The Experiences of the Latina and Latino Student Population at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor: Community Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Students at the University of Michigan School of Social Work conducted a survey of Latino and Latina students enrolled during Fall 2014. The focus was on campus climate for Latino/a students and their experiences on campus. Results from this survey provide information on the diversity of our Latino/a student community, the challenges they face, and their thoughts regarding resources. This report presents important information regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion issues for Latino and Latina students attending the University of Michigan.

THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINA/O STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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Research Objectives. In 2014, a group of Master's of Social Work students, along with faculty member Lorraine Gutiérrez, implemented a study of the experiences of Latina/o students at the University of Michigan. This study seeks to answer several key questions:

1. What is the Latina/o experience at the University of Michigan?
2. What are the needs of Latina/o students in order to reach graduation?
3. What are the barriers and the strengths of Latina/o students at the University of Michigan?

University of Michigan Demographics. As of fall, 2014, when this study was conducted, Hispanic Americans made up 4.2% of undergraduate students at University of Michigan. African Americans made up 4.1% of undergraduates, and White Americans made up 61.7% of undergraduates (University of Michigan, 2015, p. 7).

National Demographics. These minority student figures are strikingly low compared to national averages, where Hispanic Americans make up 15% of the U.S. population, and 12% of all students attending 4-year colleges (Hatch, 2015). Census data from 2010 leads analysts to project the Hispanic population will reach 80 million by 2015, and 100 million by 2045. Considering the largest age subset of Hispanic Americans is below the age of eighteen, the urgency of improving access and success in higher education is clear: this ever growing population of youth is being affected by educational policy today and is set to become a significant voice in public life and the economy tomorrow. The salience of these issues of representation, legitimacy, and service to the American population at large is not lost on the University of Michigan as it moves forward in its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative.

Research Background. According to a content analysis of previous qualitative research regarding Latina/o students' college experience, Latina/o students experience a number of significant barriers (Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014). Latina/o students face cultural barriers, marginalization, alienation, and microaggressions in higher education, especially when factoring variables such as their generation in the United States, generation attending college, and socioeconomic status (Bridges et al. 2007, Storlie et al. 2014). These factors are strongest early in Hispanic students' college careers, affecting dropout rates, which correlates with qualitative responses collected on our survey. Other factors to note are that higher self-reported critical thinking skills, attendance to ethnic/racial workshops and dialogs, progressive political views, and support of affirmative action correlate negatively with student satisfaction of campus diversity (Park, 2009). Universities located in small towns and cities were also found to correlate negatively with diversity satisfaction among Hispanic American students (Park, 2009).

Unlike African American students who face similar challenges at predominantly white institutions (PWI) but tend to thrive and excel at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), Hispanic students fare only slightly better academically and socially at Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs). This may be attributed to HSIs being relatively new in the higher education landscape compared to HBCUs: All HSIs were at one point PWIs, but changed in keeping with regional demographic shifts (Bridges et al., 2007).

Methodology. In order to investigate these research questions, a mixed-methods survey was developed, including both quantitative questions and open-ended prompts. Participants were selected using a convenience and purposeful sample design. Self-identified Latina/o students enrolled at the

University of Michigan in undergraduate and graduate degree programs were invited to participate in the survey. Although the University categorizes professional graduate degrees separately from academic graduate degrees in our instrument and, this study considered respondents from professional degree programs (MD, DDS, JD, PharmD and DNP) together under the umbrella term of "graduate students." Professional and academic degree-seekers were coded together because respondents did not differentiate themselves according to these categories in their responses.

Procedures. The survey instrument was designed on Qualtrics, and all data was obtained via electronic survey. Participants were recruited in several ways. The registrar's office sent the survey to all students who said that they were Hispanic/Latino on their admissions forms. Additionally, the survey was sent to various listservs utilized by Latino student organizations. Latino Studies faculty members were asked to send the survey to students in their classes as well. Dillman's Tailored Design Method for Survey research, which involves multiple reminders sent to potential participants, was used (Dillman, Smyth, Christian, 2008).

Survey Design: Quantitative. Closed-ended items inquired about demographic information, parent's ethnicity if one parent was not Hispanic or Latino, college attending generation, generations in the U.S., financial aid, living situation, expected graduation time, and whether the respondents had experienced one or more forms of discrimination from a list of discriminatory behaviors.

Survey Design: Qualitative. Six research assistants split into three teams coded responses to open-ended questions for themes. The open-ended items asked respondents to describe their experience with discrimination, how their experiences influence their attendance at the University, what Latino/a organizations they might belong to, resources they would like to see made available, and their positive experiences of being Latino at the University of Michigan.

Sample. Of the 283 surveys returned, 263 were used for analysis. This sample size is within a 6% margin of error with a 95% confidence level. Survey responses were excluded if they did not identify as an undergraduate, graduate, or professional student (Other, n=5 and no response, n=15), if the respondent did not identify as Hispanic/Latino origin, or if the majority of the data were missing.

Respondent Demographics

Potential within group differences were tested using t-tests and chi-square statistics. We found no statistically significant differences between graduate and undergraduate student populations in any of our variables, aside from financial aid received and family generation attending college. Testing differences between international and U.S. resident students, we also found no statistical significance across populations except international students' significantly lower reporting of micro-aggressions.

Undergraduate & Graduate Students. Undergraduates comprised 41% of the valid respondents (10.6% freshman, 12.2% sophomore, 8.4% junior, 9.5% senior) (n=107). Graduate students comprised 59% of the valid respondents (n=156).

Age. Students entered their ages on the survey, ranging from 17-53 years old. The median age for undergraduates was 20 and the median age for graduate students was 25.

Geography. The majority of respondents identified their permanent residence as located in Michigan (121 respondents), followed by California (26 respondents), Florida (20 respondents), and Illinois (17 respondents). It is notable that although 121 respondents identified Michigan as their permanent residence, only 82 respondents received in-state tuition. The reasons for this discrepancy are unclear.

Generations

Generation in the U.S. 29% of respondents were first generation Americans (born abroad and have become citizens or permanent residents), 44% are second generation, having at least one parent who was born abroad, and 17% reported being third generation with at least one U.S. born grandparent, 5% were third generation or higher, and 7% marked "Other".

College Generation. Out of a total 230 valid responses, half (n=115) of all respondents were first generation college students, and two thirds of these first generation students were graduate students (n=76). 26 percent of respondents were second-generation college students, and in this group graduate students outnumbered undergraduates by more than double (n=41 compared with n=19). Third generation and higher students amounted to 24% of total valid responses, and undergraduates outnumbered graduate students 37 to 18.

Qualitative Results

A number of open-ended questions were included in our survey to better understand individual experiences and voices of respondents. We present the qualitative codes and themes derived from our analysis of responses here mixed with examples of stories and experiences that best illustrate them. Chi-square tests revealed no statistical variation in responses across our demographic subsets (class status, college generation, age, gender, and international students) except one item in Question 25. International students were far less likely to report having experienced micro-aggressions specifically. All other types of discrimination demonstrated similar p-values below .05.

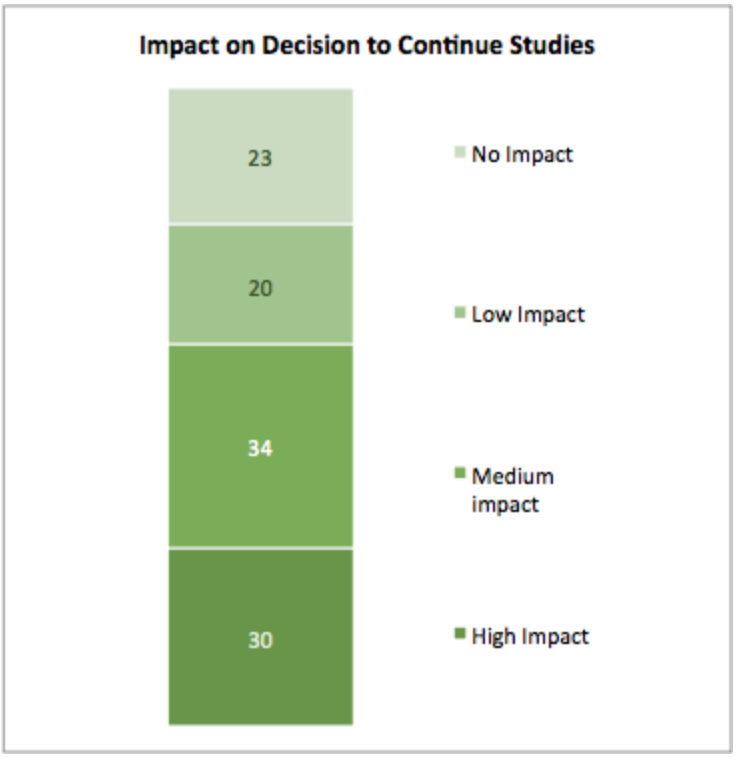
Q25: Please describe your experience/s (Discrimination, Racism, Oppression, Segregation, Exclusion, Micro-Aggression/s, Other) in the space below. 91 respondents provided responses to this question. Coding revealed that microaggressions (n=55) were the most common experience of students, followed by racism (n=35), isolation (n=27), and institutional racism (n=19). A complete list of codes and frequencies can be found in the appendix. An example of a respondent's narrative and associated codes **in bold** follows:

*"An individual at the International Institute once told me that since I was Hispanic, I could only reasonably receive a grant from them if I could clearly show lineage from Mexico[.] I'm Puerto Rican. Then they asked if I was related to Diego Rivera. I am also treated as the token minority in my department, and am asked inappropriate questions about my family, lifestyle, and race on a regular basis. Additionally, I have found little help from CAPS, where the counselor told me that I was just being sensitive about these issues. I did not experience any discrimination from my previous college, so the inappropriateness of such comments and the lack of institutional support has led me consider leaving Michigan on several occasions." (**Institutional racism, microaggressions, faculty and staff training, Hispanic heterogeneity, tokenism).***

Q26: How have your experiences (Discrimination, Racism, Oppression, Segregation, Exclusion, Micro-aggressions, Other) impacted the desire to continue your studies at U of M? Asked

about the impact on enrollment in the university, we coded for descriptive codes and themes of student perceptions, and an additional code to gauge the severity of the impact respondents felt through their answers. The chart below shows the breakdown of the 107 total responses to this item. Out of 263 total survey respondents, 84 students (31%) reported some impact on their studies, ranging from low to high. Out of the 30 respondents who reported a high emotional or academic impact from their experiences of discrimination, 19 explicitly stated having considered leaving the university. An excerpt below:

"The hostility and unwelcoming behaviors I experienced is something I do not wish upon anyone. It is already hard enough having moved away from home, and when all I wanted to do is make friends and meet people these experiences are among those that made me question whether I will ever fit in. However, with the help of other safe spaces/groups, etc. I was able to find groups of students who valued, respected, and sought to learn about various identities in hopes of building community. [...] *I wanted to help show freshmen that safe spaces for all students do exist, and that they need students like us who understand these issues."*

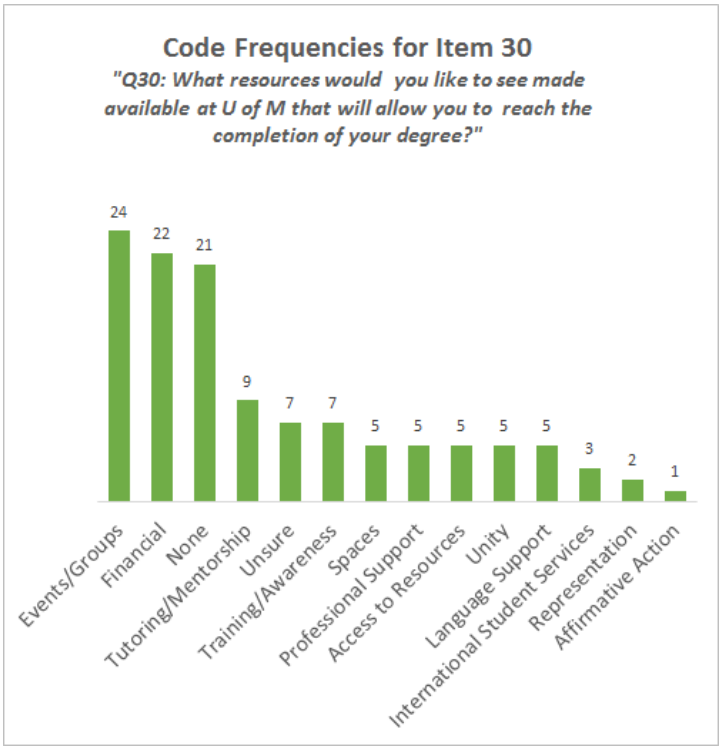


Some of our thematic codes arising from analysis of these responses included *Resilience* (sticking to their path despite discriminatory attitudes *n=15*), *Distancing* (avoidance strategies regarding people and situations where they will be discriminated against *n=12*), *Discrimination Motivation* (drawing strength and motivation from their experiences to enact change, advocate, and prove others wrong *n=12*), *Accepting the Status Quo* (where respondents rationalize discriminatory behaviors as a normal phenomenon that is to be expected anywhere *n=10*), and *Isolation* (Students reported having no people or groups to turn to with their experiences n=8).

Q30: What resources would you like to see made available at U of M that will allow you to reach the completion of your degree? 123 students responded to this open-ended question. Responses were coded into the following categories: events/groups, financial issues, none, tutoring/mentorship, unsure, training/awareness (of faculty, staff and students on issues relating to Latina/os), spaces (for Latina/o students), professional support, access to resources (knowledge of existing resources), unity (of various Latina/o groups on campus), language support, international student services, representation of Latina/o students on campus, and affirmative action. One student wrote:

> *"I am grateful for the funding that I have received here, and am confident that I will finish my program. I do want to know more about clubs for latin@s. The clubs that I know on campus emphasize community service and specific countries (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, etc.). While I*

value both those initiatives I am looking for a club that embraces citizens from all the countries in Latin America and focuses on socializing and networking." ***Events/groups, unity.***



Another student noted:

"Our biggest concern is financial. We don't come from wealthy families and are taking a big financial risk to move to Ann Arbor for me to get my PhD. My fellowship covers tuition but not much else. The biggest help my wife and I could receive would be possible scholarships for Hispanic grad students, to help pay for rent, food, utilities, school supplies, etc. We live in campus housing (Northwood IV), but it is not covered with my scholarship. The money I receive as a Grad Student Instructor is not enough." ***Financial.***

Q32: Please list which Latin@ student organization/s you are a part of. Students listed an array of 27 student organizations they belonged to: twenty-three were Hispanic and Latina/o specific organizations, two were multicultural organization in general, and two that did not explicitly target Hispanic or Multicultural student affairs. The most frequently mentioned student organization was Assisting Latinos to Maximize Achievement (ALMA). The next most often mentioned were the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, Latino Social Work Coalition, Michigan Latino Assembly, and the Hispanic Business Student Association. Please see the appendix for a complete list of all reported student organizations and counts.

Although just 29.3% percent of respondents identified themselves as part of a Latin@ Student Organization open-ended responses to Q30 ("What resources would you like to see made available at U of M that will allow you to reach the completion of your degree?"), events/groups for Latin@ students and/or around Latin@ culture were the most commonly coded responses (n=24).

Q33: Please list any positive experiences related to being a Latin@ at U of M. In order to understand and build upon the strengths of Hispanic students and the University of Michigan, respondents were asked to list positive experiences related to their Hispanic and Latina/o identities. The overwhelming majority of respondents to this question reported ties with Hispanic and Latina/o peers and faculty (coded as Community, n=54). In addition to Community, other frequently identified codes included Extrinsic Cultural Pride (when pride in their identity was tied to practical and social benefits, n=25), Events (from Latin Culture Show to Hispanic Heritage Month events, n=14), Racial Pride (Respondents noted an intrinsic pride in their identity not tied to benefits or interactions, n=14), Diversity (an appreciation of diverse identities and communities on campus, n=13), and Bilingualism (how speaking Spanish as well as English brought people together and its benefits socially, professionally and academically, n=11). We

also coded for respondents who explicitly reported having no positive experiences related to being Latina/o while at U of M (No Positive Experiences, n=19), which was the second most frequent code for this item.

Recommendations

A synthesis of the responses to this survey leads to several recommendations that the University could follow in order to improve the campus climate for Latina/o students. These recommendations include improving the visibility of organizations and events that focus on Latina/o students, improving training for University of Michigan faculty and staff, expanding financial supports, and continuing research and evaluation efforts.

- **Cohesion and Visibility for Organizations and Events**

At a large higher education institution such as Michigan, issues with visibility and isolation arise that the DEI initiative can readily consider in their planning process. Students in the study asked for more clubs, culturally relevant events, tutoring, mentorship, and support (*"Most the time I never find out when or what groups meet and that they even exist."*). Yet the same dataset uncovered 23 student organizations to which respondents belonged that specifically target Hispanic and Latina/o students in these ways. This is a problem of visibility and coordination which the OAMI (Office of Academic Multicultural Activities) and MESA (Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs) offices can address in their support of student initiatives, academic projects, and organizations not only with funding but coordination and cross-communication that help student initiatives market themselves more effectively ("*I think more outreach from Latino organizations, because I just learned from this survey the existence of ALMA. I wish I would have known before!")*. Through access to student demographic information from the office of admissions, OAMI and MESA are also at a strategic position to assist incoming Hispanic students and the various student groups by channeling information on organizations, events, and programs during orientation events, faculty advisors, and students directly.

- **Faculty/Staff Education/Training**

Throughout the open-ended responses were requests that faculty and staff receive better education and training on issues affecting Latina/o students. This supports one of the key themes identified by Community Feedback for the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion efforts at University of Michigan, "Education and Training." The DEI website notes:

> "Education and Training: Improving the university's climate requires mandatory and continuous cultural competency training for all staff and faculty, from new hires to senior leaders…Creating a safer, more inclusive climate for students - on campus and in the classroom - requires diversity, equity, and inclusion-specific training for all students, faculty, and staff." (University of Michigan, Community Feedback, 2016).

Our data echoes this sentiment from the wide range of codes throughout the open-ended items. Although it is beyond the scope of this document to provide a comprehensive look at effective training, it is possible to provide nuance through the lived experiences the study was able to collect. One response pointed towards the Office of Financial Aid not understanding the DACA process.

Another important theme in educating and training for diversity issues in our findings is addressing the heterogeneity of the Hispanic and Latina/o identity marker. Latina/o individuals, like all Americans, can trace their races and ethnicities to Europe, Africa, and Asia, to the indigenous civilizations of the Americas in a myriad of ways within 21 very different Spanish-speaking countries, including the United States. Our data shows our respondents valuing these

distinctions to the utmost. Oppression, discrimination, and stereotyping occur as the dominant culture amalgamates the Hispanic and Latina/o experience into an imagined primary identity.

Although specific evidence based training programs for faculty are hard to find, there are models of successful diversity and anti-racism programs for universities. For example, at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, workshops on "Understanding Racism and Anti-Racist Organizing" are offered twice a month to students, faculty, administrators, staff and community members. These four-hour workshops are led by a white facilitator as well as a facilitator of color, who are also available to travel to other institutions to facilitate. Additionally, faculty are invited to participate in "Anti-Racist Pedagogy Across the Curriculum," an intensive eight-day training program dedicated to "examining theory, structure, and the practice of racism and power relations embedded in history, and academic disciplines" and "developing skills for anti-racist methodologies in the classroom" (St. Cloud State University, 2016). Faculty from across the country are invited to participate (D. Leigh, personal communication, August 4, 2016). Although these training programs are not mandatory for faculty, the St. Cloud State University is currently working on incorporating the values of anti-racism into their faculty evaluations. For example, if faculty are still using with the same curriculum they used 10 years ago, without adapting it to include more diverse and inclusive subject matter, they may be evaluated poorly (D. Leigh, personal communication, August 4, 2016). The University of Michigan could implement similar faculty evaluation practices in order to encourage faculty to participate in professional development.

- **Financial Support**

Another frequent concern for students related to the cost of attendance of the University of Michigan. Again, this was paralleled by feedback received in the DE&I planning process, in which community feedback noted the importance of financial support for students from underrepresented and historically marginalized communities. As reported in Hurtado et al. (1999), low-income and minority high school students responded favorably to grants rather than to loans, and federal policies restricting grants in fact decreased minority enrollment in higher education. Reforming tuition policies is an issue in the DE&I initiative not exclusive to Hispanic and Latina/o students. Nevertheless, we endorse financial support becoming more inclusive and look to effective policies at peer higher education institutions.

A number of elite institutions have adopted financial aid policies that result in students paying based on what they can afford. For example, at Stanford University, students whose families have annual incomes less than $60,000 usually pay nothing for tuition, room, or board. Students from families with incomes of $120,000 or less will pay no tuition, but may be responsible for room and board (Jackson, 2015). Harvard University has adopted a policy where parent contributions toward tuition from families earning less that $65,000 were eliminated, and families with incomes between $65,000 and $150,000 pay between 0% to 10% of their income (Harvard University, 2016). Similar programs have been implemented at other public institutions. For example, at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, students with a family income at or below 200% of the federal poverty line are guaranteed enough scholarships and grants (possibly supplemented by work-study) so that they are able to graduate from college debt-free (University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, Year Unknown). By adopting a tuition structure of this nature, the University would likely attract and retain a more diverse student population.

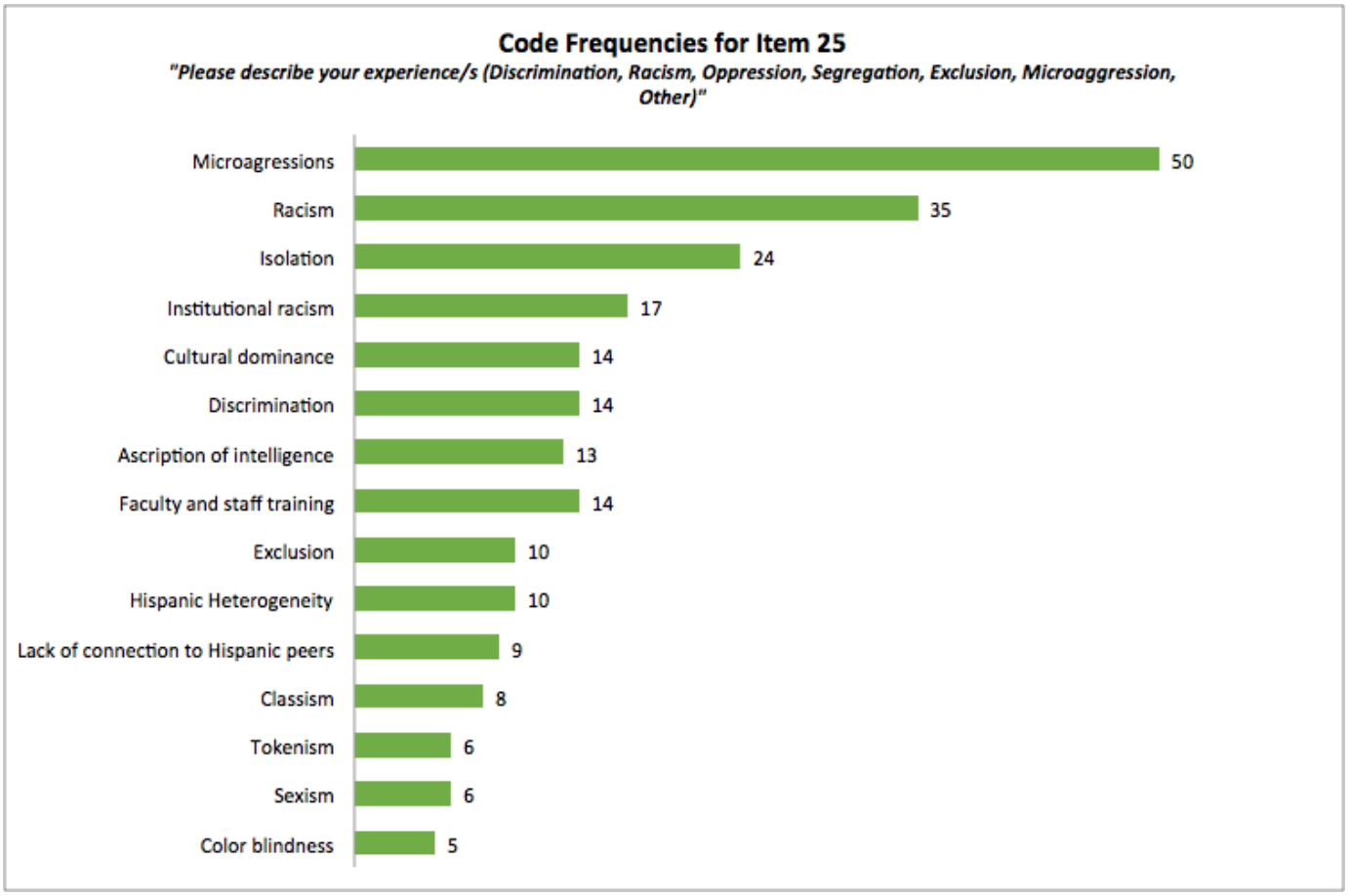
Secondly, the University of Michigan already provides undocumented undergraduate students with in-state tuition benefits, and the same policy should be expanded to include graduate students. As financial support was the most frequent response from the graduate student sample when asked what resources would allow them to reach the completion of their degree, reviewing the University's policy regarding in state tuition, especially for undocumented graduate students would be one way to address this issue.

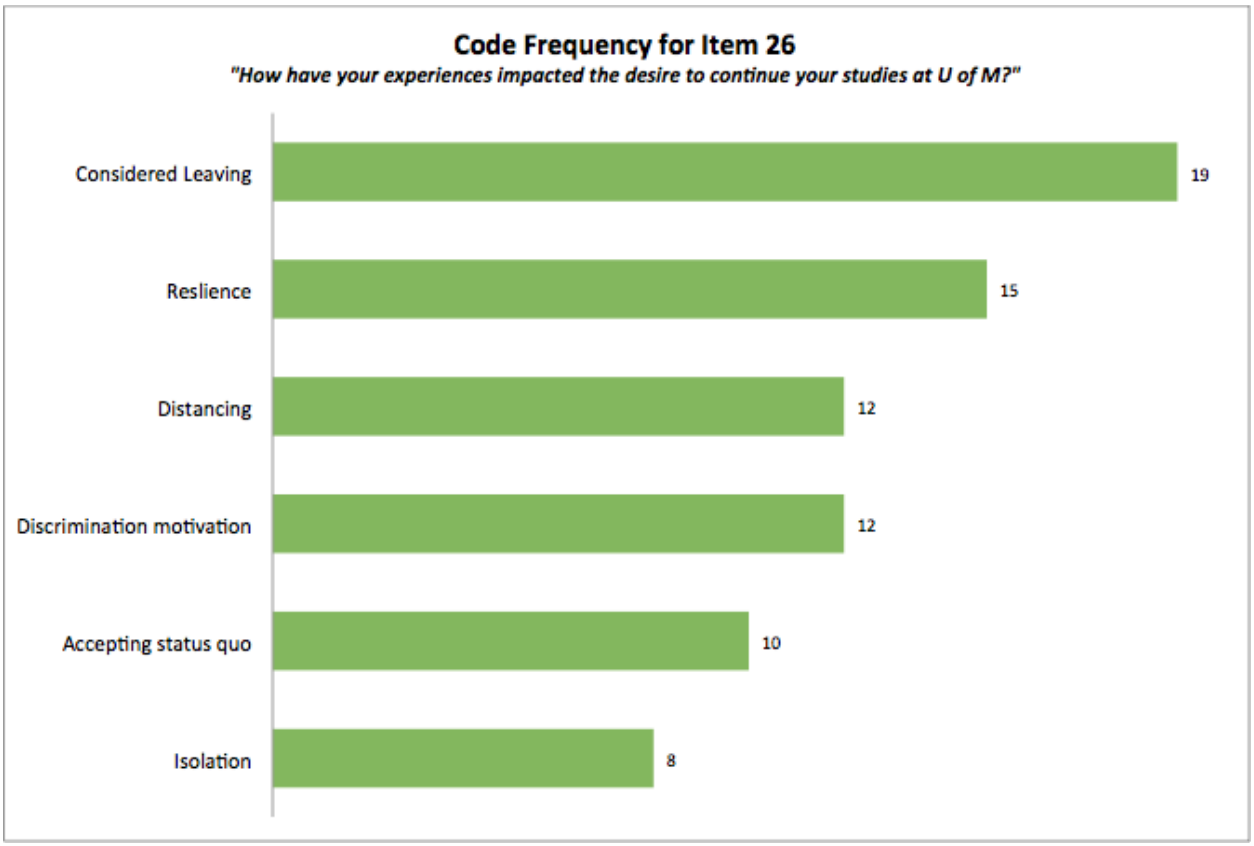
- **Continuing Evaluation and Research**

Successful retention and overall success for Latina/o students at the University of

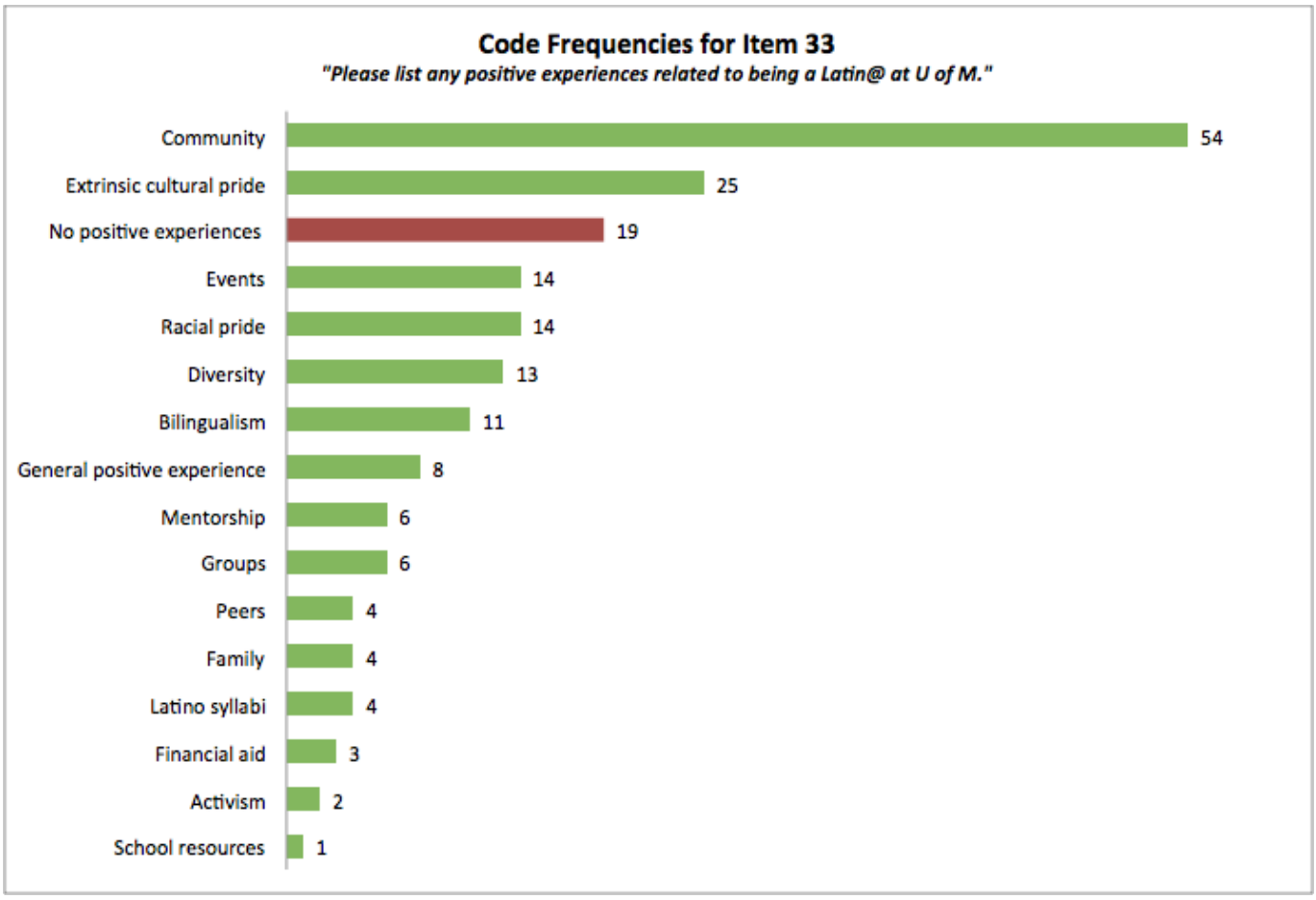
Michigan entails being accountable for the policies and programs set forth by the University. Relevant university offices such as MESA and OAMI might better serve their target populations with a clear evaluation plan that can track effectiveness and positive outcomes for Latina/o freshmen throughout their time at Michigan. It would similarly benefit the university to conduct research and evaluations of minority student outcomes based on metrics of academic success, retention rates, and campus climate. Standardized scales of possible use include the Coping with Discrimination Scale (Wei et. al., 2010), Latino College Students' Perception Scale (Gonzalez, 2013), or the Latino College Student Perceived Social Support Scale (Schneider & Ward, 2003). Using existing standardized scales of the aforementioned metrics would provide researchers and staff with useful pre-existing frameworks for addressing these questions, as well as an opportunity to strengthen said standardized scales' reliability. Such initiatives should also provide a rich opportunity for new research and collaboration across peer institutions to share knowledge on improving Latina/o student experience and achievement in higher education.

Additional Charts




Code Frequency for Item 26
"How have your experiences impacted the desire to continue your studies at U of M?"
Considered Leaving
19
Reslience
15
Distancing
12
Discrimination motivation
12
Accepting status quo
10
Isolation
8

Student Organization to which Respondents Belong	*Total*
Assisting Latinos to Maximize Achievement (ALMA)	*18*
Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers -- Graduate (SHPE)	*9*
Latino Social Work Coalition (LSWC)	*8*
Michigan Latin@ Assembly (MLA)	*7*
Hispanic Business Student Association (HBSA)	*5*
Coalition for Interdisciplinary Research of Latina/o Issues (CIRLI)	*4*
Latina/o Student Psychological Association (LSPA)	*4*
La Salud - School of Public Health	*4*
Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority Inc. (ΣΛΓ)	*4*
Latin American Native American Medical Association (LANAMA)	*4*
Latin@ Culture Show	*3*
Association of Latino Professional in America (ALPFA)	*2*
Latino Connection	*1*
School of Social Work (SSW)	*1*
Latino Student Organization	*1*
Latino Caucus of the American Public Health Association (APHA)	*1*
Multicultural Association of Pre-Health Students (MAPS)	*1*
Fraternity	*1*
Association of Multicultural Scientists (AMS)	*1*
By Any Means Necessary (BAMN)	*1*
Phi Iota Alpha	*1*
Spanish Club	*1*
Brasil Student Association	*1*
Chi Upsilon Sigma	*1*
Proyecto Avance Latino Mentoring Association (PALMA)	*1*
Lambda Theta Phi Latin Fraternity, Inc.	*1*
Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc.	*1*


Code Frequencies for Item 33
"Please list any positive experiences related to being a Latin@ at U of M."
Community 54
Extrinsic cultural pride 25
No positive experiences 19
Events 14
Racial pride 14
Diversity 13
Bilingualism 11
General positive experience 8
Mentorship 6
Groups 6
Peers 4
Family 4
Latino syllabi 4
Financial aid 3
Activism 2
School resources 1

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