

EMPIRICAL STUDY

The Community College Presidency Demystified: Creating a Pipeline of Latino Leaders

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Abstract

Community colleges are designed to serve populations largely drawn from a local base. In an increasing number of cases, the student populations are diverse, while both the administration and faculty, particularly in positions of leadership, are overwhelmingly white. Because of changing demographics, many community colleges serve predominantly Latino communities. The present article describes the impact of a national culturally tailored leadership development program for Latino administrators in community colleges. Using data from extensive, semi-structured interviews, this qualitative research study demonstrates that participants in the leadership fellows program found their experience empowering and transformational. Research findings indicate that as a direct result of their participation in a culturally relevant leadership program, participants felt increased confidence and sought out executive community college leadership positions. Additionally, participants benefitted from a national network of peers and mentors.

Keywords: community college, community college leadership, Latino leadership, leadership development program, culturally relevant leadership program

The Community College Presidency Demystified: Creating a Pipeline of Latino Leaders in the United States

In the last few decades, Latinos in the United States have made substantial gains in college enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the Latino high school dropout rate fell from 21% in 2006 to 8% in 2017 (2019). However, Latinos still fall far behind other groups in obtaining a four-year degree (Field, 2018). A contributing factor is that 52% of undergraduate Latinos are enrolled in community colleges, disproportionately the highest compared to any other race or ethnicity (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). As implied by their name, community colleges are meant to serve the very communities in which they are situated. However, the staff, faculty and leadership of community colleges do not reflect the ethnicity of growing Latino student populations. According to national data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), nearly 75 percent of faculty, 73 percent of management staff and 63 percent of student services in community colleges are white, while less than 50 percent of the students are white (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018).

Research tells us that a crisis in Latino leadership exists at the community college level (Gutierrez et al., 2002). As of 2017, less than 4% of community college presidents identified as Latino (Watson, 2017). This deficit of Latino leadership is telling. George R. Boggs, the former President and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) cautions that institutions of higher education are not serious in their diversity recruitment efforts and that criteria should shift from the “most qualified candidate” to “the candidate who best meets the needs of the institution” (Boggs, 2020). Having diverse leaders in these institutions empowers students, provides mentors and role models and increases student academic success and engagement. To effectively address the disparities of Latino student achievement, outcomes and transfer rates of diverse students, diverse leadership is required (Hernandez, 2013; León & Nevarez, 2007). Diverse leadership is key to being responsive to the needs of students of color at community colleges.

Studies on higher education leadership inform us that systemic racism contributes to the scarcity of Latino role models and mentors. As a result, Latinos in education settings rely on resourcefulness to reach positions of executive leadership (Gómez de Torres, 2018; Mendez-Morse et al., 2015; Santiago, 1996). More research is warranted on how to develop and promote Latinos for community college executive leadership. While there is a burgeoning interest in the field of Latino leadership (Rodriguez & Tapia, 2017; Bordas, 2013, 2001), the inquiry into culturally-tailored leadership programs is an understudied area. The literature on culturally relevant leadership learning is also scarce and mostly limited to student populations (Guthrie et al., 2013, Bertrand Jones et al., 2016).

Identity is central to how individuals see themselves and how they behave, particularly as leaders. Leadership development programs help promote the development of a leader identity. For underrepresented groups, it is important that these programs incorporate culturally relevant and identity-based leadership development content (Day, Zaccharo & Halpin, 2003). One such program was established by the National Community College Hispanic Council (NCCHC), a national organization established in 1985, under the auspices of the AACC to address Latino leadership disparities in community colleges across the United States. The NCCHC Leadership Fellows Program was first created and offered from 1990–95. The current program was launched in 2002 and has been offered through 2019. As of 2020, more than 250 Latino community college administrators have completed the program. NCCHC provides focused training and mentoring specific to the community college environment and includes opportunities for participants to collaborate with nationally recognized Latino experts who serve as mentors with the goal to cultivate a leadership pathway to the community college presidency or CEO level for each participant.

The NCCHC Leadership Fellows Program is currently affiliated with San Diego State University (SDSU). The yearly program consists of two three-day sessions (typically June and September). The culturally-tailored training program also features a year-long intentional mentorship, professional career plan preparation, detailed assessment of leadership skills and continued communication with NCCHC leaders and fellows. The program learning outcomes for the participants, or fellows, are as follows:

- Understand leadership competencies required of aspiring leaders
- Understand the issues facing Latino students in community colleges
- Understand the role of critical race theory, cultural competence, equity and diversity, related to Latino leadership
- Understand the challenges and opportunities related to student success
- Understand institutional change requirements and related change management
- Identify leadership capabilities, professional development needs, and develop a plan to achieve desired career goals

The curriculum features training in organizational strategy, institutional effectiveness, collaboration, student equity and success, community development, communication, board/CEO relations, strategic planning, culture, diversity and inclusion, finances and facilities, change process and professionalism. The program is also aligned with AACCC's established Competencies for Community College Leaders (NCCHC, 2020).

Most importantly, the program is designed, facilitated, and staffed by Latinos for Latinos. The program is culturally responsive and tailored to meet the specific needs of aspiring Latina(o) leaders. The program features seasoned Latina(o) community college leaders and guest speakers, some of whom have come from previous cohorts of fellows and are now presidents or in C-suite roles in their community colleges. The culturally-relevant content, coupled with Latino role models, facilitators and fellow participants create an affirming environment that motivates and facilitates growth and development. The fellows are also intentionally paired up with a Latino mentor over the course of the year. These mentors play a pivotal role in guiding the fellows through their leadership pathways.

Intentional mentoring is a critical component of the NCCHC Leadership Fellows Program. A typical NCCHC fellow's mentor is a Latina(o) community college president, vice-president, or a dean who has earned a doctorate degree. Many of the mentors are program alumni. They are recruited to share their experiences in their pursuit of their positions via a Latino lens. This process leads to a culturally tailored mentorship program in which the successes of the mentors become models for their mentees.

The mentors are matched with fellows based on their positions—presidents mentor vice-presidents, vice-presidents mentor deans. Their commitment is to mentor a fellow for one-year and they sign an agreement that calls for them to meet monthly. The fellows complete an assessment that results in the identification of leadership areas that need improvement. If the mentee has not received a doctorate, the mentor will coach them in that direction. Many continue their professional relationship with their mentors beyond their one-year mentorship. This culturally-tailored mentorship shares the experiences and strategies for the success of Latina(o) professionals and ensures that the fellows feel empowered, confident, and ready for the pursuit of their next rung on the ladder.

Today, there are fourteen former NCCHC participants among the 62 Latino community college presidents nationwide. In a recent 36-month period, 85 former fellows have received promotions: 5 vice-chancellors, 3 provosts/vice-presidents, 22 vice-presidents, 24 deans, and 17 directors in 21 states. A total of 107 multiple-known promotions have been achieved by this group. Additionally, the NCCHC Leadership Fellows Program was named a finalist in the 2018 "Examples of Excelencia" showcase (NCCHC, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

Using qualitative methodology, the purpose of this research study was to explore the effectiveness and impact of participating in the National Community College Hispanic Council national leadership fellows program for Latino community college administrators. The research study consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. The overall aim of the study was to understand in what ways the program supported the leadership development of the participants.

Methods

To gauge what impact the culturally-tailored leadership program had on Latino participants, understand what it meant to them, and how it affected them, it was necessary to ask questions, find out about their experiences and hear their stories (Patton, 2014). Quantitative methods would not have been able to capture the richness and depth of a participant's experience in a culturally relevant leadership program. Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher observed the entirety of the 2018 in-person leadership sessions to understand the essence of the participants' shared experience. In-depth interviews were also carried out to hear the participant's account of their experience of the program.

Participant Selection

There were approximately 250 potential interview candidates from a pool of past participants. Interviews were requested via e-mail in early 2019 to all the 25 fellows of the 2018 cohort. Twelve respondents self-selected to participate in the research study and were interviewed. Initially, the researcher planned to interview a selection of candidates from five cohorts. After the first 12 interviews were completed with 2018 fellows, it was concluded that thematic saturation had been reached and the decision was made not to interview fellows from previous cohorts. Short of minor modifications, the NCCHC program structure and content had remained consistent since 2013.

In the selection of participants, consideration was also given to provide maximum variation among potential demographic characteristics from the population. For the purpose of this study, the researcher was seeking out a variation of characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, geographic location and level of education. It was also key to have diverse representation in terms of the positions the participants held at their respective community college, both from the perspective leadership level and department.

Maximum variation is a sampling strategy in qualitative research that allows for diverse viewpoints and greater transferability (Merriam, 2016). Table 1 denotes the demographics of the study participants. Seven participants were men and 5 were women. Five had doctoral degrees, 3 were in different stages of completing a doctoral degree, and 4 had a master's degree. Four participants were from California, 3 from Arizona, 2 from Texas and 1 from Florida, New York and Washington, respectively. Of the twelve participants, 10 were Mexican-American and 2 from other Hispanic ethnicities.

Table 1

Participant Demographics, 2018 NCCHC Cohort (n=12)

Gender	Totals
Female	5
Male	7
	12

Education (highest level completed)	Totals
Doctoral degree completed	5
Doctoral degree in progress	3
Master's Degree	4
	12

Geographic location	Totals
Arizona	3
California	4
Florida	1
New York	1
Texas	2
Washington	1
	12

Data Collection

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews via videoconference or telephone calls. A pre-determined set of interview questions were developed in advance. The interview questions, which served as a guide, focused on the respondents' experience of the program and how the NCCHC affected their professional and personal lives. The interview guide questions were designed to stimulate the participant's perceptions and opinions about the program's impact, relevance and applicability. All the remaining questions were open-ended to allow the interviewees to express what they had to say and take what direction they felt was needed (Patton, 2014).

The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were digitally recorded with the permission of participants. Survey results from the 2018 program evaluations were reviewed to gain another perspective and validate and triangulate data received directly from the interviews. Demographic data, including resumes and educational attainment, was collected by NCCHC during the application process. This information was also made available for the research study.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed multiple times to search through the text for recurring words and themes. Patterns and themes emerged in short order from this inductive content analysis. Content analysis, according to Patton "is used to refer to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2014). The interview data were organized and analyzed around the questions. Responses from the participants were compared and grouped into themes. As themes emerged, the researcher reviewed all transcripts to compare and verify patterns from the data.

Limitations

There are limitations inherent to conducting research of any type. Generalizability is a limitation common to qualitative research. The study only interviewed participants of one leadership program for Latino community college administrators. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to all culturally tailored leadership programs or all community college leadership programs. Also consistent with other qualitative studies, the relatively small sample size (n=12) can be considered a limitation to the generalizability of the study. Another potential limitation of the study was the decision to exclusively interview participants from the 2018 cohort. Integrating the experiences of participants from other cohorts might have supported or contradicted the findings.

Findings

Based on interview data with select participants from the 2018 cohort of the NCCHC Leadership Fellows Program, five key findings emerged from the data. First, participants emerged out of the program with a different mindset, feeling more confident and empowered. Second, the curriculum and guest speakers (Latino community college presidents and executives) of the NCCHC Fellows program demystified the role of the presidency for participants. Third, one of the most valued components of the fellowship is the newfound familia or national network of peers the participants formed. Fourth, the program granted the opportunity for participants to reaffirm or reconnect to their Latino identity. Lastly, the program inspired the participants to serve their community.

A Transformative Experience: Emerging Empowered and Confident

The fact that I still have much more to contribute, the fact that I'm just as ready and prepared as everybody else, I have the experience, I have the credentials, I have the track record. Now, I even have the confidence. (Participant 5)

The majority of the study participants described their experience in the program as “transformative”, “life-changing” or even “magical”. Many of them experienced what they described as a shift in mindset. Without prompt, many expressed losing their self-doubt. Participant 6 described it in this manner:

I notice I've been saying, “You know what? I am the right person for the job...At this particular time in the history of the college and what I have going on in my life and what I want to see happen for the institution and for the students, I am the right person. That's more what I'm telling myself and believing. The self-doubt is getting replaced with, “No, you're in the right seat on this bus and you need to stay with it!

Moreover, participants described feeling a boost of confidence that led to direct changes in their professional trajectory. Within weeks of attending the first in-person summer seminar, a number of the study participants sought out higher positions and four were promoted within an approximately six-month period. Of the 25 participants in the 2018 cohort, a total of 10 were promoted during that same six-month timeframe, four of whom participated in the study. Table 2 summarizes the promotions.

Table 2

4 Study Participant Promotions (Fall 2018 - Spring 2019)

Initial Position:	Promoted To:
Vice President	President
Dean	Vice President
Director	Vice President
Director	Dean

Participants were asked about the timing of the programs in their professional lives. The majority expressed that their involvement in the program was “perfect” timing. In order to be admitted into the NCCHC Leadership Fellows Program, participants have to apply to the program in a competitive process. This demonstrates that participants exhibited motivation to lead, an important aspect of a leader identity that is associated with a tendency to lead and of viewing oneself as a leader (Waldman et al, 2012). Their participation in the NCCHC Fellows program further crystallized the participants’ leader identity or their perception of themselves as a leader, as evidenced by their seeking out new leadership positions.

The Community College Presidency Demystified

They made it seem doable, and I wouldn’t have thought that I would come into it thinking, ‘Oh, you know, yes, maybe I’ll be a college president someday.’ (Participant 6)

The participants were particularly impacted by Latino community college presidents and executive leaders who were invited to speak about their personal leadership journeys. Many of these guest speakers shared stories of their humble beginnings and how best to approach the community college presidency as Latinos. In higher education, Latino leaders, role models, and mentors are scarce. In essence, these speakers demystified the role of the community college presidency.

Participant 1 articulated the demystification as such:

Being introduced to people who are obviously in high-level leadership positions and their willingness to share their experiences, their knowledge, their wisdom and giving that open door. It demystified everything. It gives you a much clearer picture of how to get to where you want to be, where you want to go, how to reach your goals...if I believe that this guy could do it, why can’t I believe that I could do it? I believe that she could do it, why can’t I do it? And then people say, “No, you can’t.” So it’s just reassurance that you get with people that are along the same path with you. You’re not alone. There’s a trail that has been set already.

Because participants saw themselves reflected in the guest speakers, this served as an invitation for participants to bring their authentic, whole (Latino) selves to their leadership roles. Participant 6 speaks to this:

I want to use them as models. I know you have to be yourself, be unique, be who you are, and I think they gave us that advice too. You can’t turn yourself into something you’re not, but you can learn from everyone and try to adopt certain characteristics, certain qualities when you are doing this kind of work. I think just being genuine

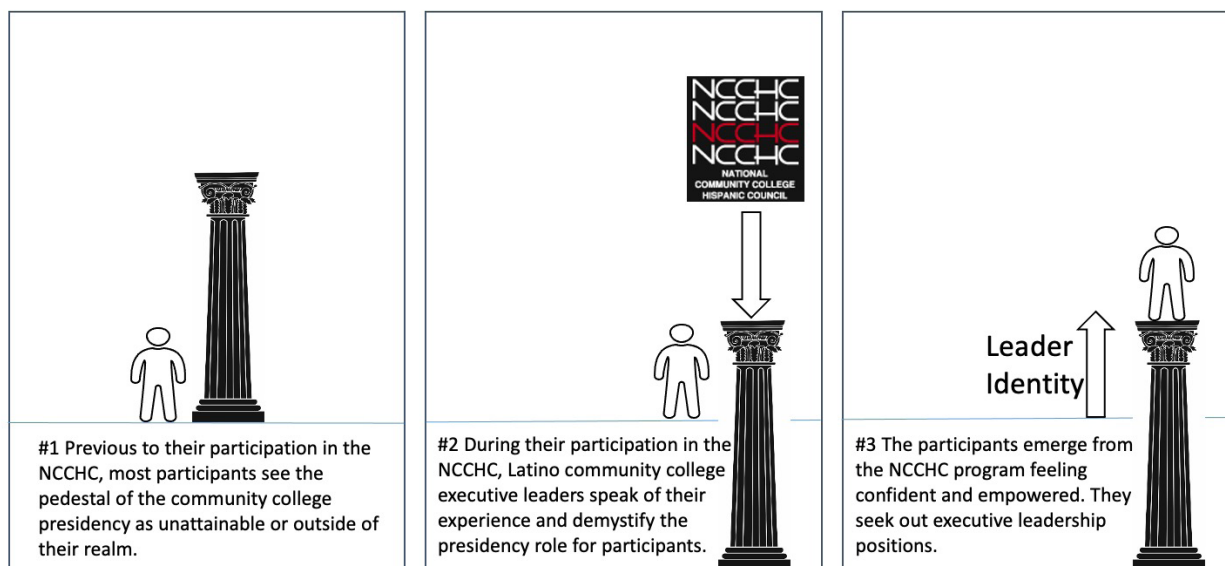
and being authentic, being caring, student-centered are all really key things that I learned from the group that helped train us.

Participant 7 shared how the representation of Latino guest speakers made the “pedestal” of executive leadership more attainable:

I know we talk about how important it is to have representation for students to see themselves at the front of the room. But I forget that even though we’ve supposedly made it, it’s so valuable for us to see that too. It takes the pedestal down a little bit...I mean, there are definitely pedestal positions, but it brought me up to the pedestal a little.

The combination of participants feeling more confident and empowered, paired with being in the company of numerous Latino community college presidents who humanized the role was powerful for participants. For the first time, many of the participants were able to visualize themselves as future community college presidents. Most study participants did not walk in aspiring to a community college presidency. However, most study participants did emerge from the program with that goal in mind. Figure 1 represents the formation of a leader identity that occurs during the program.

Figure 1 Demystifying the Pedestal of the Community College Presidency



It is noteworthy that all the female respondents expressed more self-doubt entering the program and less self-disclosed confidence post-program compared to their male peers. Further research is warranted to examine and understand the complexity of the gendered experience of leadership development for Latinas. Existing studies indicate that Latinas grapple with cultural expectations and gender norms as they make meaning of their leadership development (Onorato & Musoba, 2015; Sanchez de Valencia, 2008).

A New Familia: A National Network of Peers

A strength of the program is bringing people together, creating that network, and that to me was the most memorable of everything. The program hands you a key. It opens doors for you around the country. (Participant #1)

Being around other Latino fellows, facilitators and program staff also had a profound effect on participants. They felt an immediate sense of understanding, community, and belonging typically lacking in other professional environments. Participants felt an instant camaraderie. Some likened their cohort to “family.” Moreover, there was a genuine feeling of connectedness and shared experiences among the participants that allowed this connection to deepen almost instantly. Latino culture is predicated upon collective values such as family, a simpático (easy to get along with) demeanor, generosity, respect, honesty, hard work and service to others (Bordas, 2013) which served as the foundation of their interactions. Participant 2 mentioned:

It’s about building a family. It’s a family. I don’t feel like I just built a network, I feel like I walked away with a whole family of people that I can call for whatever. It’s different.

Beyond the comfort of being around Latino peers, the network persists after the in-person component of the program. Tangible benefits identified by the participants included sharing job postings with each other, accessing each other’s networks, and seeking out advice regarding best practices on a variety of community college-related topics. The network also serves as a virtual support system. Participant 9 expressed the following:

We’re rooting for each other to continue to be successful because when we are successful, we’re going to contribute to building a stronger system of colleges for Latino students to thrive. And being able to multiply that throughout the country because all of us are from different parts of the country. The networking was amazing.

These peer networks organically recreate themselves every year with each new cohort. The NCCHC also invites previous alumni to an annual symposium where each fellow is able to expand their network. The program also sponsors an active, ongoing social network group for all fellows to communicate and stay connected. In this way, the program has a built-in expanding network with dual functions. The network provides culturally specific camaraderie, together with peer connections that support each other through the sharing of information, best practices and resources.

Reaffirmed or Reconnected to their Latino Identity

I think the biggest thing for me was talking about our culture and talking about how our culture affects ourselves, not just personally, but professionally, and relating that to each other. I think being in a room with a group of people that know where you came from or have similar cultural experiences or have those kinds of similar things – it’s really transformational. (Participant #2)

Experiencing the in-person session reaffirmed the participants’ Latino identities. For those participants comfortable with their Latinidad, or Latino identity, they felt relaxed and free to be their genuine selves. In 2016, a study by the Center for Talent Innovation found that 76% of Latinos did not feel they could be their authentic selves at work (Hewlett et al., 2016). Three-quarters of Latinos feel the need to downplay their personas and modify their appearance and leadership style. Thus, identity and culture influence how Latinos present themselves and behave in professional settings. Participant #3 conveyed this phenomenon as follows:

It felt like I could be myself in the room versus traditional leadership programs that are non-affinity and you know, you have to act white or whatever you gotta do in those programs. I wanted to embrace a curriculum that was more centered around who I am... I could be more relaxed and be myself and talk about things from my life. I don't even do that at work as much.

For other participants, the experience allowed them to reconnect or reclaim their Latino identity. Latinos in the United States are not a homogenous group. They have varying degrees of acculturation and assimilation, Spanish-language fluency, and immigration status. These factors all have a bearing on how they experience and navigate personal, academic, and professional settings. In this study, participants who were of mixed race also found a safe environment where they felt understood and accepted. Participant 2 summed up their experience as follows:

For somebody who comes from a mixed family, I have always asked myself, 'Am I Hispanic enough?' Being in a room with people that I can have that shared experience with and then also relate to on that level was so much more than anything that could have been put in a brochure... Up until probably I was a teenager, I didn't feel like I was Hispanic. I was just a white person. I gradually accepted that part of myself, but this really reconnected that to who I am as a person. It's because I've gone through this great experience and now I feel more not just culturally fulfilled, but professionally fulfilled too.

Research on the relevance of leadership development programs for minority groups, while limited, suggests that it is vital to consider social identity in leader development for underrepresented subgroups in dominant cultures (Day, 2004). In this circumstance, the NCCHC fellows program provides what developmental psychologist Kegan (1982) denominated "holding environments" or settings of support that provide people with psychological safety in order to grow and develop.

Agents of Change Inspired to Serve their Community

I think that's one thing that you leave there empowered, wanting to contribute also...to help. You know, how can I do my part now? Like, there's all these people trying to help me, what can I do now to help others... and you're like, 'Okay, how can I serve now? You know, what can I do?' (Participant 1)

Inspired by the program, participants returned to their communities motivated to make a difference in their community and particularly in the lives of Latino students. They felt a renewed sense of responsibility to "pay it forward" and be "change agents" or "change leaders" in their own community college settings. One participant mentioned "I came back charged!" Another (Participant 5) said:

As Latinos, we understand that we are change agents, but we have to do it within the mainstream environments. So we have to really be fierce and resilient in our leadership approach. I think that for all of us, if we're serious about what we do in higher ed, engaging more Latinos into higher ed, it has to be transformative, and we have to have the courage to take on those transformational pieces. Otherwise, it's status quo and it's never going to change.

According to the research on Latinos in educational leadership, Latinos aspire to pursue leadership in social justice to support to their community (Hernandez et al, 2014; Martinez et al, 2016; Mendez-Morse, 2000; Peterson & Vergara, 2016). As they reach positions of leadership, Latinos also recognize their own significance as role models and stewards of their community (Bordas, 2001). As the program processes through the curriculum, parallel processes evolve

from the participant's interactions with Latino speakers and program staff, and the participants' desire to mirror that for their own community college students.

Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that culturally-tailored leadership programs can provide a meaningful, effective and much-needed solution to address disparities in representation in higher education. As student demographics become even more diverse at community colleges, it is important to consider first-rate, culturally relevant leadership development programs to diversify their administrative leadership. Culturally-tailored leadership programs, such as the NCCCHC fellows program, require thoughtful consideration, quality curriculum, as well as trainers and speakers.

Furthermore, it is powerful and transformative for Latinos (and other minority groups in general) to experience critical mass in an environment that is strictly intended to develop leaders, a rare occurrence for Latinos or people of color. Additional research to examine how best to develop emerging Latino leaders in community colleges and higher education is warranted.

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