. And on regular campus visits I had never even heard of the LNACC,
>
> for example or of like, multicultural orgs, of ALMA . . . There wasn't a connection. I
>
> didn't really feel like I belonged—not that I didn't necessarily feel welcomed, I just
>
> wasn't making a connection.

Teresa did not have the advantage of participating in a precollege program or The Iowa Edge,

which ensures that first-year students learn about the cultural centers. She was encouraged to

visit the LNACC and meet students from the ALMA group by an advisor/mentor who

worked at the Center for Diversity and Enrichment. The first time Teresa visited the LNACC she was drawn to the artwork:

> At first I was like, "What is this house? This is weird." And the first thing that drew my attention was the mural . . . on the porch that has . . . *El Grito de Dolores* [Cry of Dolores, the battle cry of Mexico's independence from Spain], and it has like, Che [Guevara]. And I was like, "Whoa, this is interesting" [laughs], and then as I came more in, it was just . . . very vivid and the colors and the mural, and I was like "Oh, this is really cool."

Teresa also shared that she was surprised to find political art in a campus facility:

> I guess I was a little . . . not shocked, but I was kind of like, "Whoa, like they allow this expression here?" I just thought that was really interesting . . . not necessarily because . . . I mean, it *is* 2013 obviously, but still, there's still some places where it's not generally accepted to kind of be as open.

Teresa had witnessed a controversy ignited in her hometown by a multicultural mural—a mural that was quite benign compared to the images she saw on the LNACC murals.

During her first semester at Iowa, Teresa joined both ALMA and Sigma Lambda Gamma, so she was at the LNACC weekly. She explained what drew her to the Latina sorority:

> I felt so deprived of my *Latinidad* and I'm like, "I just wanted to be surrounded by people who can speak Spanish and who aren't going to be bothered if I play *bachata* or *cumbia* or *banda* [Latino music genres] or whatever." And so I just kinda wanted a sense of community and just [to] be a part of something bigger than myself.

Teresa eventually would apply for a position at the LNACC as a work–study student, so she spent a significant amount of time at the center. Several other students commented that Teresa was looked up to as a resource and a role model.

Summary

It is clear that the students in this study experienced different pathways to the LNACC. Their stories of connecting to the LNACC reveal several factors that are important to understanding the context of this case study. First, various external units—namely the Upward Bound program, Iowa Talent Search, The Iowa Edge program, and the Advantage Iowa scholarship program—have recognized the value of the cultural centers as potential spaces for new students (mainly students of color) to get connected and involved by intentionally including visits to the centers as part of their agendas. This was affirmed by various staff members affiliated with those programs who were interviewed for this study. One staff member emphasized the importance of getting out-of-state Latina/o students connected to the LNACC:

> We feel that those students are going to need a lot of support and resources and, since they're coming from really far away, they're going to need a . . . community of people. And so introducing them to the cultural centers is going to mean introducing them to the manager, to student group leaders who really care about getting them connected with other resources on campus and to, yeah, just being active on campus and not feeling like they're isolated and lost on this big campus, so . . . I would say, you know, it's just something that we feel is important and necessary for this group to survive on campus.

Second, as students recalled their early experiences on campus, it appears that most of them were actively seeking something—connection, involvement, cultural familiarity, or perhaps cultural validation. These were the things that compelled them to return to the LNACC after their first visit. Staff members, such as the one quoted above, appear to have understood this, which may be why they placed great importance on connecting Latina/o students with the LNACC. Third, several of the students had never heard of cultural centers prior to attending UI, or they expressed surprise that the university would have such facilities. It is not surprising that students from Iowa, a state which is 92.8% White (U.S. Census, 2012), would not be familiar with ethnic cultural centers or that first-generation college students would not have a comprehensive understanding of all the cultural resources and opportunities available at a large, public university. However even Victor ,who was not from Iowa, not a first-generation college student, and entered the UI with significant social and academic capital, was surprised to find cultural centers on campus. Several students commented on the lack of information provided to them regarding Latina/o history and culture during their K–12 school experience. This may be why the cultural centers came as such a surprise to them: they were not accustomed to an educational institution providing culturally relevant space or resources.

Finally, the importance of returning Latina/o students (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) reaching out to new students and encouraging them to get involved in LNACC activities cannot be understated. This occurred through student organization fairs, The Iowa Edge peer mentors, Advantage Iowa scholarship students, and various other in- and out-of-class peer interactions. In some cases, upper-class Latina/o students were unrelenting in their pursuit of convincing new students to get involved. Some of the students described how they

were convinced to participate in LNACC activities by upper-class students. Other students
talked about what motivated them to encourage new students to go to the LNACC:

> I have this tendency to want to tell everyone about the LNACC, or just resources on
> campus. 'Cause I know, like, if I'm a Latino and I don't know about it, I feel like
> "Someone tell me!" So I'm like, "Wait—you don't know where the LNACC is?!"
> They're like, "No, what is it?" And so I like that, 'cause I get to tell them about a
> place that they could possibly use. (Patricia)

> 'Cause I know a lot of the freshmen that I have talked to, they'll be like well . . . "It's
> very like culture shock, like I just don't feel comfortable, like I don't really know
> anyone." . . . So I feel like a lot more needs to be done to retain students and make
> them feel welcomed. (Monica)

Based on their own positive engagement at the LNACC, most of the students interviewed
were passionate about making sure that new students had the same opportunity to experience
the LNACC vibe, which is the second theme revealed by this study.

Theme 2: The LNACC "Vibe"

In discussing the LNACC, many of the student participants described the facility as
having a certain vibe or essence. This was a feeling they experienced when they walked into
the LNACC and engaged in activities within the LNACC space. Based on their voices, the
LNACC vibe consisted of several elements, both abstract and concrete, including a feeling of
home (comforting and welcoming), the expression of Latina/o culture (language, music,
food, dance), and a sense of Latino history and empowerment (art).

Home Away from Home

Noel recalled how he felt the first time he walked into the LNACC: "I kind of got the vibe and just the, like the essence of it being like my grandma's house, my *abuela's* house." Elisa described the positive feelings she had the first time she entered the LNACC:

There were people in here that were giving us a presentation and . . . I don't know if you met [Latina staff member] . . . well she was here too and she was just like very happy and enthusiastic, so I was like "Oh, I like the vibe here!"

Elisa further explained what she meant by the vibe:

I feel like . . . I don't know if it's just because the color red happens to be warm, but . . . . it's relaxing too. I go there to study sometimes, and I feel like I can get work done there, and it's also I guess, playful, since I go there and I'm talking with my friends, and we'll just be laughing or just playing.

What Elisa was describing was a feeling of being comfortable in a physical space. Others, such as Monica, described this as a home-away-from-home feeling: "Like I always say, it always feels kind of like a home away from home. Like it's very . . . relaxed. . . . It's just a very, like, comforting atmosphere." Monica pointed to the kitchen as one of the spaces within the LNACC that fostered a feeling of home: "You can use it to cook your favorite dishes 'cause they have a kitchen with utensils there. . . . There's also like a TV where you can come watch your shows. You basically would use it like you use your own home." Omar added: "I come [to the LNACC] . . . and I can listen to any type of music and I feel at home." The home-away-from-home sentiment was perhaps explicated most directly by Victor, who said:

All 20 years of my life, I grew up in a house, I understood the feeling of "I'm home" as soon as I walk into a house. So that definitely has transferred over a bit to the LNACC . . . it's very easy to feel that feeling again when I walk into it.

Ten of the 11 student participants described the LNACC as a home away from home. Three students also associated feelings of home with their involvement in Latina/o student organizations that were closely affiliated with the LNACC. For instance, Teresa explained:

I think joining [Sigma Lambda Gamma] was one of the biggest things; that kind of became my home away from home, especially when I came here and was kind of like, "I don't really know what's going on, don't really know, like, who to just walk up to." So I mean, I feel like that kind of helped me develop the community.

However, some students pointed out that the home-away-from-home vibe at LNACC could be a double-edged sword, as Victor explained:

ALMA's been more of a . . . kind of a home away from home, which is not bad, but home away from home means they just kind of come and veg out and, as soon as we start talking about outreach initiatives, they just don't want anything to do with it because they feel like they have to come here and like "do stuff."

Victor was concerned that the comfortable and home-like environment of the LNACC, where the ALMA meetings were held, might have contributed to a lack of energy among the members who may have felt that coming to the LNACC was a chance to relax rather than to "do stuff." It may be that some students were viewing ALMA as more of a social organization and valued the opportunity to meet at the LNACC where they could connect socially with other Latinas/os in a home-like atmosphere. Jocelyn reflected on her

experience as a freshman and the attraction she felt to ALMA, which was mostly social in nature:

> I loved coming to ALMA meetings as a freshman just because we are a
> predominantly White school, and that's all I would see, and it was only Wednesdays
> at seven when I would see you know, like people who were Hispanic.

Another student pointed out that some Latina/o students might have avoided the LNACC precisely because it reminded them too much of home at a time when they were searching for different experiences:

> The ones who don't go [to LNACC] probably see it as, you know, just like another
> . . . like a burden just because it kind of reminded them of home and that's all they've
> seen at home, just . . . Latino people and . . . just people speaking Spanish, and they
> come to college and they want to experience something different.

Several of the staff members who participated in this study viewed the purpose of the LNACC as a home away from home for Latina/o students. One staff member, who was directly affiliated with the cultural centers, described the LNACC's purpose: "The mission and purpose of the LNACC is to serve as . . . I always say, [an] intra- and intercultural experience. It primarily serves as a home, as a place for its constituency to be." Another staff member affiliated with the cultural centers explained why the LNACC staff (student workers) were trained to welcome others into the cultural center as if welcoming them home:

> When you go home—if it's your mom, your dad, your grandparents, your dog, your
> cat—people welcome you to your home. And we want to be that home away from
> home. We want to . . . also say "our house is your house." And if you're not doing
> that . . . it takes a lot for a student who's never been there to take the courage to go to

one of these centers. And so, if you have a student frightened and kind of like, "I

don't even know where this place is," and they show up by themselves, or even if

they came with someone and they don't feel welcome, why should they come back?

Both the students and the staff members who participated in this study emphasized the

significance of the home-away-from-home aspect of the LNACC. Students alluded to other

aspects of the LNACC that contributed to its vibe including a sense of cultural community

and the significance of the artwork at the center.

Cultural Expression and Community

Another element essential to the LNACC vibe was a sense of cultural community,

which included food, language, music, and dance. Patricia described how easy it was for her

to connect with others at the LNACC:

I just found it easy meeting new people . . . that I guess identified as well as me, as

being a Latino, and you know, spoke Spanish. We had similar cultural backgrounds

in the sense of . . . things that we could relate about family or traditions. . . . And so I

knew that every time that I would be in there, I would be in some sort of contact

with someone that I could relate with.

Monica explained why she returned to the LNACC her freshman year:

'Cause I felt like [laughs] this was probably one of the only places I could . . . express

my culture. I could speak in Spanish and like, you can't do that anywhere else . . .

even the food that they would have sometimes—*pan dulce* [Mexican sweet bread] . . .

I don't know, it made it feel like home.

Noel compared the atmosphere of the LNACC to being at a family party: "I always feel like

I'm . . . at a family party when I go to the LNACC just because there's always music playing,

there's always food and just people having a good time, having good conversation." Omar described it as a sense of "nostalgia" that reminded him of home:

> This is the place where people can come and reminisce . . . not necessarily reminisce, but kind of have . . . nostalgic moments for like, you know, when they're at home or maybe for others, new experiences that they wish they could do more often at home. And it's a big part, like I said, for me growing up. . . . I feel like every weekend there was either *un bautismo*, [a baptism], there was a *tres años* [special celebration of third birthday], there was a *quinceanera* [15th birthday coming-out party], or some sort of birthday party. . . . I grew up with that—with music, with the food. And so, whenever we have events [at the LNACC] I feel like, "Hey, music and food, let's do this!"

Omar also further described the atmosphere of the LNACC during social events:

> Sometimes I've come in here and I've heard people, like, yelling and playing games, yelling back and forth in English and Spanish, Spanglish . . . or you know, people dancing, listening to *bachata* or *banda* or whatever. And so I think the LNACC plays a major role in a lot of these cultural groups coming to life and actually being . . . like I said, home, for us.

Patricia explained that ALMA sometimes used food and dance as a way of sharing the Latino culture with others:

> We try to promote cultural events . . . like *Cinco de Mayo*, you know, we always try to have a speaker to explain the actual historical background of it . . . we'll have food and stuff, kind of pull in people. . . . We try to do the educational part and . . . we'll have *agua de horchata* [cinnamon rice milk] and not everyone knows what that is . . . or *tres leches* [three milks] cake. We've had some events that I've seen like, people

will put on *bachata* [Latino musical genre], and people start dancing and, like "Oh, what is that?" And so, we'll try and teach.

Based on the student interviews, the LNACC Facebook page, and my observations, other than ALMA meetings, the majority of events that took place at the LNACC were social/cultural in nature. A few of the students expressed a desire to have more educational, political, or community service events at the LNACC, but they were aware that other students seemed to be drawn mostly to the social/cultural aspect of the center. Victor spoke of his involvement with ALMA: "I would like this group to be more focused around enriching our culture through service rather than solely connecting students on campus through, you know, dance events or food events or whatnot." Although only a few events focused on political issues impacting the Latino community, the artwork at the LNACC imbued a sense of Latino history and empowerment.

Art as a Representation of Latina/o History and Empowerment

The LNACC is filled with colorful murals, paintings, and photos representing Latina/o and Native American culture. The warm colors of the LNACC and the vivid artwork on the walls had immediately captured the attention of the students the first time they entered the center. For all of the students interviewed, this was the first time they had experienced a Latino cultural center. Teresa, one of the LNACC student workers, described the significance of the artwork to her:

I feel like the LNACC has played a large part in my self-discovery and identity as a Latina in a predominately White institution just because I feel like, even just working here and having a place to come and seeing Frida [Kahlo] on the wall and Che Guevara, Pancho Villa . . . it's very comforting, whether I realize it at the moment or

not. And I think it just goes back to acknowledging . . . my roots and kind of

developing that. . . . It's been a part of my self-discovery.

Most of the students commented on the large mural painted directly on a wall in the

living room. Originally painted in 1974 by California muralist Manuel Unzueta during a

national Chicano conference at UI, the painting underwent a revision in 2000, which caused

some controversy (Hebeler, 2001). Students were vaguely aware of the controversy and

expressed curiosity regarding the history of the mural. For instance, Noel said:

> It's really significant in my eyes, just because of the history of Mexican Americans
>
> and just Hispanics in general. So I really like that mural . . . I want to know more
>
> about it but it seems no one really knows the details. . . . It stands out in the sense of,
>
> like, you know . . . I think of "*Si se puede*" [Yes, we can] . . . but I think it would be
>
> great to actually know more of the history behind it.

Monica, who had taken a Mexican American history class the previous year, learned more

about the LNACC mural from her professor: "He told us there's some problems with . . .

there's some . . . politics 'cause when they restored it they actually made the man whiter,

lighter skinned, and he's supposed to be darker so that was something that I thought. 'Whoa,

why?'"

The staff members interviewed for this study also were unfamiliar with the exact

history of the mural, with exception of one person who had researched the issue. She was

working at the university library and had created a large display of LNACC history for the

occasion of the LNACC's 40th anniversary celebration. She explained why it was important

to include the mural history in the display:

> I named [the display] "The Story of Us." . . . No matter how many times I would go
> to the house, you know, there's new students. . . . So it would be like repeating the
> story, so I thought this way . . . they would understand the mural stories, they would
> understand everything and . . . it's just useful. I think that's just so important . . . it's
> more like an introduction to the house . . . it's become kind of a nice way for them to
> kind of know all the history without having different people go through the stories
> with them . . . to kind of know the history of something to understand what it means
> to people.

The display includes photos of students from previous decades, newspaper articles, posters,
and written text explaining the history and evolution of the LNACC. One side focuses on
Latina/o students and the other side focuses on Native American students. Only a few of the
students in this study indicated that they had looked closely at the display at any point in the
past. Most did not necessarily remember the details of the information in the display.
Patricia was one of the students who understood the significance of the display:

> Yeah, it's very inclusive in the sense that it has both Native and Latino American
> history. I've read it a couple of times. . . . It does talk about the protesting that there
> was with the center, which a lot of us don't know. . . . It's kind of nice that it's there
> so that way when people walk in . . . it's like a good, kind of like, orientation into the
> house and what it stands for and the important historical facts.

Omar also believed that the display was significant for current students: "It kind of puts you
to think . . . [about] the people that came before you . . . how much effort, how much work
they had to put in for us to feel comfortable at a university where, like you said, it's
predominantly White."

Some of the students had participated in LNACC's 40th anniversary celebration in 2011 and had gained a deeper sense of the history of the center. Noel described his reaction to meeting Dr. Rusty Barceló, one of the founders of the LNACC:

> She was really, really, really, informed about the LNACC, and it was just great to hear her story, great to hear just her struggle . . . just to get the house, and I think that's something that . . . I didn't think about. . . . I really didn't think about, you know, the people before me and how much they struggled just to get that house and that's something that, you know, I realize . . . I took the LNACC for granted. And I didn't appreciate it as much as I should have.

Noel also pointed out that the LNACC artwork was diverse in terms of reflecting Latino and Native American culture:

> I think the diversity of the different paintings, murals throughout the house, too, can speak in volumes with the different ethnicities within the LNACC, because it's just not Mexican, you know; we have [American Indian Student Association] there— they're primarily [an] Indian-based organization, so the fact that we're able to blend in, you know, our Hispanic Latino roots with you know, Native American roots, I think it's pretty cool.

Similar to Noel, most of the students in this study appreciated the mix of Latina/o and Native American artwork within the center. However, they also indicated that they had very limited interactions with the Native American community on campus, which they attributed to the small numbers of Native American students at UI.

Summary

The LNACC vibe or essence was composed of several abstract and concrete elements. The comfortable and welcoming feeling that new students experienced during their first visit to the center made them feel at home and was an essential part of the vibe. It was what drew them back to the center where they could experience cultural familiarity and nourishment through language, food, dance, and music. The physical essence of the LNACC also contributed to its vibe. The warm and vibrant colors within the center, along with the artwork and display, promoted a sense of the LNACC's historical significance. Some students found the artwork politically empowering. The LNACC vibe drew the students to the center, where they began to get involved in student organizations and leadership activities, which is discussed in the next section.

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Theme 3: LNACC as Anchor and Launching Pad

</div>

After being introduced to the LNACC and experiencing it as a welcoming, comfortable, and culturally relevant space, students joined one or more of the student organizations affiliated with the center. These organizations include ALMA (which translates to "soul" in Spanish), Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity, Inc., and Sigma Lambda Gamma sorority. The Native American Student Association (NASA, formerly known as the American Indian Student Association or AISA) is also affiliated with the LNACC, however none of the students interviewed for this study was involved with AISA. Ten of the 11 students in this study had joined one or more of the three student organizations (ALMA, Sigma Lambda Beta, or Sigma Lambda Gamma) sometime during their first year at Iowa. Only one student was not a member of ALMA or the Greek organizations; however, she was a member of The Iowa Edge Student Association. The LNACC, through its strong

affiliation with ALMA, Sigma Lambda Beta, and Sigma Lambda Gamma appeared to have served as either an anchor or a launching pad for students.

Association of Latinos Moving Ahead

The Association of Latinos Moving Ahead is an umbrella organization that serves as a network for UI undergraduate students. According to the ALMA Facebook page (ALMA, n.d.), the organization has seven foci: (a) creating a forum to meet, share information, collaborate on events, and address the needs of Latinas/os students on campus; (b) promoting student involvement while creating a support network for Latinas/os students; (c) facilitating professional development; (d) conducting community service, including outreach to Latina/o youth to encourage the pursue of higher education; (e) promoting social activities that foster a sense of community; (f) engaging efforts toward social justice; and (g) fostering cultural awareness throughout UI and the surrounding community. ALMA sponsors or cosponsors several annual programs, most of which are social/cultural. During the first week in April, ALMA sponsors the annual Cesar Chavez Week, which includes sociopolitical topics and speakers as well as cultural events (Appendix G).

When I began my research, ALMA was meeting every Wednesday at 7:00 pm at the LNACC. Nine of the students interviewed joined ALMA when they were freshmen. Of the nine students, five had held positions (either currently or in the previous year) on the ALMA Executive Board. The fact that ALMA held meetings every week at the LNACC meant that these eight students had frequented the LNACC at least once weekly during their freshman year, with executive board members attending meetings twice a week. By the conclusion of my data collection (six months later) ALMA was meeting only biweekly, with only one of those meetings taking place at the LNACC. Also, two of the student participants in this

study had stepped down from their leadership positions and were no longer participating in the organization. ALMA was going through a transition, which will be discussed in the final theme of this chapter (Theme 5: Neutral, Sacred, and Con(Tested) Space).

ALMA meetings were held in the living room (located on the main floor), because that was the only space large enough for this group, which tended to attract large numbers of freshmen early in the fall semester. ALMA was often the first Latino-based organization these students heard about when they began their freshman year. Jocelyn described the attraction to ALMA, which she experienced as a new student:

I loved coming to ALMA meetings as a freshman just because we are a predominantly White school and that's all I would see, and it was only Wednesdays at seven where I would see you know, like people who were Hispanic. . . . I just felt . . . like when I was in high school because like my group of friends . . . we were all Latinos and then coming here, it was a little bit difficult for me to be, like, social at first. . . . I felt like I was alone, so coming to the meetings definitely helped a lot. . . . And I was able to see there are Latinos here—I'm not the only one. I really liked that.

Andrea pointed out the general openness of ALMA as being something that attracts first-year students:

I think it's like more accessible to freshmen . . . it's one of the first, like, I guess, general Latino programs that are on campus, 'cause I feel like [Sigma Lambda Gamma] caters for women, [Sigma Lambda Beta] is for men . . . for Iowa Edge you have to apply, and for TRIO you have to apply. So I feel like ALMA is, I guess, all-inclusive, like everyone can come, you don't have to pay to be a member. . . . You

don't have to like be super, super committed. It's kind of like a drop-in thing. So I

feel ALMA serves as like a really comfortable space for everyone to come in, meet

other people that, I guess, are on the same boat, trying to find their like major, like the

right program for them.

Omar described ALMA as a "centerpiece" within the LNACC: "You know, obviously the

fraternity's only going to be for males and the sorority for females, but it's one of those

things where it's kind of like the centerpiece of everything else—it ties everything together."

As a result of ALMA hosting meetings at the LNACC twice weekly along with

hosting several cultural events throughout the year, which attracted large numbers of

freshmen students as well as sophomores, juniors, and seniors, the LNACC and ALMA were

tightly interconnected. The LNACC was reserved for ALMA on Wednesday evenings, and

students were aware that no other events could take place there on Wednesday nights.

Monica spoke of this as a tradition:

Because it's been tradition that ALMA's been Wednesdays at seven . . . yeah, they

already just book it for us. . . . ALMA's always met on Wednesdays at 7:00 pm at the

LNACC. so it's kind of like its signature style. . . . You don't need to tell people.

Everyone already knows. They know if they go to the LNACC at 7:00 pm on

Wednesdays, they're going to find a group of Latinos there.

In essence, ALMA was serving to connect Latina/o freshmen students to each other as well

as to the LNACC while providing new students with a learning experience regarding how

student organizations operate.

Much of the connection developed between students during ALMA meetings was

based on social/cultural familiarity. Finding and connecting with other Latina/o students on

campus was important, as indicated by student comments throughout this chapter. Another significant factor drawing students together was the shared experience of being first-generation college students. Brenda explained why she connected with ALMA: "It's a Latino group, anyone's welcome, but everybody that was there was, like, with a Latino background, like mostly everyone's first-generation too, so we all had things in common."

After students became involved with ALMA and started attending the weekly meetings, many of them took on leadership positions. This helped them to develop leadership skills in an environment that was comfortable and welcoming. Omar shared his experience of voicing his opinions at the first ALMA meeting he attended:

> The whole living room was pretty full. . . . I think it was in the spring semester, so we were probably doing Cesar Chavez Week. . . . They were asking input and, me personally, I'm gonna speak my mind . . . and I did, and everybody was kind of looking at me, like . . . "Who's this new guy? He's already talking." But my ideas were welcome, so I think that's kind of what made me stay.

Soon after this experience Omar decided to run for a position on the ALMA Executive Board, as he explained: "I saw a leadership opportunity. I wanted to be on the exec team. I felt like I had a lot of ideas and that's when I decided to run." Omar served on the ALMA Executive Board starting in the spring semester of his sophomore year until the fall semester of his senior year. He listed several skills that improved through his involvement in ALMA including public speaking skills, social skills, and general leadership skills. He attributed his experience with ALMA to making him a better leader in another student organization that he joined:

My leadership skills, being able to take charge and getting things done—not only timely, but efficiently—have gotten way better, which I feel like right now is what's helped me like, you know, work with [another student organization], being able to organize and being able to see details and see it through.

Communication and public speaking skills were important to other ALMA students, too. Monica was looking forward to improving her public speaking skills through her leadership position with ALMA:

I definitely want to improve on my public speaking. I think I've gotten a lot better but . . . it's been one of my biggest struggles so I'm really trying to work on that. And I know that after a year of doing this I should be like an expert. . . . I have to do exec meetings too so I get two days of the week to practice my public speaking skills.

Sandra explained that she ran for an executive position on ALMA because she thought it would help prepare her to take a leadership position with Sigma Lambda Gamma, which she thought would be more demanding. But the ALMA position turned out to be more work than she expected; as she described it:

I really wanted to take a leadership position in [Sigma Lambda Gamma] first, but I kind of wanted to see what it was like to have a leadership position first 'cause I'd never really had one before and so I was like, "Okay, maybe if I started out with ALMA, which is a little smaller . . . not too much work, I guess," although I'm seeing that it's just the same amount of work, if not more.

Even students who had not held a leadership position in ALMA recognized that they benefitted from being a part of the organization and learning how the group operated. Andrea pointed out:

For, like, the different organizations within ALMA, how everybody worked together

and everybody would have their own little subcommittee . . . so that helped a lot

'cause I kind of had that idea like, "Okay . . . I can like be part of this committee and

eventually run for something and get a leadership position." . . . The exec board was

just providing opportunities for us. That also helped a lot.

A few of the older students explained how they had intentionally created

opportunities for new students to gain leadership skills through their involvement in ALMA.

Monica explained: "Through some of the . . . activities that we do during the meetings . . . we

allow people to take the initiative. . . . [If] there's someone who's really passionate about a

certain thing . . . we allow them the opportunity to be more involved." Patricia believed that

cultivating leadership among the new students was part of ALMA's purpose, as she

described its mission:

> It's to provide a community for students to connect and network and then, also, to
>
> foster an enriching environment so that leaders can be fostered and we can foster
>
> leadership ability, so that those students will be able to take on ALMA executive
>
> positions.

The successful effort to cultivate leaders within ALMA may have contributed to the loss in

membership that was gradually occurring as students left ALMA to participate in other

organizations, taking their newly acquired leadership skills with them. This is what I have

termed the "launching pad" effect of the LNACC and ALMA. A trend of students moving

from ALMA to Sigma Lambda Gamma or Sigma Lambda Beta was taking place with

noticeable frequency. When asked how often they went to the LNACC during the current

semester, many students commented that they no longer had time:

I think over the four years I have gone less. . . . I can definitely say I've gone less

over the four years. . . . Right now, probably once, maybe twice a week. But then I

will randomly just not go for a few weeks. (Noel, Sigma Lambda Beta member)

It's only changed this year that I've gone because of work and school 'cause now I

have two jobs and my semester is like really intense. So . . . I can't make it [to

ALMA meetings]. (Andrea, Sigma Lambda Gamma member)

Like this semester I didn't go to ALMA that much because I was focused more on my

schoolwork. (Sofia, Sigma Lambda Gamma member)

I guess when I was a freshman, I thought everything was far [laughs]. I thought this

was just a huge campus. So I didn't mind it. I didn't mind coming all the way over

here [to the LNACC]. Now, I mean since I rarely come here, I usually can't make it

to the ALMA meetings just because I have other things that I go to on Wednesdays,

and that's why I'm not a part of it anymore, so I don't find, like, reasons to come here

anymore. (Joycelyn, Lambda Theta Nu Interest Group member)

I had less things to do [as a freshman], like my courses weren't that intense, so I

could like waste those three hours or two hours, whatever it was. And now I can't

really do that. . . . I can do so much in those three hours. . . . I feel like I would utilize

it more if it was closer, which is very unfortunate that I don't get to go as much.

(Victor)

The students quoted above, as well as others, listed various reasons for not frequenting the

LNACC as often as they had during their first year or two of college. Those reasons included

that they were busier now as upper-class students than in previous years, that the location of

the LNACC on the far side of campus made it difficult for them to find time in their

schedules to attend activities there, or that they were focusing more on their academics. None of the students listed their involvement in Greek organizations as a reason for their decline in attendance at LNACC programs; yet, a few students, as well as staff members, noticed a trend whereby students who once participated regularly in ALMA/LNACC events were moving toward the Greek system, which required a significant amount of time and energy.

Andrea expressed her concerns about this trend:

I believe [ALMA's] like a place where a majority of freshmen go and, from there, they meet all these other people or are introduced to these other orgs on campus and, from there, they all go and like find their own. . . . It's like something that like I've been observing on my own like, how to retain people [in ALMA].

Patricia had seen this trend take place during her first year in ALMA and explained how students would attend ALMA meetings, then be recruited by Sigma Lambda Gamma and never return to ALMA. However, the Gammas and the "Betas" (members of Sigma Lambda Beta) also were encouraging students to get involved in ALMA—indeed several students were members of both the Gammas/Betas and ALMA. The difference was that, once students joined the Greek system, they did not leave their fraternity or sorority. By contrast, it was common for new students to be deeply involved in ALMA during their first and/or second year, then transition to other organizations and discontinue their ALMA involvement. This meant, by association, they were no longer frequenting the LNACC regularly.

Sigma Lambda Beta and Sigma Lambda Gamma

Similar to ALMA, the two Latina/o-based Greek organizations were also closely affiliated with the LNACC, although in more of a historic and symbolic manner. Sigma

Lambda Beta International Fraternity, Inc. was founded at UI in 1986 and had grown to 116
chapters nationwide (Sigma Lambda Beta Alpha Chapter, n.d.). Sigma Lambda Gamma was
founded at UI in 1990 and had become the "largest, Latina-based multicultural national
sorority, and the fastest growing fraternal organization in chapters and alumnae associations
throughout the United States" (Sigma Lambda Gamma, n.d.).

The founders of both of these alpha chapters had used the LNACC as a home base as
they were getting started and continued to meet at the LNACC until their groups became too
large to hold meetings there. However, both groups maintained a physical and symbolic
connection to the LNACC: each organization had office space on the second floor of the
center for their specific use—known as "the Beta room" and "the Gamma room." These
rooms had closets in which the organizations kept supplies. The closets were kept locked
and could be accessed only by members of the organizations, who had to request a LNACC
staff member to open it for them. The walls of these two rooms were painted with Gamma-
or Beta- related symbols. Students who joined these two organizations were taught about the
history of their chapters and understood the significance of the LNACC in the history of their
founding. They developed a sense of ownership and pride regarding their connection to the
LNACC. Patricia shared an example of a Gamma/Beta event where alumni had the
opportunity to sign the Gamma wall at the LNACC:

This summer we had the Motherland BBQ, where we have the Betas and the

Gammas, we have a BBQ together and a lot of people from out of town come and . . .

there were sisters from out of town. . . . And so they're like, "Oh my gosh! I am

signing the wall!" 'cause like, we were founded here at the University of Iowa and so,

yeah, one of my line sisters, the one that joined with me, she's like, "Can you take a

picture of me signing the wall?" and she Instagrammed it so like, it was very special

because it's finally going on [the wall], like written.

The Gamma room at the LNACC has been recognized by Sigma Lambda Gamma chapters nationally as a symbol of their founding at UI. Thus, the Gamma wall at the LNACC holds special significance for members across the nation.

The Beta room, which had been recently updated by Sigma Lambda Beta members, also held special significance as a symbol of the alpha chapter. Noel, a Beta, recalled his experience painting a mural on the wall of the Beta room:

> We painted the walls purple, and then, as we painted the walls purple, I remember
> feeling like that sense of ownership, just because that was our color, and then it
> wasn't until later that we drew a mural on the wall with our crest and just a
> symbolism of our brotherhood and our fraternity. So it was after that that it felt like,
> "All right, this is the Beta room—we call this the Beta Room."

Based on the student interviews and my own observations, the Beta and Gamma rooms had two main functions: to serve as important symbols of the chapters' founding and to store supplies and materials belonging to the chapters. Occasionally, the members used the rooms for small meetings. When asked how the Gamma room was used, Sandra, a Gamma member, explained: "I think we just use it to put supplies in. And when we have different Gammas from the other chapters come, they can sign the wall. . . . We show them the scrapbooks that we've made over the years." Andrea, another Gamma member, commented: "I remember last semester for *Dia de los Muertos* [Day of the Dead], our meetings were there. And sometimes we . . . hold meetings, committee meetings in there."

The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defined "anchor" as "a person or thing that provides strength or support" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In many ways, the Gamma and Beta rooms served as a symbolic anchor for the Alpha chapters as well as for the other chapters nationwide. Members were aware of its location and significance. The Alpha chapters took pride in their respective rooms and viewed them as a sort of home base. Noel explained: "The LNACC plays such a big role in our history, in our founding here at the University of Iowa that I feel like it's really important for us to, you know, to establish that as a true home." Andrea pointed out: "Since we don't have a [sorority] house, like that room is really important for us."

The LNACC also was an anchor for other students who were not involved in the Greek organizations. For instance, Victor was a member of the ALMA Executive Board, and he explained why the LNACC was so central to his experience at UI:

> As I got involved in groups like ALMA that were housed there . . . that's when the LNACC became more of a place that housed my identity; it housed people that I knew or people that knew me, other Latino students in Latino groups that would meet together and celebrate there or would enrich our culture there or would simply hang out there. Those connections were made there. So throughout my entire experience here, the LNACC has been the facilitator of how I feel and am recognized by others as a Latino student on campus.

Summary

The students in this study were drawn to the LNACC during their first year at UI because they were seeking connection with other Latina/o students. Subsequently, they spent a significant amount of time and energy participating in LNACC programs. For some

students, the frequency of their participation in LNACC activities decreased significantly after their sophomore year as they moved on to other activities. These students recognized and were able to discuss the benefits they attained from their LNACC activities, particularly through involvement with ALMA, which provided them with the opportunity to meet and connect with other Latina/o students on campus as well as to acquire a wealth of leadership skills. They did not completely disassociate with the LNACC. In fact, many of them stressed that they continued to support LNACC activities through their participation in specific annual programs, such as ALMA's Back to School Bash early in the fall semester. Students also spoke of the LNACC with great fondness, even those who were no longer regular participants; as Andrea explained: "It was like my first place where I had the chance to meet other people and socialize and feel a part of the community again. So, to me, the LNACC will always be very special." However, there was a clear pattern of students getting involved in other activities that drew them away from the LNACC after their sophomore year. Furthermore, they were joining other organizations as a result of the contacts and relationships formed at the LNACC. For those reasons, the LNACC may be viewed as a launching pad for new students—a culturally relevant place where they were able to get connected to peers and become members of a Latina/o student organization, and then move on from to form connections with the broader campus community.

For some students, particularly the members of the Latina/o Greek organizations Sigma Lambda Beta and Sigma Lambda Gamma, LNACC also served as an anchor. These chapters were founded at UI by students who used the LNACC as a home base. As a result, the LNACC was historically and symbolically relevant to chapter members locally and nationally. The second floor of the LNACC, which housed the Gamma room and the Beta

room acted as a symbolic anchor that tied current Gamma/Beta students, as well as Gamma/Beta alumni, to the center. The LNACC also served as an anchor for students who continued to stay closely connected to the center past their sophomore year. Two of these students expressed a passion for addressing political issues impacting the Latina/o community, particularly immigration reform. Their efforts to initiate programs addressing immigration issues were not always met with enthusiasm by other students. The tension between students who viewed the LNACC as a social/cultural space and those who imagined it as a space for political activism is discussed later in this chapter. All of the students interviewed for this project agreed that the LNACC lacked visibility on campus and expressed the need for a greater Latina/o presence on campus.

Theme 4: Latina/o Presence on Campus

Most of the students were aware that Latinas/os were the largest minoritized group at UI, which caused them to wonder why there was not more of a Latina/o presence on campus. Monica expressed her concern: "The stats just came out recently that Latinos are now the largest minority group on the Iowa campus; so, if that's true, I'm kind of like, 'Well, where are these Latinos at?'" Victor also shared his thoughts regarding the lack of visibility of Latina/o students at UI:

> I noticed that there was not a particular presence I saw on campus of Latino students
> . . . I would like to see more, I think, just quantity-wise, as far as initiatives that the
> university is taking to connect Latino students with resources and get them to be more
> of a presence on campus.

Not all of the students were aware of the size of the Latina/o student population on campus.

Noel was one of those students. He expressed surprise regarding the number of Latina/o

students at UI and wondered if more could be done to get them involved in the LNACC:

> Yeah, that's surprising 'cause it doesn't feel like there's that many of us. . . . My
>
> question is . . . where are the other Latino students who don't show their face around
>
> and, you know, what are they doing and . . . what hasn't the university done or maybe
>
> the LNACC or us, as students, what haven't we done to kind of like bring them in,
>
> welcome them in, and provide some type of like, I don't know, like family
>
> environment for them?

Noel believed that it was the responsibility of not only the university (administration) but

also of students like himself to create an inclusive environment where Latina/o students

would feel encouraged to get involved in activities and organizations. Monica commented

on ALMA's role in giving visibility to Latina/o students: "We're trying to . . . do more . . . be

more active in the community and give more presence to the Latinos . . . on campus."

Students also expressed strong feelings about the LNACC's lack of visibility in

general. They often connected this lack of visibility to the geographic location of the center.

Noel said:

> Not too many people know about the LNACC. I guess the only way you would know
>
> about it is if someone told you or if you . . . participated in Iowa Edge. . . . It's too
>
> hidden, and I think if it were somewhere centralized, like you know, somewhere . . .
>
> on the Ped Mall or the Pentacrest, it'd definitely be a lot more frequently used.

Several students shared stories about how their friends had never heard of the cultural

centers. Victor recounted his experience inviting friends to the LNACC: "I would talk about

it with my friends and maybe invite them to come with me. And they're like 'The LNACC?

What is the LNACC?' Like, 'What is a cultural center? I didn't even know we had those.'"

He added: "I remember specifically there were some Latino friends who were not aware [of

the LNACC] but again, it's in a spot on campus where not the majority of first years get to

explore much, so I'm not too surprised." Noel described similar experiences:

> I'll ask people like, "Oh, you should come to our event the Betas are having at the
>
> LNACC next week." And they're like, "Oh, where's it at?" "It's at the LNACC."
>
> Like "Oh, what's that?" Then I tell them and they're like, "Oh, I didn't know we
>
> have that." I've had that experience numerous times with friends who are seniors and
>
> friends who are juniors and sophomores. So I mean . . . I definitely get that a lot.

Patricia pointed out the difficulty in explaining how to get to the LNACC for students who

had never been there before:

> It's difficult to explain to people sometimes . . . especially for events. You know,
>
> we'll have to say, "Oh, it's like, it's on Melrose . . . kind of like next to the Law
>
> Building." Or we tell people, like, you know, "Go through an ally that's like, behind
>
> Slater," . . . there's no set way 'cause it's, kind of like, off the radar.

Teresa also found it challenging to describe the location of the LNACC to others:

> I think that sometimes it's problematic because it's kind of hard to find. . . . Even
>
> people that are familiar with the Iowa City area, with the campus, they're like,
>
> "Where is that?" And I'm, "Oh, it's behind Slater." And they're like, "Behind
>
> Slater? Where?" Like, "That's weird." And, I mean, you drive through, you're
>
> driving on Melrose and you completely miss the driveway and then you have to
>
> completely go around and, the alley, you can't really see when you're coming up. . . .

I feel like it's definitely hidden, like the area, it kind of contributes to people being

confused about where it is.

At the same time, some students had ambivalent feelings about the LNACC's inconvenient

location. Patricia went on to say: "It would be nice if it was close to campus, but at the same

time, it's kind of nice because you kind of get away from the center of campus." For

Patricia, the LNACC was a good place to study because of its lack of visibility, which meant

that, unless an activity or program was taking place, the center was often empty and quiet.

She sometimes took naps there.

Elisa also believed the LNACC lacked visibility, but she liked that aspect of the

center, which is located on the west side of the Iowa River:

I actually like where it's located . . . it's good to get away in a way, so it's not . . .

right on campus where all the other buildings are at, so you can just, like, if you want

to have it for yourself, you pretty much get away from the city [laughs]—that's what I

say. And then you just come here, and it's just like, because the west side is more

calm than on the east side.

Omar had similar feelings about the LNACC's location:

Even though it's not known a lot, it's one of those things where like, I would love it

to be more known, but at the same time I kind of like . . . that it's a little oasis of our

own, you know, you can come here and . . . it is unique.

Based on the perspectives shared by the students, it was clear that they were of two minds

regarding the geographical location of the LNACC on campus: they believed that it was too

far away, inconveniently located or off the radar, yet they also liked the fact that going to the

LNACC meant you could get away from the hub of campus. They also had ambivalent

feelings about the LNACC's lack of visibility or lack of presence: they all wished more people knew about it but, at the same time, they viewed it as an oasis—a very unique place on campus.

Some staff members interviewed for this study agreed that the LNACC might be somewhat inconvenient to access due to the fact that no sidewalk existed on one side of the street leading up to the center. However, they stressed that the campus bus stopped near the center, and it did not take a significant amount of time to get to the LNACC from the center of campus. One staff member commented:

> If you look at how far it is from campus, it's not that far. And even the walk is not
> . . . walking up a hill, it's going to take you maybe three minutes. A three-minute
> walk is not that hard . . . it's a very slight hill. . . . And so, location is not, I think, an
> issue. I think it's more the pathways to get there. So I would say the walkways are
> not convenient.

Another staff member responded to the impression students had regarding the lack of a bus stop near the LNACC:

> There is a bus that stops across the street from LNACC . . . not 50 yards, 20 yards to
> the west, so that's a really close stop. . . . Some of that issue right there, I think, is
> folklore. It's kind of handed down . . . so it's really interesting that people, through
> storytelling, can be really codified in the notion that something is real. And the
> reality is, that's not real—there is a stop. . . . And I think people may sometimes
> confuse getting there and parking differently. They can get there, it's just once they
> get there, if they've got a car, you might not be able to park.

It became apparent from the interviews that students and staff members each had different perspectives on navigating to the LNACC. Adding more complexity to this issue is the fact that the students' perspective regarding the LNACC location sometimes shifted as they moved past their second year on campus: the busier their schedules became, the more inconvenient the location of the LNACC became. However, both students and staff agreed on the importance of increasing student engagement in LNACC activities.

Marginalization on Campus

Another aspect of the Latina/o presence on campus involved students' experiences of marginalization, particularly within the academic domain. Most of the students interviewed had experienced the "lonely–only" phenomenon: being the only Latina/o or student of color in a class or other university setting. Noel was actually the only Latino student in his academic program: "When I first started in the School of _____, I was the only Hispanic student . . . and since then, there's probably been less than five." He shared what it felt like to be the lonely–only as a new student at UI:

> I remember my freshman year, I think my first class was a big lecture hall, and it was like 300 of us, and I remember just walking in from the back of the room and just kind of like staring around like, what am I getting myself into? . . . And it hit me like, all right, I'm in college. . . . I'm here on my own, but then actually looking around, I'm the only brown kid in this class of 300 and, I mean, of course, I stick out 'cause of my skin color but, I mean, I have to stick out even more just because of, you know . . . I wanted to do well in this class. . . . I've definitely felt that in numerous classes here at Iowa.

Noel was referring to the double burden of being the lonely–only and feeling like he had something to prove because of assumptions others may have about the academic ability of students of color.

Andrea, who grew up in a large, racially diverse urban area outside of Iowa, commented on what it was like to feel like a minority for the first time:

Here was when I felt like a minority for the first time, even though I am a minority, but I never really, like, felt that or knew what that meant in [my hometown] till I came here. I mean, like I said, our numbers are growing, but there's still, like, we're not that present and . . . I feel like there's a lot of comments that I've heard . . . since I'm a freshman till now, like a lot of microaggressions, I guess.

Some of the students spoke about their experiences with bias incidents or racial microaggressions on campus. Andrea shared an experience that happened in one of the dining halls:

This semester I was having breakfast at Burge, and there were girls behind me. They didn't see me, and they were talking about a Latino girl that was pregnant . . . in her class, and someone else was like, "Well, that's okay, it's normal, it's part of their culture to get pregnant when they're teenage girls." And then I was just like, "What? Are you kidding?" And then I turned around and then I just looked at them and I was like, "Well, thanks for educating me on my own culture" . . . and they didn't say anything, and they just stopped and just were like, "Oh, we didn't mean it like that." . . . I probably shouldn't have said anything but it really angered me. I was like, "Really? That's what you think? Like that's what you're going around thinking—

that it's part of our culture?" . . . So it's a lot of comments that I've heard like that that are not accurate.

Some students also questioned why UI did not have a Latino/Chicano studies program. The fact that the UI currently has a Department of African American Studies and an American Indian and Native Studies Program made it more apparent to students that Latinas/os were being overlooked. Monica became aware of this issue after taking a "Chicano" class with a Latino professor:

> I loved that class. That was one of my favorite classes. . . . It just kind of made me start questioning like why we don't have a Chicano studies or like a Latino studies program. 'Cause I know even [the professor] came to one of the ALMA meetings, and he talked about how we're the only Big Ten [school] that doesn't have [Latino Studies]. . . . He was just so knowledgeable in everything. . . . It just made me more aware.

Monica expressed dismay that this faculty member, whom she admired and respected, decided to leave the university because of an apparent lack of support:

> I think he said there was no need for his type of study. . . . There was no interest at the university. He didn't really leave too happy. . . . He is now gone, so we don't have any teachers teaching anything about Chicanos anymore.

Other students indicated that they had never had a Latina/o professor during their time at UI. The dearth of Latina/o faculty members at UI, combined with the stigma of being the only Big Ten campus without a Latina/o Studies program, contributed to a feeling of urgency regarding the need for a greater Latina/o presence on campus.

In many ways, the students looked toward the LNACC to get a sense of the Latina/o presence on campus. Teresa explained why she expended so much time and energy in planning programs at the LNACC:

> I feel that the LNACC is an important part of our campus . . . to kind of showcase and tell people out there. I mean, for me . . . I wish it would have been like the first thing I had known about Iowa. I mean, Iowa State doesn't have a Latino Native American Cultural Center . . . and I just, especially . . . being in the state of Iowa, I just feel like it's such an important part . . . it's like "We're here!"

One important function of the LNACC was its role in the preservation and dissemination of historical information regarding the Latina/o presence on campus. This occurred mainly during anniversary celebrations. The 30th and 40th anniversary celebrations provided an opportunity for students to meet one or more of the original founders of the LNACC. The LNACC's "library liaison" created a large historical display in honor of the center's 40th anniversary celebration. Each of the cultural centers at UI had a library liaison who served as a resource for students. The LNACC's library liaison was instrumental in researching and sharing information about the center's history as well as the activism of Latina/o students from previous decades.

Summary

The concept of a Latina/o presence on campus was important to the students in this study. They expressed concern regarding a lack of visibility of Latina/o students and faculty, as well as of the LNACC itself. Students commented that the geographic location of the LNACC—on the west side of the river, on the outskirts of campus—made it difficult for some students to find their way to the center. At the same time, some students believed that

the location contributed to the LNACC being a good place to study or to get away from the hub of campus. There existed somewhat of a disconnect between how students and staff perceived the location of the LNACC.

Students' experiences of marginalization and/or racial microaggressions on campus was an important aspect of Latina/o presence. To a certain extent, the LNACC served to mediate the negative impact of marginalization on campus, especially for first-year students, by providing a welcoming and culturally nourishing environment for Latina/o students. The potential existed for the LNACC to serve as a significant representation of the Latina/o presence on campus; however that remained an elusive goal due to a lack of resources. Without full-time staff members, a sufficient budget, or a critical mass of Latina/o faculty and staff members who could support LNACC activities and serve as mentors to students, it was difficult for the LNACC to reach its full potential.

Theme 5: Neutral, Sacred, and (Con)Tested Space

The final finding of this study concerns how space was viewed and used at the LNACC. Spaces within the LNACC each had their function, and the roles of the spaces were understood by student participants. Based on interviews with students and staff, I understood the various spaces within the LNACC to be either "neutral," "sacred," or con(tested).

Neutral Space

For the most part, students described the main floor of the LNACC as "the commons" or neutral space. The main floor consisted of a front entry room, main office, living room, alcove, kitchen, dining room/conference room, bathroom, and back entry room. The largest space on the main floor was the living room, which contained comfortable couches and a flat screen TV. An alcove area connected to the living room could be used as a meeting space or,

during social events, as a place to serve food or set up sound equipment for a DJ. The living room could accommodate approximately 15 people comfortably or a larger group if they were standing. The combined spaces of the main floor could easily accommodate a social gathering of 30–40 people or more.

In addition to their regular meetings, ALMA hosted several events at the LNACC— mostly social/cultural. Other student organizations, such as the Latina/o Greek organizations and The Iowa Edge Student Association, also hosted events on the main floor. Occasionally, university departments, such as the Center for Enrichment and Diversity sponsored programs at the LNACC. It also had been a tradition for the Native American Student Association to host a potluck at the LNACC every Thursday evening, which was attended by students, children, and faculty members.

When asked which space was used most often at the LNACC, Omar responded: "It's the living room, it's like the commons, it's the main area." Patricia pointed out that the fact that the second floor was divided into smaller rooms did not negatively impact student use of the LNACC: "I think because the downstairs is so neutral—I think that helps a lot." Students described activities held on the main floor as welcoming and fun. Elisa described a social event hosted by The Iowa Edge Student Association: "There's just like, a lot of people just talking to each other, or there were people dancing with people they don't even know but are just, like, dancing. And it was like very fun, just happy." Andrea observed that LNACC "regulars" make a special effort to welcome new students and non-Latina/o students to LNACC events:

Well, at least I do and I see, like, they accept members. They go up to them and they

talk to them and go . . . "How are you? Where are you from?" Like, you know, try to

meet them because, obviously, they're a new face so they're going to stand out because we mostly all know each other now at this point. So . . . I think we do a job of, like, just approaching them.

Teresa described her role, as a student worker at the LNACC in welcoming people to the center:

If people come in, [I tell] them about the LNACC and just [make] them feel welcome. I think that's one of the top priorities for all the cultural centers. But I think . . . the main thing is just to make people feel welcome and have them realize that this is their space—that they can come here and watch TV or cook or just hang out or do homework.

The importance the students placed on welcoming people to the LNACC was reinforced by a staff member who explained that this was part of the training the student workers received. He explained that the student staff of all the cultural centers were trained to use the SWAT method of welcoming guests. SWAT is an acronym for "stand" and greet the guest, "welcome" the guest to the center, "acknowledge" the guest by asking if he or she had been to the center before, and "thank" the guest for visiting the center. He stressed that students were encouraged to use their own authentic style and voice when engaging in SWAT and emphasized the importance of using this method:

So we came up with this SWAT acronym. . . . It's important all year. But it is really important like the first four to six weeks of school. Because students are going to be looking for places, safe places, welcoming places and figure out where those are on campus.

In addition to the importance placed on welcoming new students to the LNACC, students also described opportunities to meet and interact with new students during social/ cultural events that take place on the main floor of the LNACC. Elisa, who had some difficulty finding a group of friends during her first month on campus and considered transferring to another school, explained how she connected with students at an LNACC event and decided to remain at UI:

> It was a Halloween event and I met a girl there in an organization, and from there we pretty much . . . started to talk, and we went to an event together, and from there we pretty much became I guess more comfortable, and from there we started meeting more people.

Omar acknowledged that it is not uncommon to see non-Latinos attend events at the LNACC, but the majority of students who participated in the social activities were Latinas/os:

> Obviously, if I want an event to be successful, I'm not just inviting Latinos; I'm inviting everybody to come and enjoy themselves. And so sometimes I'll bring my friends, they'll come in here, and they'll be like "Oh yeah, this is cool. This is okay." You know, they'll kind of feel uncomfortable for a little bit. But I feel like there are those students who . . . a couple of my friends . . . they were introduced to it and they're like, "Oh, this isn't too bad. I kind of like this," and so they keep coming back. But most of the time . . . for the students that I've seen . . . one or two students that aren't of Latino background. Other than that, everybody is Latino, or at least half, or in some sort of way.

Other students also described instances when they invited their friends who were non-Latina/o to attend social events at the LNACC. The social atmosphere and food helped to make those students feel comfortable and welcomed.

In essence, the main floor of the LNACC was used for ALMA meetings on Wednesday evenings, NASA potlucks on Thursday evenings, social/cultural events, and the occasional student who came to study. The comfortable furniture, TV, and kitchen contributed to the message that the main floor was a space for all to use—a neutral space for the most part. The second floor of the LNACC, by contrast, contained spaces that were simultaneously open and closed to the general student population.

Sacred Space

As described in the "Theme 3: LNACC as Anchor and Launching Pad" section of this chapter, the second floor of the LNACC housed the Gamma room and the Beta room. There also was a room dedicated to the Native American Student Association and an "ALMA room." The doors to these rooms did not have signs on them and were kept open. The official understanding among students and staff was that anyone was allowed to use the spaces on the second floor. However, in reality, students had a tacit understanding that the Beta and Gamma rooms were specifically for the use of those two groups and off-limits to everyone else. Noel, a Beta, explained:

> I definitely feel like it's more used by brothers just because, I feel like sometimes people who aren't . . . you know, a part of the fraternity or who just, you know, don't know, that they just back away just because they think, "Oh, this is the Beta room; nobody goes in here."

Andrea, a Gamma, made a similar observation about the Gamma room:

> I wouldn't care if someone else would go in there [if] they're not [Sigma Lambda
>
> Gamma], but I feel like since it's so like [Sigma Lambda Gamma], like the walls, the
>
> colors and everything, I feel like people don't go in there for that reason 'cause
>
> they're like, "Oh, that's [Sigma Lambda Gamma's] room" . . . but I don't think there
>
> should be any problem if someone who's not [a Gamma] goes and studies there.

Elisa, who was not a Gamma, indicated that she had been in the Gamma room only once and did not feel like she could use that space "just because I feel like it's just for the sorority, so I feel like nothing should be touched." Omar, who was not a Beta, had a similar perspective regarding the Beta room:

> I feel like a lot of the times, if you go upstairs . . . all the rooms are separate, like for
>
> different organizations that come here at the LNACC, and so that's kind of reserved
>
> for, not necessarily reserved for, but you know, we give it that respect like, "Hey, this
>
> is their place."

Omar, then tried to emphasize that the rooms are open to anyone but with the same caveat as his previous statement:

> Anyone's welcome. I think . . . a big part of that is you could walk into any of the
>
> Latina sorority and the Latino fraternity here on campus and kind of learn a little bit
>
> about their history by going into their rooms, and I think that's what it's meant to be
>
> there for. But then again, we don't want to go in there and hold meetings in there,
>
> you know, 'cause it's kind of like, let it be.

The students quoted above were trying to explain the delicate balance of maintaining an open environment on the second floor of the LNACC while protecting the sanctity of the Gamma

and Beta spaces. In fact, the students who were part of the Greek organizations viewed the rooms as sacred spaces, as Sofia (a Gamma) explained:

> I've been to the Beta room a couple of times, and I guess you could say . . . those two rooms are like very sacred to us, for each person's org, because that's how it kinda got started since we were founded here in Iowa City. . . . The Gamma room is special to me because when I go up there, I see past sisters . . . and like the founders, they signed [the wall], and when we have visitors they come and sign.

Andrea (a Gamma) described the room in a similar manner: "Like in [the] Greek world, I guess, [it's] a sacred space for us. . . . You know, like it's somewhere where our founding mothers met and like brainstormed for ideas . . . [for] one of the fastest growing [Latina sororities] nationwide.

By contrast, the ALMA room was viewed as a space for general use. Some students liked to study in the ALMA room. ALMA members used the room to store materials and supplies as well as to hold executive board meetings. The students did not discuss the NASA room. Based on my observations and interviews (where I learned that opportunities for interaction between NASA students and ALMA students were limited), I am under the impression that only NASA students used that room. The double standard of the LNACC second floor, where all of the spaces were officially open for general use, but two (and possibly three) spaces were effectively viewed as sacred set up a situation that has the potential to create tension as the Latina/o student population continues to increase at UI.

(Con)Tested Space

When discussing the Gamma and Beta rooms, few of the students in this study alluded to any tensions regarding use of those spaces. However, they did acknowledge that a

new Latina/o sorority chapter was being established on campus. Jocelyn, who was a member of the new sorority's interest group, explained that they were not meeting at the LNACC but expected to host some events there:

> We know that [for] some of our events, because we want to maybe have a movie viewing or a discussion or some other events, we would probably use the LNACC. But like I said, our meetings, just due to the distance, it is just more convenient to do it on campus.

She did not mention the expectation that her sorority would have space at the LNACC similar to the Gamma space. The issue of space allocation for student organizations did not loom large for most of the students interviewed, however the staff members directly affiliated with the LNACC stressed the importance of addressing space needs fairly as new Latina/o organizations are established. One staff member provided his perspective on preparing for the future:

> Well, I think, quite frankly, our Latino community is expanding in terms of its organized constituency base and [the LNACC] only acknowledges three, and therein lies our problem. And although ALMA, Beta, and Gamma are historic, and we need to continue to honor that, we can't continue to honor that at the expense of new groups. And we're going to have more. And so it's about preparing for the future . . . and I don't feel like we're way late. I just think . . . it's just right, and we need to be capitalizing on that. And so we've had some conversations, specifically, with Gamma . . . about the whole notion about, we're not devaluing you, we want to continue to honor you, but we have to create space that makes others feel welcome, too, and valued. So I think that's . . . where we were headed in our conversation.

This staff member understood that he was treading on sensitive ground that had to be navigated carefully so that the members of the alpha chapters would be able to maintain a sense of sacred space while also welcoming and making room for new organizations at the LNACC. One student confirmed that this may be an emerging issue. When asked if other students ever complained about the fairness of space allocation at the LNACC Noel responded:

> Yeah, stuff like that, like you know, "How come they get to have their own room?" you know; like "They're only one Latino-based organization, and there's a lot more." And especially now that we're getting . . . we have a few other Latino/Latina fraternities, sororities.

A few Gamma members expressed concern regarding the future of the Gamma room as well as the future of the LNACC facility in general. Teresa worried that, if the Gamma room is not utilized, the members risk losing it:

> I know I'm a Gamma but, to be self-critical for a second, I mean, we have a room upstairs, but it is completely dusty, and it's just used for storage, and I just feel like the importance that the LNACC has to our organization is also being overlooked, because, I mean, if it was used, it wouldn't be dusty and kind of forgotten. And I feel like, with the importance that it does for our organization, it should be used more. I mean, even by our members. . . . You know, I understand that these organizations have grown, which is great but, I mean, I feel like this is where we were founded and so why would we walk away from that?

Teresa also worried about the future of the LNACC facility:

> At the moment, I do worry about the future of the LNACC because I understand that, in order for the LNACC to continue to be what it is, people need to come and use it, because the school is, obviously, not going to fund or, you know, keep something around that isn't being used. And, I mean, I feel like even events that have been hosted this semester haven't been well attended.

Andrea expressed her hopes for the future of the Gamma room:

> I'm sure that, at some point, they're going to want to probably like make a new [LNACC] building, maybe at some point, . . . I don't know, maybe [in] 10, 20 years. What I would like to happen is for [the Gamma room] to not be touched. Just because of everything that it holds on the walls. But realistically speaking, I mean, I don't know how possible that is.

It is evident that both the students and staff members had some concerns regarding the future of the LNACC. It is likely that the LNACC will be "tested" on issues of space use and allocation in the near future as the Latina/o student population continues to increase at UI. Whether or not this test becomes a contested space issue depends on the manner in which students and staff work together to re-imagine space at the LNACC.

Summary

There appeared to be an emerging space allocation issue at the LNACC. The main floor was viewed as a neutral space for all to use, and the second floor was divided into the four spaces dedicated to a sorority (Sigma Lambda Gamma), a fraternity (Sigma Lambda Beta), a Latina/o student organization (ALMA), and a Native American student organization (NASA). The Gammas and Betas viewed their rooms as sacred spaces, because their

chapters were founded at UI and the LNACC played a critical role in their founding. At the same time, the Beta room and Gamma rooms were being used only as storage space and symbolic space—few actual activities were taking place in these rooms. Students who were not Gammas or Betas did not go into those spaces, even though the spaces were supposed to be open to anyone. A new Latina/o sorority was being established on campus, and the office that oversaw the LNACC was grappling with how to address space needs for new groups as well as how to make the second floor functional space as opposed to symbolic space.

Analysis Using the Concepts of Validation, Sense of Belonging, and Thriving

The findings from this study indicate that the LNACC at UI is a space in which Latina/o students have experienced cultural validation while developing a sense of belonging, which has promoted their ability to thrive as students of color at a predominantly White campus. In this last section of Chapter 4, I will explicate how students at a PWI experienced these interconnected sociocultural concepts within the space of a cultural center that played a supportive role in their success.

Validation

My findings indicate that the students interviewed for this study experienced a type of out-of-class validation as they entered the physical setting of the LNACC and interacted with other Latina/o students. When the students entered the LNACC for the first time, they experienced a unique space on campus—one that offered cultural familiarity through color, artwork, food, language, and community. They used the following phrases to describe how they made meaning of the LNACC: home away from home, oasis, like my *abuela's* house, welcoming, homey, like being at a family party, safe space, familiar, and comfortable. Indeed, what they were experiencing was a unique space on campus. This experience offered

the students, most of whom were first-generation college students, a confirming message that their cultural backgrounds were valued.

For the students in this study, validation occurred at the LNACC, though not necessarily through interactions with faculty and staff, who were rarely in that space. Rather, validation occurred through peer interactions as well as through what the students referred to as the LNACC vibe or essence. Furthermore, for most of the participants, the validation process began early in their college experience due to the fact that they were introduced to the cultural centers prior to the beginning of their first semester through precollege programs.

As students became familiar with the LNACC and connected with peers, they began to join student organizations. Older students served as role models and reached out to new students to push them to engage in student organizations and prepare to take leadership positions. The older students were able to model leadership skills for new students while providing them with advice and feedback regarding organizational challenges. Noel described how membership in Sigma Lambda Beta validated his ability to use his voice:

> I wasn't really one to speak up . . . like right away. Sigma Lambda Beta helped me out with that as far as just making my voice heard and just making sure that I kind of put my opinions out there and just making sure that I—I don't want to say get what I want, but like, I don't know . . . just the whole confidence factor on, you know, just making my voice heard.

Teresa's confidence in her growth as a leader was validated through her LNACC activities:

> This is like a really weird analogy but, I feel like in [Hometown] . . . I was hatching as a leader, and I feel like I had a lot of support and, I mean, almost like a toddler learning how to walk and people there [to support me]. I feel like when I came here,

it was my first chance to kind of see if I could do that around other people . . . around

peers, people my age . . . 'cause I feel like in [Hometown], it was mostly working

with youth . . . a lot younger than me or working with adults, whether it was

educating them about immigration or the DREAM Act or whatnot. And so I feel like

it was different in that context.

Teresa learned that she was capable of taking the leadership skills she acquired in her

hometown under the guidance of caring mentors and transfer them to the university setting

where she was interacting with peers. Students also were validated through interactions in

the sorority. Andrea described a validating relationship with one of her Gamma sisters:

I got to know her through [Sigma Lambda Gamma]; we went for coffee, and we just

started talking, and we found out we have a lot of things in common. . . . We became

really good friends, and then we became sisters, and now she's not here anymore, but

we still keep close contact, and she's always like sending me information about

programs that I could apply to.

The older Gamma sister was providing Andrea with information about opportunities to grow

as a leader, in essence, sending a strong validating message that she has confidence in

Andrea's leadership capacity.

In addition to the peer-to-peer validation occurring through LNACC interactions,

students were validated by the physical presence of a facility that resonated with their

cultural backgrounds as Latina/o students. Rendón and Muñoz (2011) asserted that

validating agents are people—faculty, staff, peers, family members, etc. Based on my

findings, I argue that it is possible for a "validating agent" to be a physical space. The

LNACC itself acts as a validating agent for Latina/o students because it is the only space on a

predominantly White campus where they can walk in the door and feel their cultural background being represented through Latina/o artwork, pictures of Latina/o students, historical artifacts regarding the Latina/o experience on campus, and even the warm Latino colors used on the walls. This is part of what the students referred to as the essence of the center. It promoted their sense of belonging on campus by confirming that their cultures and backgrounds are valued on campus—at least within this space. The LNACC facility, with or without human interaction, was a Latino-focused space that offered students a sensory experience that they were unlikely to find anywhere else on campus. For the students in this study, simply walking into the LNACC space with its warm colors and Latino- focused artwork offered a familiarity that majority students experienced on a daily basis throughout other spaces campus. Validating experiences, which occurred through peer interactions at the LNACC, combined or in parallel with the physical essence of the LNACC, promoted a sense of belonging for Latina/o students at UI.

Sense of Belonging

The findings from this study provide insight into the mechanisms by which a particular environment – the LNACC – affects Mexican American students' sense of belonging. As discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review), Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that early experiences in college are key factors influencing students' sense of belonging in subsequent years. Most of the students in my study participated in a precollege program that helped them get acclimated to the campus environment and introduced them to the LNACC. Hurtado and Carter also found that membership in Greek organizations had a positive effect on sense of belonging, particularly in the first two years of college. Several of my student participants joined a Latina/o fraternity or sorority where they connected with a Latina/o

community and experienced leadership development skills. Finally, Hurtado and Carter hypothesized that students in their study who reported racial/ethnic tensions on campus and had joined ethnic organizations "may experience group cohesion and marginality simultaneously" (p. 335). A few of the students in my study reported experiencing racial microaggressions on campus, and all of them experienced the lonely–only phenomenon. They also voiced their concern regarding the lack of a "Latina/o presence" on campus, while pointing to the LNACC as a "home away from home."

For the students in my study, sense of belonging was an essential aspect of their first-year experience as first-generation underrepresented students attending a large PWI. The need to belong was what attracted them to the LNACC and compelled them to spend a significant amount of time within that space during their first and second years of college. Most of the students were searching for something familiar—in most cases, other Latina/o students. This supports Strayhorn's (2012) assertion, discussed in Chapter 2, that sense of belonging *drives* student behavior because it "takes on heightened importance in contexts where individuals are inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible" (p. 10). This qualitative case study offers an interpretation of the mechanisms by which an ethnic cultural center serves as a space that promotes sense of belonging for Latina/o undergraduate students. The cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of sense of belonging as experienced by the students in this study are explained below.

I think I belong here. The cognitive aspect of sense of belonging occurred on two levels for most of the students in this study. The first level involved the process of understanding how they fit into the LNACC as new students and making a decision regarding how often they would participate in LNACC activities. The second level involved the

process of transitioning from the LNACC as their main (or only) source of campus involvement to other activities outside of the LNACC. Moving from LNACC activities to campus-wide activities did not necessarily mean that students severed ties with the LNACC. It simply meant that the amount of time and effort devoted to LNACC activities decreased, often significantly.

Students spoke at length regarding the reasons they decided to get involved in LNACC activities after they were first introduced to the space. Sandra, who attended a predominantly White private high school, actively sought out spaces in which she could immerse herself in Latino culture, including membership in ALMA and Sigma Lambda Gamma. She reflected on her decision process regarding getting involved in LNACC-related activities:

> I realized that I didn't really know anything about, I guess, my culture and so, I guess
> . . . one of the biggest reasons why I joined the Gammas [was] because I really
> wanted to, not just know more about my culture but, I guess, the Latino culture in
> general. . . . I guess with everything like the immigration, that was becoming such a
> big issue, I realized I didn't really know much about it, and I kind of thought it was
> something that I should worry about just because I am a Latino.

After joining the Gammas, Sandra was encouraged by her sorority sisters to join ALMA. At the time of her interview for this study, Sandra held leadership positions in both organizations. She was also taking a class in Mexican American history. In essence, Sandra made a conscious decision about where she thought she belonged based on her desire to immerse herself in Latina/o culture. She was able to do this in both the academic realm and the social/cultural realm.

For Teresa, like many of the students in this study, the realization of "I think I belong here" happened immediately the first time she visited the LNACC; she recalled:

I really liked it. I'm a very artsy person, I love painting, and I love history and Latin American Studies, and so . . . a lot of the things are familiar to me like the paintings, and I was like, "Oh this is so cool." . . . I just wanted to be surrounded by people who can speak Spanish and who aren't going to be bothered if I play *bachata* or *cumbia* or *banda* or whatever.

Several students spoke of how their involvement in the LNACC provided them with confidence and leadership skills that helped them get involved in other (non-LNACC) activities. Victor was one of the students who, during the course of my study, had transitioned from being very involved in the LNACC to very limited involvement. By the end of my study, he had been selected to serve as an Iowa Edge peer leader. The experience he gained at the LNACC as a member of ALMA was essential in giving him the confidence to work with students in the The Iowa Edge program. Victor grew up in a predominantly White, affluent neighborhood with parents who had graduated from college. Thus, he had to learn how to relate in an authentic way with first-generation students who were from low-income backgrounds. Victor shared what he learned from his involvement in the LNACC:

Communicating with other students, underrepresented students and students who come from different backgrounds, as cliché in general as that may sound, that was something that was very much developed in my participation with ALMA. My comfort with connecting to other underrepresented students, not that I was uncomfortable doing it in the first place, I just wasn't as used to it from where I was from . . . that was really key. . . . So it took a little work to . . . to be comfortable with

the fact that that was the reality, that . . . I was different and . . . I was the same as

them but different.

For Victor, getting to "I think I belong here" at the LNACC meant recognizing and

navigating his own privilege as a middle class student and gaining the confidence to fit into

an environment where most of the participants were first-generation college students. The

skills he gained at the LNACC helped give him the confidence to apply for a position in

which he would be serving as a peer mentor for first-generation underrepresented students—

another "I think I belong here" experience. The cognitive aspect of SB is interconnected

with the affective aspect. "I think I belong here" often happens simultaneously with "I feel

like I belong here."

     I feel like I belong here. As described in-depth in Theme 2: The LNACC "Vibe,"

students shared myriad ways in which the LNACC helped them feel as though they

belonged. Students described the vibe as encompassing both the physical/material form of

the space as well as the social interactions that took place there. Andrea, similar to most of

the other students, experienced initial validation and a feeling of belonging, which led to her

involvement in LNACC activities:

    I was excited because . . . I remember I signed up to like volunteer for things and, like

    I said, it provided me an outlet to be more involved. . . . I just felt comfortable just

    being there. . . . Because of the people, like I feel you could relate them and they were

    really nice and like just wanted to know who I was and, I mean, they seemed like

    generally interested in who I was and like why I was there.

Other aspects of the LNACC that engendered a feeling of belonging included Latino-themed

artwork, food, music, and dance. Students also stressed the importance of being in a space

where Spanish was often heard and spoken. Home away from home was the analogy most often used by students to describe how they felt at the LNACC. As Noel said:

> I feel like it's truly a home away from home. . . . I think a lot of it is just the people that I've come to encounter and share my experiences with there. I've had nothing but positive interactions and experiences there at the LNACC. . . . It just feels good.

The LNACC also was described invariably as welcoming, safe, warm, fun, relaxing, and familiar. Student descriptions regarding the vibe of the LNACC confirmed that "I feel like I belong here" was a fundamental aspect of their experience.

I act as if I belong here. After students were introduced to the LNACC and experienced the cognitive and affective elements of SB, they joined one or more of the LNACC-affiliated student organizations. Membership and, in some cases, leadership in these student organizations was behavior that indicated "I act as if I belong here." Patricia described how she decided to be actively involved in ALMA:

> I just didn't have really any experience . . . but I knew that I had a lot of potential. I just needed to find a way to kind of show it. . . . I knew I could do it, but I just didn't know how to get started and how to even go about that. I just knew that I wanted to be involved. . . . So I did ALMA. . . . I tried to be as involved as I could, like any volunteer opportunities they would offer . . . going to the meetings, just showing the commitment and . . . I ran for a position my freshman year.

Patricia had a sense of her own potential and looked for opportunities to demonstrate it. She was able to do this at the LNACC—an environment in which she felt she belonged. Most students in this study experienced a similar process as Patricia, whether through ALMA, Sigma Lambda Gamma, or Sigma Lambda Beta.

It is difficult to determine if students who gained a sense of belonging at the LNACC were also able to gain that feeling within the larger campus community—if their involvement in the LNACC led to a sense of belonging at UI in general. However, it is clear that gaining a sense of belonging at the LNACC was an essential element of their ability to thrive at UI.

Thriving

As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, Schreiner (2013) proposed a model in which creating a sense of community through four key elements – membership, relationship, ownership, and partnership - formed a "foundation for thriving" (p. 5). Based on my interviews with students and staff, along with observations and document analysis, the participating students experienced all four elements of a sense of community, at some level, at the LNACC. However, membership and relationship clearly were the strongest elements experienced by the students, as discussed in the first three themes of this chapter.

Ownership was the weakest element, although this concept was somewhat paradoxical within the LNACC. Due to the lack of any full-time staff housed within the LNACC, it appeared that the center was a purely student-driven entity. This was true to a degree—the manager of the center was a graduate student (half-time position) and the majority of activities taking place at the LNACC were a result of student planning and coordination. Occasionally a staff member from another unit would host a program at the center. In this sense, students had a sense of ownership of the center. However, spaces within the center were, for the most part, controlled by the Center for Student Leadership and Involvement. If members of the sorority (Sigma Lambda Gamma) wanted to paint a wall in the Gamma room they had to request permission from Center for Student Involvement and Leadership. Recently, their request to paint a wall to make room for more signatures from

new Gamma members had been denied due to the impending issue of how to make space within the center for more student organizations. It is possible that the students' sense of ownership may increase in the future as staff members from the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership address the space issue. One staff member indicated the need to have additional conversations with students to plan for the future. He also discussed the delicate balance of "ownership" as it concerned the LNACC:

> I want the students to care as much as I do, and we can't get ourselves in the situation where they see us caring more or caring less because each has an effect. Don't worry about it, you know, they've got it under control, you know, they'll take care of it for us. . . . Or a flip side of that is, why don't they care, why aren't they helping? And we've got to be equal partners in this whole thing.

The student participants in this case study experienced a sense of community within the LNACC that contributed to their ability to thrive within a PWI environment. Successfully navigating the issues of space and ownership will strengthen the sense of community for current and future students to participate in LNACC activities.

CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

This chapter provides a summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings as they relate to the research questions. Next, implications for practice and research are discussed. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection regarding my research journey.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of an ethnic cultural center in the experience of Latina/o students at a PWI located in the Midwest. The objectives of the study were to understand how Latina/o undergraduate students make meaning of their experiences at a cultural center, help close the knowledge gap regarding the role of cultural centers in student experiences at PWIs, provide greater understanding regarding how cultural centers might contribute to Latina/o student success at PWIs, and build on the work of Lori Patton (2004, 2006, 2010) to promote greater understanding of the significance of cultural centers in the college experience of students of color.

Data collection for this case study consisted of interviews, observations, and document analysis. The participants included 11 undergraduate Latina/o students and six staff members. The students were selected based on their self-identification as Latina/o or Hispanic and their involvement in LNACC activities. Each student participated in two interviews. The first interview was face to face; the follow-up interview was either face to face or via telephone. Staff members were chosen based on their direct or indirect affiliation with the LNACC. Four staff members directly affiliated with the LNACC were interviewed twice; the first interview was face to face; the second was either face to face or via telephone. Those who were indirectly affiliated were interviewed once, face to face. The majority of the

first-round student interviews were conducted at the LNACC, during which time I also made observations of the facility. Finally, data from documents such as websites, brochures, and newspaper articles were collected and analyzed to provide greater context regarding the LNACC.

The study used a constructivist-interpretive research approach and was informed by a student success conceptual framework based on the concepts of sense of belonging, validation, and thriving. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Latina/o students become aware of the cultural center?
2. Why do Latina/o students choose to participate in cultural center activities?
3. What role does the cultural center play in Latina/o student success?

The next section provides a discussion of the findings as they relate to each research question.

Findings Related to Research Questions

After a thorough analysis of the data using a three-level coding system to illuminate conceptual categories and themes, five themes emerged regarding the role of the LNACC in the experience of the participants. A discussion of the findings as they relate to the research questions follows.

Research Question 1

How do Mexican American students become aware of the cultural center?

Students found their way to the LNACC through various pathways. The most common method for them to learn about the existence of the LNACC was though precollege programs. Four of the participants were introduced to the center through The Iowa Edge, a week-long program that took place one week before classes started their freshman year. The

purpose of this program was to promote a smooth transition to UI for students of color and first-generation college students. One staff member interviewed for this study stressed how beneficial this program is for out-of-state students who are beginning their first year at UI. Three of The Iowa Edge students were from out of state, with two of the three coming from urban, predominantly Latina/o neighborhoods.

A fifth student was introduced to the LNACC through the Upward Bound program, a federal program that serves low-income high school students whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree. This student also participated in The Iowa Edge program, but she had been active in Upward Bound during high school and participated in the Upward Bound Summer Bridge Program at UI prior to participating in The Iowa Edge. A sixth student participated in the Iowa Talent Project during high school. Similar to Upward Bound, the Iowa Talent Project had a summer component that introduced students to campus resources, including the LNACC.

Two of the student participants learned about the LNACC through their scholarship program, Advantage Iowa. This scholarship was coordinated through the Center for Diversity and Enrichment. The scholarship included a point system by which students had to attend a certain number of campus programs to earn points in order to maintain their scholarship. The Center for Diversity and Enrichment regularly promoted LNACC programs and activities to its students, particularly to the Advantage Iowa scholars who needed to fulfill their program attendance requirements.

The final three students learned of the LNACC through various campus connections. One of the students attended the UI student organization fair held at the beginning of the semester and spoke with representatives from two student organizations: ALMA and Sigma

Lambda Gamma. Both these organizations were closely affiliated with the LNACC. After hearing about activities at the LNACC from the enthusiastic students at the fair, this student was excited to begin attending LNACC events. Another student was encouraged to visit the LNACC by her aunt who was an alumna. While she was still in high school, the student made a special visit to the cultural center with her aunt, who reminisced about her fond memories of the LNACC. The final student was encouraged to visit the LNACC and attend ALMA meetings by an advisor/mentor who worked at the Center for Diversity and Enrichment. This student was a transfer student, so she did not have the opportunity to participate in The Iowa Edge or other precollege programs. She was fortunate to have caring mentors who assisted her in getting connected to peers and activities that were of interest to her.

For the students in this study, getting connected to the LNACC led to their involvement in student organizations and activities congruent with their needs: connection with other Latina/o students, a home away from home, a safe space to develop leadership skills, or simply a comfortable place to get away from the hub of campus. Schreiner (2013) argued:

> Student affairs professionals are well positioned to help students become selectively involved in the campus activities and organizations most likely to connect to their passions, identities, and interests. This selective involvement appears to be a crucial ingredient in the contribution of involvement to thriving, as too much involvement can detract from other commitments, and participating in events that are not likely to enhance a sense of belonging can be counterproductive. (p. 45)

Each student was intentionally guided to the LNACC by a campus program or staff member. Some students immediately immersed themselves in LNACC activities at the beginning of their first semester at Iowa; others waited until later in the second semester of their first year. By the end of their freshman year, all of the students were attending LNACC activities regularly. The student experience of walking into the LNACC and feeling an immediate sense of home or familiarity corresponds to Strayhorn's (2014) affective component of sense of belonging, which he rendered as "I feel like I belong here."

Research Question 2

Why do Mexican American students choose to participate in cultural center activities?

Participation in LNACC activities revolved around membership in LNACC-affiliated student organizations. The organization most closely associated with the cultural center was ALMA, which met at the center every Wednesday evening and hosted social/cultural events there during the fall and spring semesters. Two Latina/o Greek organizations, Sigma Lambda Gamma sorority and Sigma Lambda Beta fraternity, also were affiliated with the LNACC, however they did not hold their meetings there. The Betas and Gammas each had a room on the second floor decorated with their colors and symbols where they kept materials and supplies. ALMA also had a room on the second floor for its supplies, but it was not decorated with ALMA symbols and was viewed as a general space where students often studied, as opposed to the Greek rooms which were viewed by students as sacred spaces.

Students were first attracted to the LNACC because of what they described as its vibe or essence. They viewed the center as a unique space on campus where they were immersed in culturally relevant art, music, dance, food, and language. Most of the students described

the LNACC as a home away from home and shared numerous experiences by which they gained cultural sustenance from an environment that validated their background and culture. What the students described is congruent with Gonzalez's (2002) concept of cultural nourishment, which he developed based on his study of Chicano students attending a PWI. Gonzalez (2002) described cultural nourishment as "individuals and material elements that replenish the students' cultural sense of selves" (p. 193).

In addition to being attracted to a space on campus that validated who they were as Latina/o students at a PWI, students continued to engage in LNACC activities because of their connection with other Latina/o students and their membership in Latina/o organizations, to which they developed strong commitments. Some of the students were at the LNACC twice a week attending ALMA meetings—the executive board meeting and the general meeting. The other students were at the LNACC at least once a week. Upon reflection, students could point to tangible skills they had developed through participation in ALMA or the Latina/o Greek organizations. Some of them actively sought out opportunities to build their leadership skills at the LNACC; others were gently pushed into leadership roles by older students who recognized potential. In essence, upper-class students were validating the leadership potential of younger students by encouraging them to run for office or by nominating them for leadership positions. The act of joining a LNACC-affiliated student organization and becoming active members of those organizations corresponds with Strayhorn's (2014) behavioral component of sense of belonging which he rendered as "I act as if I belong here."

Most of the students in the study had a higher frequency of participation in LNACC activities during their freshman and sophomore years. As students reflected on their reasons

for getting involved at the LNACC many of them pointed to the opportunity to meet and interact with other Latina/o students. They were seeking familiarity, but they also recognized the diversity of the Latina/o population and shared stories of what they had learned from Latina/o students from different backgrounds. These interactions happened between Latina/o students who differed in the following background characteristics:

- In-state residency status versus out-of-state residency status;

- Having grown up in a rural versus an urban area;

- Having come from a predominantly White neighborhood versus a predominantly Latino neighborhood versus a predominantly Black neighborhood;

- Being a first-generation versus a second-generation college student;

- Being from a middle-class versus a low-income background; and

- Being bilingual versus multilingual versus monolingual.

Although a few students in the study mentioned that they had interacted with other Latina/o students at the LNACC who did not identify as having Mexican ancestry, all of the students in this study indicated that one or more of their parents were of Mexican descent. Students with other Latina/o backgrounds (Central American, South American, and Caribbean) did not appear to participate in LNACC activities in significant numbers. Nonetheless, the students in this study valued the opportunity to interact with and learn from Latina/o students with backgrounds different than their own.

Throughout their involvement with the LNACC, students had engaged in a cognitive process that included deciding which organizations to join, whether to run for a leadership position within an organization, how to use their voice at organizational meetings, and how

to serve as mentors to younger students. This process is congruent with Strayhorn's (2014) cognitive element of sense of belonging, which he rendered as "I think I belong here."

Research Question 3

What role does the cultural center play in Mexican American student success?

The LNACC served as an anchor for some students and a launching pad for others. Seven of the student participants in this study connected with the LNACC during their freshman year, joined ALMA, and became active members, some having held positions on the ALMA executive board. Sometime during or after their sophomore year, they began to get involved with other organizations and activities outside of the LNACC. Several students joined Sigma Lambda Gamma, which demanded a significant amount of their time and energy. As their lives became busier with more classwork, jobs, and new student organizations, they had difficulty fitting LNACC activities into their schedules. During the course of my study, ALMA was also undergoing a transition in which programs and activities were focusing more on immigration and other political issues impacting Latina/o communities and less on purely social/cultural events. This resulted in some students withdrawing from participation as members of ALMA.

Regardless of the reason for decreased involvement in LNACC activities, all of the students were able to point to the benefits and skills they gained while they were involved. Those skills included connecting with a network of Latina/o peers on campus; acquiring organizational, public speaking, interpersonal communication, and general leadership skills; and understanding university policies for student organizations. The students were aware of their ability to transfer these skills to new activities and organizations. This is how the LNACC served as a launching pad for these seven students. In some ways, it also served as

an anchor because, even though these students were not as active in the LNACC as before, most of them continued show their support by attending the larger annual events held there.

Four of the students continued their strong connection with LNACC past their freshman and sophomore years. For these students, the LNACC served as an anchor. Two of the students served on the executive board of ALMA and faced the challenge of navigating through a period of change for the organization. A third student worked at the LNACC, so she was there on a weekly basis. The fourth student was the only participant interviewed who was a freshman, and she had struggled to connect with the Latina/o community during her first semester. By the end of my study, she had bonded with Latina/o students in The Iowa Edge Student Organization, and they attended a social event at the LNACC together. She was frequenting the LNACC regularly to attend events or to study. It is difficult to predict whether she would continue her strong connection to the center throughout her sophomore, junior, and senior years. For the other three students, the LNACC had played a significant role in their college lives.

For all of the student participants, whether the LNACC served as an anchor or a launching pad or both, the experiences they had at the cultural center contributed to their sense of belonging and their ability to thrive as Latina/o students attending a PWI. At the LNACC, they built community with peers who offered support and validation as they developed their leadership capacity. For some it was the first opportunity to explore what it meant to be Latina/o. Each of them felt a sense of home during a time of transition in a predominantly White environment. Not only were students thriving in the social/cultural domain through their involvement in Latina/o organizations and other groups, but they were also progressing successfully in the academic world. Six of the participants were pursuing

double majors; three of the six were also in certificate programs; and one of the six was pursuing a double major, a minor, and a program certificate. The LNACC's main role in student success was to provide a culturally relevant space where students could feel a sense of belonging while developing as student leaders.

How the Findings Contribute to the Existing Literature

Using a student success framework centered on the concept of "thriving" which Schreiner (2010) defines as being "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally" (p. 4), this study was informed by Laura Rendón's (1994) validation theory and the construct of "sense of belonging" based on the work of Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Faye Carter (1996, 1997) and Terrell Strayhorn (2008, 2012). I examined how a cultural center promotes "thriving" by providing an environment in which students experienced a sense of belonging and cultural validation at a PWI. The following is a discussion of how the findings from this study advance our understanding of these concepts.

Sense of Belonging and Validation

All of the student participants in this study described the LNACC as a "home away from home," a place to connect and build community, and a comfortable space where aspects of Latino culture (language, food, art, etc.), specifically Mexican American culture, could be expressed and experienced. In essence, they all experienced a "sense of belonging" at the LNACC. The findings point to two aspects in particular that enhance our understanding of sense of belonging and validation at a PWI: the importance of cultural centers for first-generation college students and the complexity of student "ownership" of a cultural space.

Ten of the eleven student participants in this study were first-generation college students. Each of them recalled their experience as new students searching for something

culturally familiar on campus. They found cultural nourishment at the LNACC. Only one student participant had parents who had graduated from college. He was also searching for something as a new student—a way to learn about and connect with his cultural heritage which he did not experience growing up in a predominantly White, wealthy neighborhood. The findings from this study indicate that cultural centers serve a unique role for first-generation Latina/o students because they provide a culturally relevant space that validates the personal background of students who are searching for a sense of familiarity in a predominantly white physical, cultural, and academic environment. Connecting with the cultural center early in their college experience promotes a sense of belonging for first-generation students that they might not find elsewhere on campus, at least not in their first semester. Thus a cultural center can serve as a catalyst for first-generation Latina/o students to develop a sense of belonging on a predominantly white campus, which in turn, may positively impact persistence and retention.

For Latina/o students who are not first-generation college students, a cultural center may provide experiences critical to ethnic/racial identity development. Although only one participant in this study was a second-generation college student, it was clear that he was exploring his ethnic identity through his LNACC activities. He purposely sought out the cultural center even though once he became involved he realized that his privileged background was different than that of other LNACC student participants. He was also the only student participant in this study who was not bilingual. These differences challenged him to explore the diversity within Latina/o populations and pushed him to gain a deeper understanding of how his own privilege and cultural heritage impacted his interactions with others. He realized that using his academic and leadership skills to "give back" through

community outreach and mentoring activities was not a one-way street. He was learning important lessons about culture and community from the very students he was mentoring. This was only possible after recognizing and working through cognitive dissonance he experienced as a non-first-generation, middle class student participating in a cultural center where the majority of his peers were first-generation college students. For Latina/o college students attending PWIs, issues of ethnic/racial identity, language, and class can play a dominant role in their ability to develop a sense of belonging. Cultural centers provide a safe space not only for first-generation students, but for second- and third-generation students who are struggling to connect with their Latina/o roots while recognizing issues of privilege.

Findings from this study indicate that the concepts of "sense of belonging" and "validation" are interconnected. That is, being in a space that validates Mexican American history and culture promoted a sense of belonging for the student participants. As discussed in Chapter 2, Rendón (1994) describes "validation" as "an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). Rendón further defines potential enabling "agents" as faculty members, students, staff, peers, and family members. In other words, validating agents— according to Rendón—are *people*. Based on the findings from this study, I argue that a culturally relevant *space* (like the LNACC) may also serve as a validating agent for Latina/o students. Multiple physical aspects of the LNACC validated the cultural backgrounds of the student participants, especially the artwork which recognizes and honors Mexican and Native American history and culture. Students in this study could walk into the LNACC and immediately experience a sense of cultural familiarity based on their physical surroundings, regardless of whether other people were present. As one student stated: "And

as I was walking in…I kind of got the vibe and just the essence of it being, like my grandma's house, my *abuela's* house." The LNACC was the only space on campus dedicated to recognizing, honoring, and promoting Latino culture—in this case, Mexican culture. The physical space of the LNACC sent an immediate message to the participants that their cultural background was of value on this predominantly White campus. Thus, I contend that the definition of a "validating agent" should be expanded to include both people and spaces.

Thriving

The findings from this study indicate that the LNACC provided a space in which students created and cultivated a sense of community. Schreiner (2010) argued that creating a sense of community was the "foundation for thriving" for college students. She outlined four key elements of a sense of community as: membership, ownership, relationship, and partnership. Students in my study experienced high levels of membership and relationship through their activities at the LNACC. However, ownership was a more tenuous issue due to the organizational model of the LNACC and the allocation of space within the center.

In theory, the LNACC is "student-driven" because it is not staffed by full-time professional staff members, but rather by a graduate assistant (20 hours per week) and several undergraduate work-study students. This would indicate a high level of student ownership in the LNACC. However, in practice the LNACC has limited hours due to the lack of full-time staff which limits student access to the space. The LNACC manager position rotates every two years which contributes to a sense of instability. Also, LNACC programming is totally dependent on the time and effort of students, without the assistance of office support (secretarial/clerical), and with limited guidance from professional

administrators. The lack of full-time staff support has led to programming gaps, particularly for upper-class students (juniors and seniors). The LNACC caters overwhelmingly to freshmen and sophomores because those are the students who frequent the center and plan all of the activities. Programming is also inconsistent and varies in quality depending on the strength of student organizations during that particular year.

Student ownership of the LNACC is also mediated by the method in which space is allocated at the center. The fraternity Sigma Lambda Beta and the sorority Sigma Lambda Gamma feel a sense of ownership of the LNACC because they each have been allocated a room within the center to use as storage and to display organizational symbols and artifacts. While this may contribute to a sense of ownership for the Betas and Gammas, it sets up an exclusive environment on the second floor of the LNACC where non-fraternity/sorority students may feel disenfranchised within a space that purports to be inclusive and welcoming. At the same time, the cultural and historical significance of the connection between the LNACC and the Betas and Gammas cannot and should not be disregarded. Thus, within the LNACC the thin veneer of "student ownership" is complicated by an organizational model that creates instability and space allocation that privileges certain student organization.

In summary, the findings from this study demonstrate that a cultural center can be a space that promotes thriving through engaged learning, positive perspective, and social connectedness for Latina/o students at PWIs. With institutional support in the form of staffing, funding, and equitable space allocation cultural centers may also contribute to academic determination and diverse citizenship for student participants.

Implications

The main objective of this study was to increase understanding of how an ethnic cultural center contributes to the success of Latina/o students at a PWI. The implications offered in this section are based on the findings that emerged from the interviews with students and staff. Implications are discussed as they relate to practice and future research.

Implications for Practice

Connecting students with cultural centers. Each of the students in this study learned about the cultural center through external agents: either staff members, family members, mentors, or peers. Those students who were involved in precollege programs were introduced to the LNACC very early in their first semester or prior to their arrival on campus. They were then able to connect immediately with other Latina/o students and organizations. Those students who had learned about the center later in the academic year lamented that they had not learned of it sooner. Teresa, a transfer student, felt that she should have been made aware of the LNACC prior to her arrival on campus:

> I feel that the LNACC . . . is an important part of our campus, and it's an important part to kind of showcase and tell people out there. I mean, for me, I wish I would have known about it. I wish it would have been like the first thing I had known about Iowa.

Precollege programs, such as Upward Bound, the Iowa Talent Project, and The Iowa Edge, make intentional efforts to connect students with the campus cultural centers through purposefully programming. They incorporate visits to the cultural centers in their program schedules. The Advantage Iowa Scholarship program also promotes the cultural centers

through their point system, which requires students to attend a certain number of programs on campus.

Efforts to connect students of color to campus cultural centers can result in students getting connected to peers and activities that may resonate with their specific needs, interests, and passions. Not all students of color are interested in participating in cultural center activities; however, for those first-generation students who are seeking a sense of familiarity on a predominantly White campus, cultural centers can be an essential pathway to gaining a sense of belonging. Latina/o students would benefit from a broader campus approach to cultural centers—one that incorporates information about the cultural centers into campus visits for both traditional and transfer students. Also, finding ways to make Latina/o cultural centers inclusive of Latina/o students who do not have a Mexican heritage background is essential. Scanning the physical environment of a cultural center to ensure that artwork, photos, and displays represent the diversity of the Latina/o population is an important first step to creating a truly Latina/o-focused center.

Engaging students beyond the sophomore year. The results of this study clearly indicate the importance of the LNACC in the transition of Latina/o students to a PWI by providing a home away from home, cultural validation, and an opportunity to develop leadership skills with Latina/o peers. Many of the students in this study moved on to other non-LNACC affiliated activities during or after their sophomore year, which resulted in a decrease in their connection to the center. Students viewed the launching pad influence of the LNACC as both a positive and a negative phenomenon. They appreciated the connections, networking, and leadership skills gained through involvement at the LNACC

but felt that the ALMA student organization (and by association, the LNACC) has suffered as a result of losing members to other organizations.

Staff members directly affiliated with the LNACC were keenly aware of this pattern of heavy student involvement during the freshman/sophomore years followed by a drop in participation as students joined the Greek system or other student organizations and leadership activities outside the LNACC. One of the biggest challenges in promoting the LNACC to all Latina/o students and providing programming relevant to juniors and seniors is the lack of full-time staff members at the center. Oversight of the UI cultural centers is conducted by staff members who are housed in the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership, which is located across the river from the LNACC in the Iowa Memorial Union. The LNACC is managed by a half-time graduate assistant. Thus, most of the student programming that occurs is planned and coordinated by undergraduate students, the majority of whom are freshmen and sophomores.

Lack of adequate resources, including funding and staffing, is a challenge for many cultural centers. A simple scan of the websites of Latina/o cultural centers in the Midwest demonstrates that those centers with full-time staffing offer cultural, educational, sociopolitical, developmental, and academic programs as part of their missions. Some of those centers include:

- La Casa Cultural Latina (n.d.), University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign

- La Casa: Indiana University Latino Cultural Center (n.d.b), Bloomington

- Latino Cultural Center, Purdue University

- Latino Resource Center (n.d.), Northern Illinois University

The types of programming offered at these centers include peer mentoring programs, leadership retreats, community outreach programs, academic skills workshops, lunch-and-learn sessions, and social justice programs. Without full-time staff members, it is possible but difficult for a cultural center to offer programs of interest to freshmen through senior year students. However, the quality and success of those programs are almost entirely dependent upon the group of students who plan the program in that particular year. This leads to a lack of stability for Latina/o-focused programs that should continue improving every year as the Latina/o student population increases. Students also are less likely to conduct a comprehensive evaluation and assessment of programs due to the time constraints they experience as they juggle their student organization commitments with classes, research projects, jobs, and other activities.

One student participant in this study, Patricia, pointed out that she was forced to prioritize her involvement:

Sometimes it was either ALMA or [Sigma Lambda Gamma]. Like, I didn't get as involved with [Sigma Lambda Gamma] as I wanted because I was overly committed or involved with ALMA. And so I kind of had to choose between. Like, I still took committee chair roles but I never felt like I could take on executive roles . . . that would have been four meetings a week, and so I'm supposed to be a student [laughs]. I don't get paid for being involved or credit. Being involved is kind of like three hours or even more. I feel like it's five semester hours 'cause like you're dealing with it whether you're in your class or not.

Students like Patricia, and there are many, would benefit from working with full-time student affairs practitioners at the cultural center who could tend to the administrative elements of

program planning in concert with students who could provide the creative and marketing elements. Cultural centers with full-time staff members are able to establish enduring programs that are geared toward various needs based on student interests and year in college. These programs have the potential to evolve and improve based on solid evaluation and assessment efforts. At the same cultural center staff members must maintain a delicate balance between student-driven and staff-driven program initiatives.

Contending with space issues. This study revealed a potential issue regarding the use of space at the LNACC. The main floor of the center was viewed as the commons or as neutral space where ALMA holds its meetings and major social/cultural events take place. The second floor, which includes four separate rooms, was viewed differently. Each room is designated as space for a specific student organization, with the Beta room and the Gamma room perceived as sacred spaces that should not be disturbed. However, as the Latina/o student population at UI grows and the number of Latina/o-based student organizations increases, it will not be possible for the LNACC to provide a room for each organization.

Most cultural centers in the Midwest were founded in the 1970s, which means they bring over 40 years of history to the campus community. This history may be encompassed in the material form of the center—including artwork, displays, and artifacts. It may also be found in the memories of the founders and alumni, as well as of staff and faculty members. In the case of the LNACC, the history of two Latina/o Greek organizations is interwoven with the LNACC as a result of these alpha chapters having been founded at UI approximately 25 years ago. Yet the LNACC founders might have been incredulous at the thought of Latina/o students establishing sororities and fraternities—something that was unheard of in 1971.

The allocation of space dedicated to specific student organizations, or to specific purposes in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, may no longer fit the needs of a growing Latina/o population. Serving the needs of contemporary student populations may require reconsidering how space is used, especially within a cultural center that has limited square footage. That means staff members responsible for managing cultural centers must work in concert with students to reimagine space allocation in a way that honors the past while meeting current needs. Because space within a cultural center often carries with it political, cultural, and emotional aspects, discussions regarding how to use space can be difficult. However, the dialogue is necessary for the center to continue to thrive.

Implications for Research

The extant literature on Latino cultural centers is minimal, even though several cultural centers in the Midwest were established over 40 years ago. As a result, student affairs professionals lack a body of empirical research regarding promising practices, organizational models, and historical context. Several streams of research, beginning with historical analysis, would enhance the understanding and future success of Latina/o cultural centers. Conducting research from a historical perspective would enhance understanding of the complex dynamics that led to the creation of Latina/o cultural centers at PWIs. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) emphasized that "acknowledging a past history of exclusion implies an institutional willingness to actively shed its exclusionary past" (p. 283). Villalpando (2004) urged a focus on historical context in order to "gain a deeper understanding of the historical factors that have affected and continue to affect their [Latina/o students'] lives and educational experiences" (p. 47). Challenges to conducting historical

research on cultural centers may include a lack of sufficient archival documents and the expense of conducting personal interviews.

Research on the impact of Latina/o cultural centers on recruitment and retention of students is virtually nonexistent. Cultural center directors are aware, through anecdotal evidence, that Latina/o students who participate in center activities and programs are positively affected in myriad ways. However, quantitative and qualitative studies must be conducted to provide evidence that Latina/o cultural centers improve student involvement on campus, increase a sense of belonging, and increase student retention.

Accountability in higher education has become increasingly important as institutions seek to fund programs that have a positive impact on student success, particularly on persistence and retention. Latina/o cultural centers can provide quality programming by establishing learning outcomes and assessing programs regularly. This requires staff members experienced in conducting focus groups, developing survey instruments, and analyzing data. It also presents an excellent opportunity for Latina/o cultural centers to partner with academic departments to provide graduate students with research projects.

Finally, a comprehensive survey of organizational models must be conducted to determine the current landscape for Latina/o cultural centers at PWIs. This will open the door to the discovery of promising practices for the retention of Latina/o students. Knowledge of organizational models, combined with empirical research on promising practices and a deep understanding of their own institutional history, will empower stakeholders—students, staff, alumni, and community members—to create a vision for their cultural centers. In order to survive and thrive, Latina/o cultural centers must build on their

past legacies while taking a central role in shaping the campus environment to increase cross-cultural understanding and interaction among current and future students.

The campus environment is complex and multidimensional. For Latina/o students who attend PWIs, the issues of race, class, and privilege permeate everyday experiences. Student affairs practitioners must investigate emerging models of student retention to gain a deeper understanding of the factors affecting the persistence of Latina/o students. Latino cultural centers can serve as critical resources to increasing student retention and success. By recognizing the diversity of Latina/o college students, understanding how background characteristics can be mediated by the campus environment, and using current models to inform practice, student affairs professionals will be better prepared to change the institutional environment to support Latina/o student success.

Personal Reflection

Years ago, I made the decision to focus on Latino cultural centers for my dissertation. My passion was driven by my own experience as a first-generation, Mexican American high school student from Iowa who was just embarking on a journey of racial/ethnic identity development. My experiences at the UI Chicano American Indian Cultural Center (now known as the LNACC) during my teenage and young adult years were pivotal in my own identity development as well as in my decision to pursue student affairs as a vocation. As I moved closer to actually engaging in this research study, my biggest concern was how to acknowledge, honor, and use my past experience with the LNACC without letting it get in the way of conducting a vigorous study.

My concerns were greatly alleviated when I entered into the field to conduct my first observations. It immediately became clear that the LNACC of 2014 was, in many ways, a

very different center than the one I had experienced over 30 years ago. First of all, the LNACC no longer has a live-in student manager, which means today's students are not at the center all hours of the day and night. Second, the LNACC (like all UI campus buildings) is a dry facility, meaning social events at the center no longer include alcohol, which impacts the tone and environment of these events. Also, the legal drinking age was 18 during my undergraduate years at UI. Third, most of the programs I participated in at the center were either politically oriented or performance oriented, and even activities involving dance and theater tended to be of a political nature. Most of the students I interviewed for this study were interested mainly in social/cultural programming. The students who were interested in addressing political issues (e.g., workshops on undocumented students or immigration) through the student organization, ALMA, were met with resistance from peers. Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, Latina/o fraternities and sororities did not exist when I was a college student at UI. Indeed, the mere idea of a Latina sorority would have been incomprehensible to me during that time because I, along with my Latina peers, viewed the Greek system in general with suspicion and not a small amount of contempt. Much of what I experienced at the LNACC as a young college student in the late 1970s and early 1980s—the political activity, the all-night sessions, occasionally crashing on the couch overnight, the availability of alcoholic beverages—was possible because of the extreme marginalization of the center. In essence, the LNACC was flying under the radar back then. It is now more institutionalized, as are all of the centers, although the lack of full-time staff members keeps it somewhat on the margins.

These changes in the evolution of the LNACC helped me to enter my study with fresh eyes and an open mind. It actually made my research more exciting to me because of the

opportunity to truly learn about how students in the 21st century make meaning of their experiences at a cultural center with a rich history at UI. I had also learned, through my work with Latina/o students over the past 15 years, that making assumptions about the Latina/o student population at any university is unproductive and sometimes counterproductive. This knowledge also helped me to approach my research with an open mind.

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to interview the students and staff members who participated in my study. I will continue to follow the evolution of the LNACC as it serves new generations of Latina/o students. In a sense I feel as though I am a thread connecting the LNACC's past with the future. I was fortunate to know each of the founders of the LNACC as well as many of the early Latina/o alumni who were activists at the center (many of whom where my mentors and role models); and now I have learned about the LNACC experiences of contemporary Latina/o students at UI. I hope my study provides insight into a space and place that has impacted so many Latina/o students throughout the past 43 years.

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APPENDIX A. LNACC PHOTOS

Front view of the LNACC (from the LNACC website: http://csil.uiowa.edu/multicultural/lnacc/)
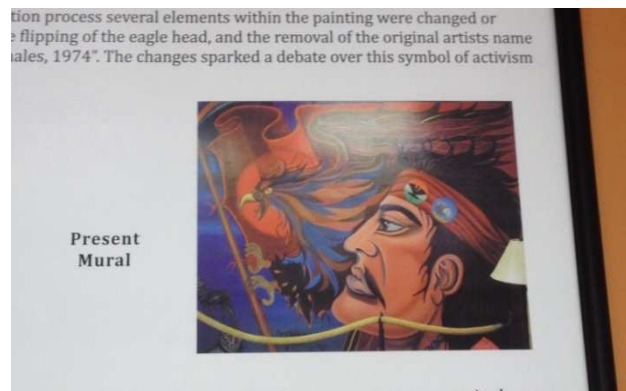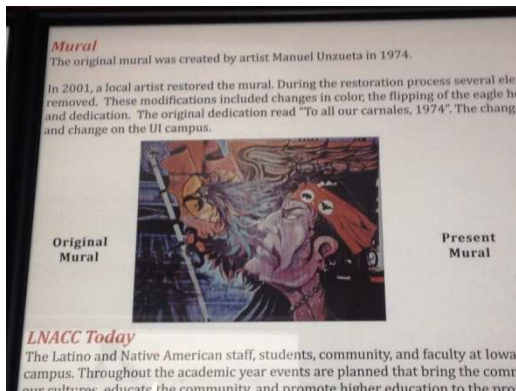
Photos of the original mural and the renovated mural as part of a LNACC historical display.

The "Beta Room" (2nd floor of LNACC)

The "Gamma Room" (2nd floor of LNACC)

APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

Recruitment Email

Hello. My name is Adele Lozano and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at Iowa State University. I am conducting a dissertation research study to understand how and why students participate in the UI Latino Native American Cultural Center programs and activities. I am contacting you to ask if you would be willing to serve as a research subject for my study.

If you decide to participate in the study, I would conduct two interviews with you in a private setting for 1-1/2 to 2 hours each. If necessary I will also conduct a third follow-up interview by phone or Skype if any information from the previous interviews needs to be clarified. The time and place of the interview would be determined according to your schedule and availability. During the interviews, which would be audio-recorded, I would ask you questions about your experiences at the Latino Native American Cultural Center. I would then transcribe the recordings. I will also be attending public events at the LNACC to observe how students use the center and interact with each other during activities.

The data will be kept confidential by storing it in a locked cabinet and in a password protected personal computer. Results of this study may be published in an academic journal and as a conference paper, and may include quotations from your interview. A pseudonym will be used instead of your name and efforts will be made not to disclose your identity. However, it may be helpful for readers to know which quotations came from freshmen versus seniors, for example. Because there are a relatively small number of Latina/o undergraduate students attending the University of Iowa, this amount of detail means that your anonymity cannot be absolutely guaranteed. After ten years I will erase the tapes and destroy any transcripts of the interaction.

Participating is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from participation at any time. Additional information about the project can be found in the attached consent form. Your decision to participate or not in this project will not affect your relationship with me, with the University of Iowa, or with Iowa State University in any way.

Thank you for your interest in my work. If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at alozano@iastate.edu or by phone at (319) 383-8159. You may also contact my major professor, Dr. Larry Ebbers by email at lebbers@iastate.edu or by phone at (515) 294-8067. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact the Office for Responsible Research, ISU by email at IRB@iastate.edu or by phone at 294-4566
Sincerely,

Adele Lozano

APPENDIX C. RECRUITMENT FLYER

ISU IRB # 1	13-311
Approved Date:	13 August 2013
Expiration Date:	29 July 2015

Recruitment Flyer

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA STUDENTS:

I am conducting a study to examine the experiences of Latina/o college students who participate in the University of Iowa Latina/o Native American Cultural Center.

I am seeking Latina/o undergraduate students (18 years old or older) who participate in programs and activities at the LNACC to share their experiences and perspectives.

I have received approval from the ISU Institutional Review Board for this study. There will be no known risks in participating in this study.

This study will help institutions of higher education better understand the role of cultural centers on their campuses.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me by phone or e-mail for more detailed information.

Thank you!

Adele Lozano, Ph.D. Candidate
Coordinator for Retention
Office of Multicultural Student Affairs
Iowa State University

Phone: 319-383-8159

E-mail: alozano@iastate.edu

APPENDIX D. IRB CONFIRMATION E-MAIL FROM UI

From: Bertolatus, John [mailto:john-bertolatus@uiowa.edu]
Sent: Tuesday, August 13, 2013 7:30 PM
To: Lozano, S. A [MSA]
Subject: RE: IRB Question

I confirm that you do not need IRB approval from the University of Iowa IRB for this project. Your approval from the ISU IRB is sufficient.

J. Andrew Bertolatus MD
Executive Director, Human Subjects Office
IRB Chair, IRB-01
University of Iowa

APPENDIX E. STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCAL

I would like start by asking you some general questions about your background. This will help provide context so that I can begin to understand who you are as a student at the University of Iowa.

1. What is your year in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)?

2. What is/are your major/majors?

3. Are you a first-generation college student (neither of your parents attended college)?

4. What is your ethnic background (Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.)?

5. What is your generational status in the U.S. (1st generation, 2nd generation, 3rd generation, etc.)?

6. Are you bilingual (English/Spanish)? If so, how would you describe your Spanish skills (fully proficient, semi-proficient, minimally proficient)?

7. Do you live on-campus or off-campus?

8. Why did you choose to attend the University of Iowa?

9. Are you currently a member of any student organizations? If so, which ones?

Now I would like to ask you some questions about the Latino Native American Cultural Center.

1. How did you first find out about the Cultural Center? What made you decide to get involved in the cultural center?

2. Can you tell me the story of when and how you first got involved in the cultural center?

   - What was your first impression of the physical space of the cultural center?

- What feelings did you have regarding your first experiences at the cultural center?

  What stands out in your memory?

- What programs or activities do you participate in that are sponsored by the cultural center?

- Areas to explore: how often student participates in activities; how student feels about the geographic location of the center; what role student has within cultural center; what other activities student is involved in outside of cultural center?

3. What types of peer interactions take place during cultural center activities?

   - How do you interact with cultural center staff?

   - How would you describe your role at cultural center in relation to other students (peers) who participate in cultural center activities?

4. What advantages or disadvantages have you experienced as a result of your participation in the cultural center?

5. Compare your experiences at the cultural center with your experiences participating in other campus student activities. What do you think is unique about the cultural center compared to other places on campus?

   - Areas to explore – cultural acceptance and respect, marginality, sense of belonging

6. Why do you continue to participate in the cultural center activities?

APPENDIX F. STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
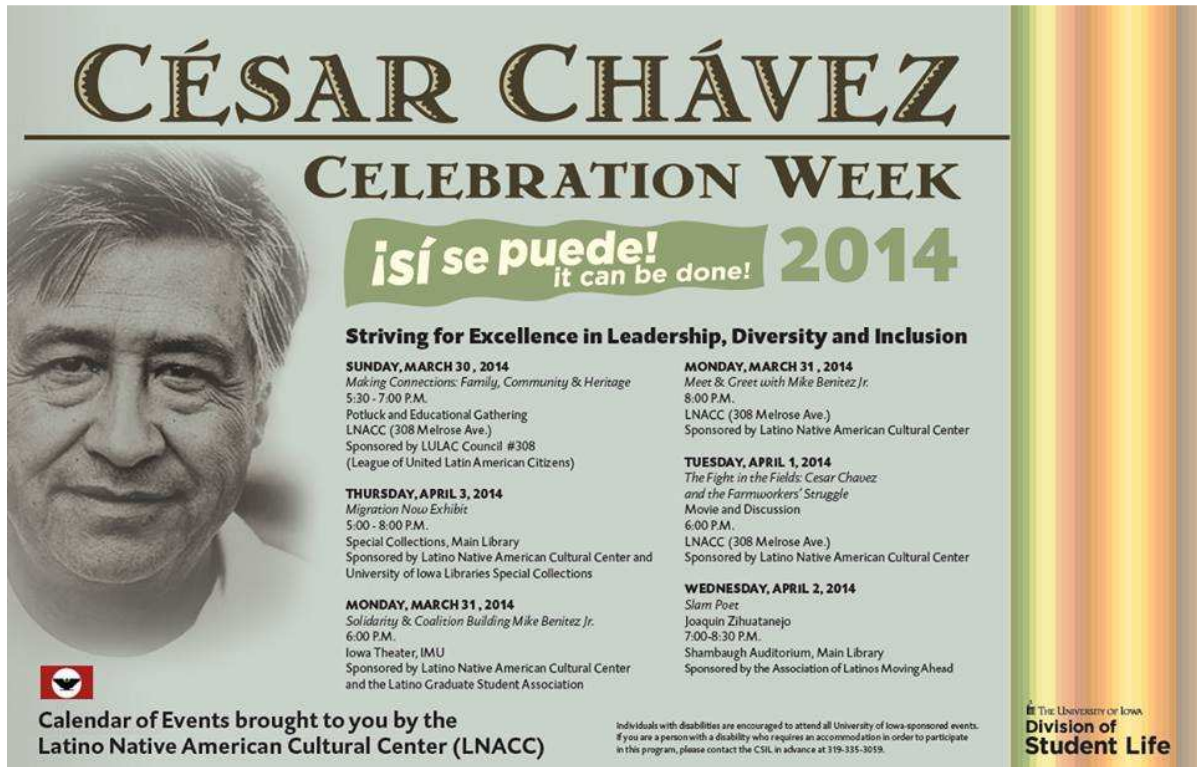
I would like start by asking you some basic questions about your position at the University of Iowa. Then I will ask you to talk about your role with the LNACC, and share your perspective regarding how and why students use the LNACC.

1. What is your title?

2. How long have you worked in this position?

3. What are your main responsibilities in this position?

4. What is your role with the LNACC?

5. How would you describe the mission/purpose of the LNACC?

    - What resources are available to meet the mission/purpose?

    - What assessment/evaluation is conducted to determine if it is meeting the mission/purpose?

6. What are the greatest challenges you face in your role with the LNACC?

Now I would like to ask you some questions about how students use the Latino Native American Cultural Center.

1. What are some of the main ways students use the LNACC?

2. Why do you think students participate in the LNACC?

    - What do you think students gain from participating in the LNACC?

3. What do you think keeps students from participating in the LNACC?

    - What do you think are some misconceptions about the LNACC

4. What changes would you like to see in the LNACC?

APPENDIX G. CESAR CHAVEZ WEEK POSTER

From the LNACC Facebook page www.facebook.com/groups/229576640102/photos/