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Involvement in Greek Life for Latinx Students Pursuing Higher Education: Does Involvement Equal Persistence?

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Abstract

Cultural mismatch theory predicts that a mismatch between the independent values of a higher education institution and the interdependent values of an underrepresented student may pose significant challenges for such students. This study examines the relationships between Greek membership, ethnic identity, perceptions of the university, persistence attitudes, and belonging. Latinx and multicultural-based fraternities and sororities are relatively small and may provide a sense of familismo for Latinx students, thus matching their culture and influencing factors of persistence. We expect that Latinx Greek members will show stronger positive relationships between ethnic identity, persistence, and belonging compared to non-Greek Latinx students.

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It is critical to understand the reasons why Latinx students are not performing to the same level as their white peers (achievement gap) with respect to persistence rates in college (Stephens et al., 2012) and to investigate the factors that can foster success in students. Additionally, factors relating to persistence such as sense of belonging, ethnic identity, and perceptions of higher education institutions have been studied and show that these factors impact student persistence. Specifically, students who have positive perceptions of the university environment and feel a sense of belonging are more likely to persist (Hausmann, et al., 2009; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015), and Latinx students who identify strongly with their cultural background may tend to be more sensitive to stereotypes about their ethnic group regarding their capability to be academically successful (Castillo et al., 2006). In addition to investigating the achievement gaps that Latinx students experience while pursuing higher education, it is also important to take a positive approach and identify the opportunities and features that promote the elements of persistence in these students.

Cultural mismatch theory predicts that students from working-class families will typically experience more difficulties than students from middle-class families in college because of the cultural mismatch between their interdependent cultural values and the independent values of the four-year institution (Stephens et al., 2012). The two fundamental principles of this theory are 1) that U.S. higher education institutions hold independent values while also excluding interdependent values seen in minority groups, and 2) that these institutions inhibit the success of minority students by maintaining this cultural barrier. Applying this theory provides an entryway into investigating different programs that may be beneficial for a four-year institution to adopt or increase support to reduce this gap.

A study by Stephens and colleagues (2012) demonstrates that a critical part of student persistence at the university is related to cultural mismatch theory. In one of these studies, first-year first-generation students from a private university were asked to read either a university welcoming letter that featured independent motives or a university letter that featured interdependent motives, then asked to complete as many anagrams as they could in 10 minutes. Results showed that first-generation students who read the interdependent university letter demonstrated more persistence by solving significantly more anagrams than the first-generation students who read the independent university letter, whose values conflicted with those of the university (Stephens et al., 2012). Persistence is an integral student success factor to study when it

comes to students from interdependent backgrounds.

In looking at factors that impact a student's persistence in college, Castillo et al. (2006) had Latino-identifying students from a predominantly white university complete a series of surveys regarding persistence attitudes/behaviors, ethnic identity, and their perceptions of the university environment. Results from this study suggest that for Latinx students, perceptions of the university environment mediate, or explain the underlying process of, the relationship between ethnic identity and persistence attitudes (Castillo et al., 2006). The current study aims to explore student persistence, ethnic identity, and student perceptions of the university.

A student's sense of belonging has also been shown to be an integral element related to student persistence such that students who feel a sense of belonging at their college or university are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of persistence (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Latino students who held negative perceptions of their university had a lower sense of belonging but had a higher sense of belonging if they were involved in racial-ethnic organizations. Typically, Latinx students come from interdependent families, or families where members value the relationships with others in the group and consider them before making important, personal decisions such as deciding between going away for college or staying home to help out the family (Hernandez et al., 2010). Therefore, it would be useful to look into Latinx student involvement in Latinx- and multicultural-based Greek fraternities and sororities, commonly referred to as brotherhoods and sisterhoods, as a way of increasing student persistence since these organizations are close-knit and are generally comprised of students from the same or from similar cultural backgrounds.

Latinx culture tends to revolve around familism, or interdependence, where emphasis is placed on the importance of family and depending on them as a support system to navigate different aspects of life by spending time with, providing support for, and seeking advice from family members (Schwartz et al., 2010). For individuals pursuing a higher education, their culture may influence how they establish themselves in the social relationships that they maintain at their institution (Rodriguez et al., 2003). For example, when looking at how collectivism, or interdependence, impacted students at a public university, Arevalo et al. (2016) found that Latino American college students were more likely than students from other ethnic backgrounds to endorse situations that involved helping others. This effect was true even if they weren't related to the individual/s involved, suggesting that Latinx college students

see their college experience through the lens of helping others (Arevalo et al., 2016). When it comes to Latinx student persistence at the university, the methods in which they develop such social relationships and the nature of these relationships, such as through clubs, Greek affiliation, or housing arrangements, may be crucial in understanding how they influence Latinx student persistence and the university level.

The United Sorority and Fraternity Council (USFC) at UCSB governs the Latino/a/x-based and multicultural-based fraternities and sororities. Based on the UCSB USFC Community Report from the spring quarter of 2019, these fraternities and sororities may range between 10 and 30 members (USFC Community Report). Given that these fraternities and sororities are relatively small in size, it would be wise to see whether USFC fraternities and sororities provide a helpful support system for Latinx students. Additionally, much of the literature on fraternities and sororities focuses on the negative aspects of involvement in such organizations such as drinking habits, academic dishonesty, and drug use. By highlighting the positive outcomes of involvement in Greek life for Latinx students, researchers can work toward examining what features lead to these positive outcomes, thereby leading universities to consider providing more support for Greek life. Further, if the data suggest that involvement in Greek life has positive impacts on Latinx students' persistence, then universities have a way that they can support marginalized students.

Latinx culture and values in the United States are primarily built upon collectivism, also known as interdependence (Rinderle & Montoya, 2008), meaning that members of these communities value the relationships they have with others in their group (Arevalo et al., 2016). Unfortunately, cultural mismatch theory predicts that members of these communities may encounter acculturation struggles, such as performing at the college level academically or understanding the norms of navigating the college atmosphere, compared to their white peers when they attend a higher education institution, which holds primarily independent values (Stephens et al., 2012). Further, previous research shows that Latinx students do not persist at the same levels as their white counterparts (Stephens et al., 2012). However, research suggests that perceptions of the university environment serve as a mediator, or as an explanation for the underlying process of the relationship between an individual's ethnic identity and their persistence attitudes (Castillo et al., 2006). This previous research has led us to hypothesize that Latinx student involvement in a cultural-based Greek fraternity or sorority will develop feelings of familism at school which will help them develop a sense of belonging, maintain their ethnic identity,

and engender positive perceptions of the university, thus leading to more persistence attitudes and behaviors, compared to Latinx students not involved in a sorority or fraternity.

Methods

Participants

The sample included a total of 88 participants who self-identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Participants were recruited from the University of California, Santa Barbara by convenience sampling. Participants in a Latino/a/x-based or multicultural-based fraternity or sorority were recruited via email and personal solicitation. Participants in the comparison group were recruited via subject pool in the Psychological and Brain Sciences department. Data from the participants indicated that 52.3% of the participants are not in a Greek fraternity or sorority and 47.7% of the participants are in a Greek fraternity or sorority. Participants in the fraternities and sororities were compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card and participants in the comparison group were compensated with research credit.

Materials/Measures

Persistence Voluntary Dropout Decisions Scale

The Persistence Voluntary Dropout Decisions Scale is a 29-item scale designed to assess an individual's persistence/dropout behavior using aspects of Tinto's model, which asserts that to persist, students need to integrate into formal and informal academic and social systems. Participants rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 5 indicates "strongly agree." Scores are calculated by summation; higher scores indicate that participants have higher persistence while lower scores indicate that they have lower persistence. Cronbach's alpha was determined to be .84, .83, .82, .74, and .71 for the scales of peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty, faculty concern for student development and teaching, academic and intellectual development, and institutional and goal commitments, respectively, which demonstrates good reliability (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

Cultural Congruity Scale

The Cultural Congruity Scale (CCS) is a 13-item scale designed to assess how an individual's culture fits in with that of the university environment. Participants rate how much they agree or disagree with each statement on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates "not at all" and 7 indicates "a great deal." Five of the items are reverse-scored. Scores are calculated by summation; higher scores indicate that more of a difference between the participants' culture and that of the university while lower scores indicate that

there is less of a difference between the participants' culture and that of the university. Cronbach's alpha was determined to be .89 (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996).

University Environment Scale

The University Environment Scale (UES) is a 14-item scale designed to assess participants' perceptions of the environment of the university they attend. Participants rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates "not at all" and 7 indicates "a great deal." Five of the items are reverse-scored. Scores are calculated by summation; higher scores indicate that the participant has a predominantly positive view of the university environment while lower scores indicate a predominantly negative view of the university environment. Cronbach's alpha was determined to be .84, establishing good reliability of the measure (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996).

Interdependent and Independent Items

The Interdependent and Independent Items survey is a 12-item scale designed to assess the participants' motives for attending university; half of the statements refer to independent motives and the other half refer to interdependent motives. For each statement, participants indicate whether each statement was a top reason for wanting to attend college with a "yes" or "no." Scores are calculated by summing the number of interdependent and independent motives separately. Chi-square tests determined this measure to be significant when comparing first-generation and continuing-generation students on the number of interdependent items ($p < .001$) and independent items ($p < .05$) they had selected (Stephens et al., 2012).

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) is a 12-item measure designed to assess participants' strength of their ethnic identity. Additionally, participants are asked to indicate the ethnic group with which they identify and that of their parents. Participants rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 4 indicates "strongly agree." Scores are calculated by summation and can range from 12 to 48. Higher scores indicate that the participant has a strong ethnic identity while lower scores indicate a weaker ethnic identity. Cronbach's alpha was determined to be .85 (Roberts et al., 1999).

Sense of Belonging Questions

The sense of belonging questions includes four questions regarding the campus community (three Likert-scale, one open-ended) and 13 questions regarding how much the participant feels they

belong on campus on a Likert-scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates “not at all” and 7 indicates “a great deal.” These questions are a part of Stephens’ pilot study (Stephens et al., 2012).

Procedure

Participants gave electronic consent through the Qualtrics platform. Participants then completed a series of six surveys followed by a series of demographic questions. Participants were then debriefed and thanked for participating in the survey. Participants who were members of a Latinx-based or multicultural-based fraternity or sorority were compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card and participants in the subject pool were granted research credit.

Results

Using an independent sample t-test, the researcher examined if persistence, perceived university environment, cultural incongruence, motives for attending college, and ethnic identity differed between Hispanic/Latinx students involved in Greek life versus those not involved in Greek life. There was no significant difference between the groups in persistence scores [t (86) = .230, n.s., Figure 1]. However, there was a significant difference between the groups in perceived university environment [t (86) = -3.126, p = .002, Figure 2], ethnic identity [t (86) = 3.73, p = 0.000, Figure 3], interdependent motives for attending college [t (86) = 2.001, p = .049, Figure 4], and cultural incongruence [t (86) = 2.093, p = .039, Figure 5], such that those involved in Greek life scored lower for perceptions of the university environment and scored higher for ethnic identity, interdependent motives, and cultural incongruence compared to those not involved in Greek life.



Figure 1: Greeks vs. non-Greeks persistence

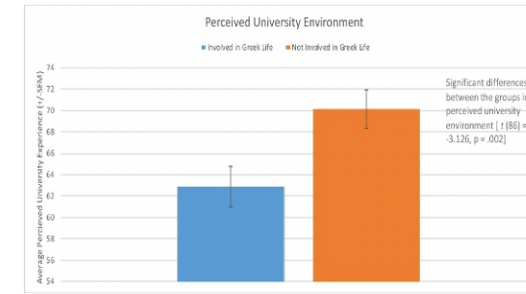


Figure 2: Greeks vs. non-Greeks perceptions of the university

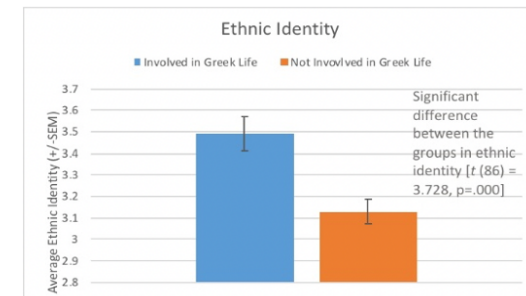


Figure 3: Greeks vs. non-Greeks ethnic identity

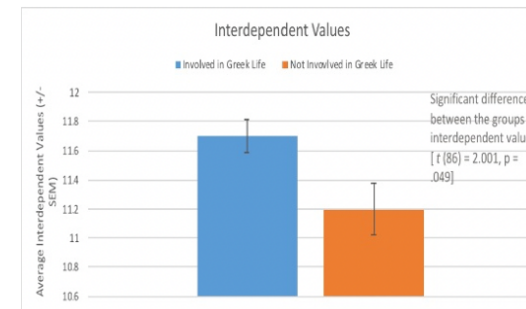


Figure 4: Greeks vs. non-Greeks motives



Figure 5: Greeks vs. non-Greeks cultural incongruence

This study also examined ethnic identity as a mediator for perceptions of the university environment on persistence. A mediation analysis was performed using SPSS. The outcome variable for analysis was persistence. The predictor variable for the analysis was perception of the university environment. The mediator variable for the analysis was ethnic identity. There was a partial mediation of the relationship between university environment and persistence by ethnic identity (Figure 6).

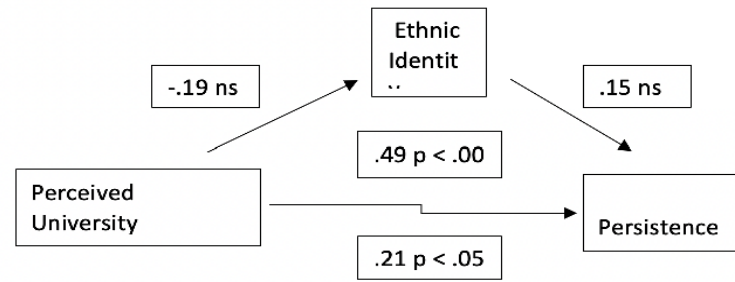


Figure 6: Mediation analysis

Discussion

Results suggest a partial mediation of strong ethnic identity on the relationship between perceived university environment and persistence. This differed from a previous study, which identified a mediation of perceived university environment on the relationship between ethnic identity and persistence (Castillo et al., 2006). We chose to run the mediation model with the assumption that a student's perceptions of the university would be influenced by their ethnic identity. Because ethnic identity relates to culture, and since cultural mismatch theory states that students who experience a cultural mismatch with the university are less likely to persist, it makes sense that a student's ties to their ethnic identity would explain the influence of perceptions of the university on persistence. However, future research should look into these factors as possible mediators, as we got a partial mediation effect that was different than the one found in the study by Castillo and colleagues (2016).

Results also showed that Hispanic/Latinx students who were involved in a Latinx-based or multicultural-based fraternity or sorority had a stronger ethnic identity, higher reports of interdependent motives for attending college, experienced more cultural incongruence with the university, and held predominantly negative perceptions of the university compared to those not involved in such fraternities or sororities. These results coincide with cultural mismatch theory such that participants reported interdependent

motives for college and experienced a cultural incongruence with the university, though much more so with the students involved in Greek life. It is notable that we did not find a significant difference in persistence in our sample, which does not support our original hypothesis.

Although there were significant differences between Latinx Greek vs. non-Greek students, we cannot make causal or directional claims from the data. It is possible that students who felt more cultural incongruence with the university are more likely to join a racial/ethnic Greek community, or it could be that the involvement in a racial/ethnic Greek community is leading to differences in cultural incongruence. The researchers think it is more likely the former, but it remains an empirical question whether this is the case.

Culture remains to be a significant element of Hispanic and Latino students' college experiences. While such students may look to Greek life for a feeling of home, being a member seems to strengthen their cultural identity, and our data suggest this may further widen the cultural mismatch with the institution. The fact that there were no differences in attitudes towards persistence seen in our sample suggests that even though Latinx students with Greek involvement showed differences in ethnic identity and perceptions of the university, these differences were not associated with persistence. It is curious that in our sample these factors did not affect students' attitudes towards persistence. This could be a form of resilience, developed out of necessity, for the Latinx students as they navigate a system where they feel a mismatch, but this mismatch does not change their attitude towards finishing college. Future research could explore this idea. The current research further emphasizes the need for the university to work toward developing a cultural climate that is representative of all of its students to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to be successful. This could include establishing more connections between faculty and academic resources and the cultural-based fraternities and sororities that allow students in these organization to develop a sense of belonging to the university and develop persistence from these additional relationships on campus.

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About the Author

Alyssa Villa is graduating transfer student with a Psychological and Brain Sciences major and Educational Studies minor. She developed an interest in research after taking Dr. Woods's PSY 98 class which subsequently led her to take her lab in advanced research methods, gain experience in research with her regarding transfer student college experiences, and received substantial help from her on the current study. She plans to take a gap year or two before going to graduate school where she hopes to gain a PhD in social psychology so that she can conduct her own research regarding underrepresented ethnic groups in academia.