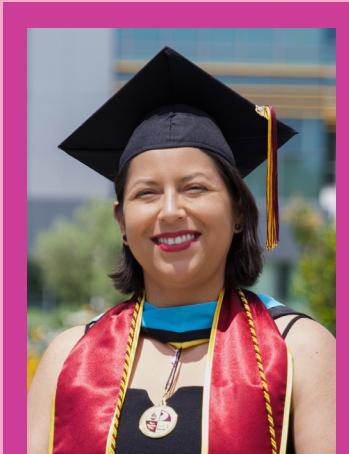


# Counselors as Webs of Endurance in Higher Education



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## Abstract

This reflective piece raises the voices of a counselor educator and two higher education counselors who inspire hope at their campuses because of their commitment to advocate and serve their students. The first voice is a counselor educator and former school counselor framing the current state of the counseling profession and offering her own brief reflection as a counselor and counseling faculty. The second voice is from a four-year university counselor who opts to hold themselves accountable to be a source of community for colleagues and students. The third voice is a community college counselor who speaks to how the attacks on immigrant communities have provoked fear and how they have chosen to make sense of them. The paper concludes by drawing connections across the three voices and how they are generating a *tejido* of change through their work with students.

**Keywords:** counselor, higher education, minoritized communities, liaisons

The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth a heightened focus on the need for more counselors in educational settings to support student social emotional needs and retain them in our schools and colleges. At the turn of the new administration, the blatant attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion, and access surfaced questions about how and what we are funding in our schools and colleges. Suddenly, our politicians began to assess who works where and why. During times of budgetary crisis, counselors are often deemed expendable despite them being the tejidos (webs of endurance and liaisons) between instructional professionals and administrations. Counselors across K-16 guide students to make sense of the negative experiences during classroom conversations, the feelings of not belonging, and the opportunities that exist for them to prosper. Counselors in higher education work behind the scenes to increase student retention and graduation (Tovar, 2015) and remind students that they are exactly where they belong. Still, the counselor's role and value are often misunderstood. Hence, as much as we say we need more counselors and frequently ask them to implement and explain policies and happenings to students, we are also quick to forget how much we truly need them in our institutions. Counselors in K-16 are more than another person you employ; they are the glue that holds spaces of learning together and provide the support our students need during times of angst, uncertainty, loneliness, and celebration. This

paper includes three reflections, one from a counselor educator and two from her counseling students who are counselors in higher education settings. All three underscore the impact of their identity as Latina counselors and how their experiences make their work personal. All three have also become each other's comadres in this work!

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### **Counselor Educator: Counselors as Webs of Care**

*Dr. Margarita Landeros*

Being a counselor of color, Latina, specifically, during this political climate also means having to defend our own belonging and merit in the roles we occupy in schools while still being strong enough for our students to serve as a source of endurance for them. The attacks on education are not just attacks on my students, they are attacks on my own identity as a person and as a professional. As a first-generation college graduate Latina counselor educator, I am preparing graduate students to do the very work I do with them. In this work, I focus on how they will use their own experiences and identity to be a source of strength (Brown et al., 2020), hope and support to their own students. I offer not only my own reflection but also reflections of two current Latina counselors about their own experiences as professionals in higher education in

urban settings with Hispanic Serving Institution designations. These counselors are charged with keeping it all together because this is the calling of our profession: to serve our students and empower them when everything else feels like it is against them. Students in higher education rely on faculty who look like them and validate their experiences (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020), as they guide them through their journey in higher education. They need interactions of care and connection that directly and indirectly support their retention and success in higher education (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020); and this is the role of counselors in higher education. I am experiencing the very literature my students and I read about. Together, we are all working to change the outcomes for students like us and show the impact and power of educational counselors. The comadismo my students and I share serves as our tejidos of solidarity in a service-oriented profession. My counseling students' reflections that follow are a testament to students shaping the future, today, and counselors being a symbol of webs of endurance in educational settings.

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### **Counselor Reflection 1: I Choose to Show Up as a Counselor**

*Karla Celene Martinez Treviño*

“y en la calle codo a codo  
somos mucho más que dos”.  
(Benedetti, 1997, p. 43)

In 2021, a year after we were globally forced to stay at home, that period of introspection helped me recognize that after several years of working in student services at a four-year higher education institution, I was ready to do more. Being of service to students and those around me was not just a job, it became a calling that I was committed to carry out responsibly. As shared by Nuñez (2023), being an educator sometimes includes negotiating your beliefs and “protecting [your] livelihood.” Today, as a new college counselor, I tap into the counseling skills I have learned to make sense of the current political climate while responding to its impact upon my students and me.

As minoritized communities are increasingly targeted, I choose not to let anger be the response, but rather the fuel that drives me to use counseling as a practice of love. Reflecting on the intersecting identities that feel threatened, I hold space for myself to digest my feelings as a Latina woman, an immigrant, an adoptee, and a lesbian. I, myself, am a symbol of resistance during this political climate. My students being in a space that was not built for them, which is the reality of higher education, is a form of resistance and an affirmation of what is possible when we develop a new social fabric of access in higher education. Every fiber is touched, so I choose to show up for my communities as a counselor, drawing strength from the stories of resiliency that live within us. From counseling students on their academic success to being an

Equipped with the counseling skills and professional values that I have learned, as well as guided by a moral inner compass, I aim to be a safe space for students to unpack their concerns and engage in meaningful dialogue during difficult conversations. In a polarized political climate, I choose to resist rhetoric rooted in antagonism. By holding myself accountable to practice self-awareness and by committing to being a responsible member of the counseling field, I choose to build others up by standing with my colleagues and empowering our communities. I do this by offering solace through dialogue, fostering retention, and nurturing resilience among students.

Inspired by the voices of social justice movements led by diverse communities, I strive to engage in meaningful action as a college counselor. As we grapple with a shifting reality that defies us daily, I remain committed to finding my place and my voice as a college counselor in higher education, so I can help students reach their academic goals. I also look forward to joining my colleagues in supporting students with ease and care as they navigate their educational journeys, while also championing degree attainment during these times of uncertainty.

My recent experience paving a professional path reminded me of the transformative power of education, and why it is worth fighting for. This fight is for students, their families, and

our communities at large. As immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities continue to be threatened with erasure, ocean names may change, but the power of unity and the knowledge that education provides cannot be divested.

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### **Counselor Reflection 2: Creating Visual Representations of Alliance as a Counselor**

*Janet Garcia*

As a first-generation Latina professional and daughter of immigrant parents, my work is shaped by resilience and systemic inequities. My career in education began supporting high school students in Title 1 schools and now I serve in higher education settings by working with community college students with diverse backgrounds. The students I work with are navigating the complexities of financial hardships, educational needs, and pressure of being successful in a system designed to marginalize many communities.

My personal and professional experiences have strengthened my commitment to building webs of endurance in radical empathy, care, and advocacy for communities I serve. Based on Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) definition of radical empathy, it is the active practice of listening with humility, educating myself beyond awareness and seeking to understand other's realities

that anchor my practice. What this looks like is being fully present by slowing down and listening when students share their narratives.

One student story that remains with me is supporting an undocumented student who was informed by their lawyer that their pathway to citizenship was unlikely. While devastated, the student was determined to continue in their studies while creating a class schedule that best fits them to care for their younger siblings. My role in that moment was not to paint over their story with silver linings, but ensuring them I would be present, acknowledging the weight they carried and honoring their experience. Radical empathy meant recognizing and accepting the truth of their reality and letting the truth fuel my dedication to advocate with heart. The experience has served as a reminder that my presence grounded in trust, humility, and deep listening can be empowering and impactful intervention.

Witnessing the attacks on civil rights, education, and dehumanization of underserved communities, I am flooded with anxiety and fear for the safety and well-being of my family, students, peers, and communities. My mind immediately focuses on actions that are within my grasp, from informing myself on how to navigate conversations with ICE, laws, and policies that provide protection, gaining insights from experts in the field through social media, and checking in with family and peers.

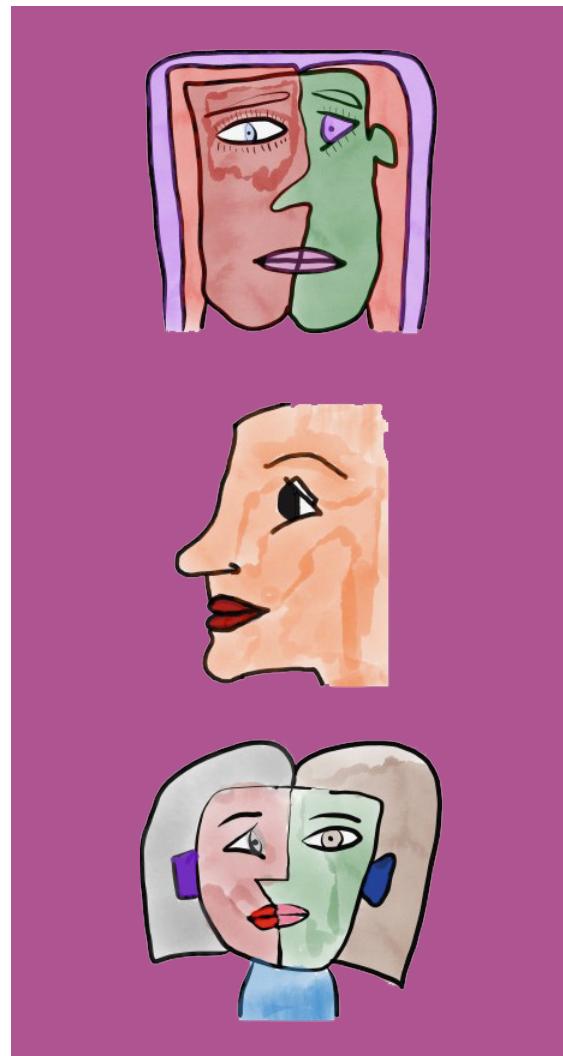
At my worksites, I focus on creating visual representations of alliances that promote community, belonging, and emotional safety for students. For example, ensuring to have plenty of Red Cards, a resource that informs students of their rights when interacting with immigration enforcement, visible and available in the office. I also maintain a dedicated resource board tailored to first-generation, undocumented, and LGBTQ+ students with information and affirmations. While the efforts can be glossed over, the visual support sends an empowering message to students: You are seen, belong, and are supported here. By creating the visual representation of an alliance, I hope to foster trust and safety the moment students walk into academic spaces.

However, as I had to purge and cling on for the safety of what I can control, I began to look inward to assess my feelings and thoughts about the turn of events and how I am showing up in my workplaces, personal life, and for myself. My personal web of endurance is constructed daily with care. It's grounded in self-awareness and reflection. I create this web of endurance through a journal where I can honor my own emotional responses, and through physical movement to help connect with my body. Additionally, connecting with trusted peers and mentors who have fostered a safe space to process and feel understood without judgement has been critical to my well-being. Connecting with trusted individuals serves as a reminder I am not isolated in

### Webs the Bind Us as Counselors

Aligned to Brown's (2020) call for first-generation faculty and counselors to use their experiences and serve as role models for their students, this counselor educator and two counselors share with us how they use their own identity to encourage their students. Counseling requires self-awareness so that counselors can be responsible members in the profession, create action, and serve as champions for students without imposing their own perspectives. Still, this does not mean that counselors cannot stand up for their beliefs and advocate for their students to earn their degree and create this same cycle of hope for others in their communities. As Martinez shared in her reflection, *I Choose to Show Up as a Counselor*, counselors have their own stories and values that they bring into their work, and this cannot be disentangled from the service they provide to others. Similarly, Garcia highlighted in her reflection, *Creating Visual Representations of Alliance as a Counselor*, that it is our personal and professional experiences that serve as our tejido of endurance so that we can be fully present to support our students. When our students and communities are under attack, we are there to be active listeners and honor their experiences. While students are not in the classroom, counselors provide another space for learning, reflecting, planning, and connecting. This is the power of education. We are more than educators; we are connectors, resources,

and sources of care for our students. In partnership with our colleagues, one another, and our students, we are creating a new tejido for social change in education. Our students are evidence that when we resist the attacks on our communities, choose to reclaim spaces not made for us, we can create a new generational fabric for our communities. This is the purpose of counselors in higher education - we are webs of endurance for our students and their communities!



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