

# **Uplifting our Voices: Examining Servingness at a Hispanic Serving Institution through Photovoice**

## **Abstract**

This study centered Latine student voices as co-researchers to explore what it means for a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSIs) to serve them and support their success. Utilizing a photovoice methodology with six Latine undergraduate co-researchers at a four-year HSI in Northern California, student co-researchers identified a desire for a college experience that centered their identity development and degree attainment and underscored the role of culturally affirming environments in their experiences.

## **Resumen**

*Este estudio centró en las voces de los estudiantes latinos como coinvestigadores para explorar lo que significa para una institución al servicio de los hispanos (HSI) atenderlos y apoyar su éxito. Utilizando una metodología de fotovoz con seis estudiantes latinos de licenciatura como coinvestigadores en una HSI de cuatro años en el norte de California, los estudiantes coinvestigadores identificaron el deseo de una experiencia universitaria que se centrara en el desarrollo de su identidad y la obtención de un título, y subrayaron el papel de los entornos que afirman la cultura en sus experiencias.*

*Keywords:* Latine/a/o/ students, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Photovoice

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Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) represent 20% of all colleges and universities (Excelencia in Education, 2025) and support a diverse group of students, enrolling approximately 64% of all Latine<sup>1</sup> students (Excelencia in Education, 2025). During the 2017-2018 academic year, HSIs accounted for the graduation of over 45% of Latine college graduates in the United States (Postsecondary Policy Institute, 2021). While HSIs are graduating more Latine students, scholars have called for HSIs to define what it means to intentionally serve Latine students (Garcia, 2012) beyond traditional outcomes like graduation rates and GPAS (Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2019; Cuellar et al., 2017). These traditional student success outcome measures are often insufficient for evaluating institutional servingness as they fail to account for how the campus environment contributes to these outcomes. Moreover, these metrics overlook the lived experiences of students at these institutions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to engage Latine students as co-researchers to examine how the campus environment at an HSI supports their success. Utilizing photovoice, this study uses an innovative approach that grounds students as knowledge producers whose lived experience is essential to interrogating how the campus environment supports their holistic success. Specifically, this study seeks to respond to the following research questions: (1) How do we, as Latine students, perceive California State University, Sacramento (also known as Sac State), our HSI, as serving us, and how can it be improved? and (2) How do we, as Latine students, define student success?

HSIs are federally designated 2- and 4-year institutions that have at least half of the undergraduate student population identified as low-income and 25% of their undergraduate full-time students identifying as Latine (or Hispanic). As HSIs enroll the majority of Latine

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<sup>1</sup>We use the term Latine as a gender-inclusive alternative to Latino and Latina that aligns more naturally with the Spanish language. We recognize that individuals and communities may identify with other terms such as Latino/a, Latinx, Hispanic, Chicanx, or culturally specific identities (e.g., Mexican-American, Dominican, Maya K'iche).

undergraduate students, Cuellar and colleagues (2017) argue that HSIs have a critical opportunity to shape the educational trajectories and long-term success of Latine students. However, because this designation is based solely on enrollment criteria and is not often as a result of intentional strategies or a mission to serve Latine students; many HSIs operate with what scholars have called an “invisible” HSI identity (Torres & Zerquera, 2012). This often leads to limited support for Latine students, inadequate institutional resources that align with the designation, and a lack of intentional commitment to Latine students from HSI leadership (Lujan & McNaughtan, 2024). The “invisible” identity can result in students being unaware that their institution is designated as an HSI and, as a result, are unsure of what support or experiences to expect from their institution (Gonzalez et al., 2020). While students may not have clear expectations of what an HSI should offer, Garcia (2016) argues that the organizational identity of an HSI is deeply connected to the lived experiences that students have on campus. Therefore, through engaging Latine students as co-researchers, this study elevates student voices while interrogating how the campus environment supports Latine students’ holistic success. Not only were Latine student co-researchers part of understanding how the campus currently supports them, but they also examined data to assess how campus environments can more effectively support their success in the future. This approach centers student voices in institutional transformation, which is key to understanding how HSIs can truly recognize and fulfill their mission of serving Latine students.

### **Literature Review**

Higher education scholars seeking to understand how campus environments impact college students’ lived experiences have found that institutional environments have a substantial impact on the experiences and outcomes of Latine college student populations (Deeb-Sossa et

al., 2024; Cano Matute et al., 2024; Cuellar et al., 2017; Figueroa, 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Museus, 2014). We synthesize the literature examining the role of campus environments in supporting student success at HSIs below, focusing on the role of physical spaces, interactions with institutional actors, and the classroom environment.

### **Physical Spaces Shape Student Belongingness**

One element of the campus environment that has received attention in the literature is the role of physical spaces on campus. Through a photovoice process at a designated HSI, with six Latine students, Lujan and McNaughtan (2024) found that the perception of specific physical spaces on campus shaped their experiences. Students described avoiding specific spaces, such as the library, football stadiums, and the business college building, given their discomfort and perception of being an outsider in these spaces. Cano Matute and colleagues (2024) suggest that campus spaces on HSIs, such as ethnic and gender program centers, career services offices, the library, and students' academic departments, are central to student experiences, as they help cultivate environments that promote student belonging and validation. For example, Latine undergraduate students stated that the Chicano Cultural Center was a physical space in the center of campus that affirmed their cultural backgrounds and created opportunities for them to think about academic and cultural identities together. Additionally, using a community-based participatory research methodology Latine undergraduate students at an emerging four-year HSI identified qualities of campus spaces that made them feel safe and unsafe (Deeb-Sossa et al., 2024). Using a photovoice methodology, students identified that safer spaces on campus made them feel welcome and intentionally supported them as students. Students also noted that in these spaces, there was art on the wall that showcased student movements that led to the creation of ethnic studies programs on their campus. The art in these spaces acknowledged and made

visible their identities, creating a sense of safety and belonging for these Latine students on campus, where they often experienced “cultural starvation” (p. 318).

### **Affirming Interactions with Institutional Actors**

Scholars have also emphasized the importance of interactions with specific institutional actors within campuses. In the aforementioned photovoice study with Latine students, students identified qualities of safe campus spaces that provided environments where students felt that they could meet with faculty and staff and speak honestly and in their native language without fear of being attacked or criticized (Deeb-Sossa et al., 2024). The importance of interactions within these spaces is further supported by Figueroa (2016), who argues that it is more than the physical space but about the social interactions that happen within these spaces that impact students’ experiences. She argues that Latine students may stay away from spaces where they feel unwelcome and experience being devalued and dismissed and seek out spaces where their voices and culture are incorporated into discussions and programming and receive support that affirms their cultural identity. This is further supported by Cuellar and colleagues (2017) who point to specific ways that students' participation within the campus environment support their holistic success, including opportunities to engage in research and internship experiences, experiences with cultural centers and student organizations, and interactions with diverse peers, faculty, and staff.

### **Feeling Valued in Classroom Environment**

Much of the existing literature has specifically focused on the classroom environment as a physical space and student interactions with faculty. Classroom environments are critical spaces where students have opportunities to engage with faculty and with culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy which play critical roles in validating students' cultural ways of knowing

(Garcia, 2016; Museus & Shiroma, 2022) and creating welcoming campus environments (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2023). Additionally, Salazar and colleagues (2025) found that for undocumented students, curriculum and one-on-one interactions between students and faculty were critical in fostering opportunities for students to learn about themselves, which added to their feeling respected and valued, enhancing their commitment to their education. These more recent findings align with Rendón (1994), who suggests that undergraduate students who feel like they matter to faculty are likely to have positive college experiences.

Together, these studies highlight the importance of understanding how students perceive campus environments, including the classroom, other physical spaces, and interactions with institutional actors in supporting their holistic success. Cuellar and colleagues (2017) argue that campus environments have the opportunity to develop critical learners and foster personal growth, highlighting that HSIs, in particular, have the opportunity to draw on Latine students' cultural knowledge and assets, creating a transformative educational experience. Furthermore, these scholars argue that for HSIs to improve on how they serve the Latine student population, they should engage Latine students as co-creators of knowledge and recognize that these students are experts in experiencing their institutions. Thus, student voices should be central in assessing how institutions serve them.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is situated in the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model of college success, which provides a culturally conscious theoretical framework for understanding how a campus environment can be culturally validating, engaging, and best support diverse student populations (Museus, 2014). The CECE model has been used in various research studies, conducted at HSIs, that explore how diverse student populations experience

campus environments, as it draws on empirical research to identify specific elements of campus environments that foster cultural relevance and responsiveness, shape the college experiences, and support the holistic success of racially diverse students from the student perspective.

Specifically, the model consists of nine campus indicators that can be grouped into two separate yet interrelated categories. The first category, *cultural relevance*, reflects the extent to which campus environments provide (1) cultural familiarity, (2) culturally relevant knowledge, (3) cultural community service, (4) opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement, and (5) culturally validating spaces. The second category, *cultural responsiveness*, reflects the extent to which campus environments foster (6) collectivist cultural orientations, (7) humanized educational experiences, (8) proactive philosophies, and (9) holistic support systems (Museus, 2014). Together, these two categories, *cultural relevance* and *cultural responsiveness*, and their respective indicators make up elements of a culturally engaging campus environment.

The model goes on to indicate that these culturally engaging campus environments facilitate a greater sense of belonging, more positive academic dispositions, and higher levels of academic performance, such as the graduation of racially diverse students. For example, the second indicator, culturally relevant knowledge, posits that when students have the opportunity to engage with knowledge relevant to their home communities, they are more likely to identify with their institution and are more likely to persist and complete their degree. Museus (2014) identifies empirical support for each of these nine indicators providing deeper insight into how campus environments engage the backgrounds, communities, and identities of diverse student populations, thus creating meaningful college experiences and holistic success among students.

Research conducted at HSIs has frequently drawn on the CECE framework to explore the role of campus environments in student success. Garcia (2016) explored how organizational

members, including administrators, faculty, staff, and students, co-construct a Latine serving identity at a four-year master's granting HSI through interviews. Her findings highlight that student perspectives on daily institutional practices are crucial in shaping a campus environment where culturally relevant and culturally responsive practices are central to developing a Latine-serving identity. Moreover, Gonzalez and colleagues (2020) interviewed undergraduate and graduate students at an R1-HSI to understand how the campus environment influences their educational, personal, and professional experiences. Through interviews, they found that both graduate and undergraduate students reported that they wanted faculty, departments, and campus organizations to be culturally relevant and responsive to their needs as students. More specifically, students highlighted how institutions that are designated as HSIs need to focus on a collectivistic cultural orientation that values and embraces their HSI designation. Taken together, these scholars argue that institutions, more specifically HSIs, that provide culturally relevant environments and are culturally responsive to the needs of their students not only promote the academic success of their Latine students, but also provide opportunities for students to actively participate in learning experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2020) gaining necessary knowledge and skills to empower individuals to contribute to society in meaningful ways (Cuellar et al., 2017).

### **The Present Study**

The present study utilizes a photovoice methodology to gain an emic perspective of Latine students at a 4-year HSI and their understanding of how the institution serves them. This centers Latine student voices directly in the research process as well as in taking actions towards improving how HSIs can better serve them. The study examined the following research questions: (1) How do we, as Latine students perceive Sac State, our HSI, as serving us and how can it be improved and (2) How do we, as Latine students, define student success? Given the

iterative nature of the photovoice methodology, these questions acted as a starting point for the project.

The study was conducted at California State University, Sacramento. Sac State is a public four-year university in Northern California and was designated as an HSI in 2015. In fall 2022, Sac State had a total enrollment of 28,389 undergraduate students, of which 39% (10,997) identified as Latine.

## **Methods**

A photovoice methodology was used to explore the emic perspectives of Latine students attending an HSI and how the institution, as an HSI, serves them. Photovoice is a participatory, qualitative methodology that partners with participants to document and critically reflect on their everyday experiences to better understand the systems that impact them and how they can transform them (Wang, 2006). Through an iterative cycle of taking photographs and critical reflection, photovoice creates a process that allows co-researchers to better understand their assets and concerns. Photovoice aims to support systems transformation through the sharing of photos and narratives with stakeholders. Similar processes have successfully been conducted with college youth (see Latz, 2015 as an example). This study partnered with six Latine undergraduate co-researchers to better understand how they saw their HSI campus as supporting Latine student success. Student co-researchers actively participated in decision-making throughout the project and directly engaged in data collection, analysis and dissemination. The study obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval.

## **Recruitment and Co-Researcher Selection**

Potential Latine student co-researchers were recruited through convenience sampling procedures. Enrollment criteria included that students needed to be a currently enrolled

undergraduate student at Sac State and graduating no sooner than Spring 2023 and identify as Latine. Once IRB approval was obtained, recruitment began in late spring 2022 and included posters placed around campus as well as emails sent through department and college listservs, and student clubs. Interested students were asked to fill out an interest form and invited to attend a webinar about the project. Eighty-six Latine students completed the interest form and were invited to attend an information session about the project, including information about participation, compensation, and methodology. After the information session and additional conversations with potential participants, eight of these students expressed continued interest and joined as co-researchers. Two students left the project in the initial weeks due to the time commitment. Student co-researchers were provided with \$1000 stipends for their participation in the project; this compensation was outlined upon initial participation. Two Latina undergraduate students who participated in a previous photovoice project helped facilitate the photovoice sessions. In total, the final research team consisted of two faculty members, two Latina undergraduate student facilitators, and six Latine undergraduate co-researchers. One student co-researcher withdrew from the group after the 6th photovoice session but provided permission to use their photos and data to the team; the other five co-researchers persisted through the study.

Student co-researchers reported their identities as Mexican American, Mexican, and Salvadoran. Five co-researchers self-identified as women and one as a man. Four co-researchers were transfer students (67%) while the other two began their higher education at Sac State. Additionally, four co-researchers (67%) were commuter students with the other two co-researchers living on campus. Co-researchers majored in business administration, criminal justice, kinesiology, ethnic studies, public health, music, and computer science. Four of the co-

researchers were in their equivalent of their 4th year (67%), graduating within one year of enrolling in the project, and two co-researchers (33%) were in the equivalent of their 3rd year.

### **Data Collection & Analysis through Photovoice**

This study utilized an iterative data collection and analysis process adapted from photovoice (Wang, 2006) and PhotoPAR (Lykes, 2010). The research team met for 12 3-hour sessions from August 2022 through February 2023. These sessions were led by two faculty researchers with the support of two Latina undergraduate students who had previously participated as co-researchers in an earlier iteration of the project. The first two sessions introduced student co-researchers to the photovoice method and the ethics of research and photography. Additionally, these first two sessions provided opportunities for team building where team members were able to develop a team name - Songs of the Hummingbird - and create a working set of group norms. Student co-researchers were asked to begin the photovoice process by taking photos in response to the prompt, “How does Sac State, as an HSI, support your success?” Students joined the third session with 1-3 photos in response to the prompt. This began the first of seven sessions of photovoice. In each session, students met and shared their 1-3 photos, describing the photos and their relationship with the prompt. They then would break up into small groups of two to four for a critical discussion utilizing the SHOWeD method (Wang, 2006) where they discussed similarities across their photos, underlying themes, and potential actions they could take to address issues that they identified. In the final hour, co-researchers would return to a full group discussion where they would outline themes across their groups, questions that arose, potential action steps, and the prompt for the next round of photovoice (e.g., “What does college life look like for you?”). Co-researchers collectively generated 54 photos, approximately 1-2 per researcher per session, across the seven photovoice sessions. After the

seventh photovoice session, co-researchers were led through a pile-sorting session where they examined all 54 photos, narratives and session notes to identify cross-cutting themes (Necheles, et al., 2017). A final set of 10 themes were identified. The group met one final time to collectively develop a narrative to explain each theme, identify representative photos that capture the essence of the themes, and their relevance to the project for a public audience. These themes were presented in an exhibit to the campus community, where other students, faculty, and administrators were invited. The first two authors then conducted a review of these 10 original themes, along with field notes taken during sessions, and identified overlaps and connections across themes. During this additional analysis, the researchers were sensitive to how campus environments shape college student experiences to support their holistic success as suggested by the CECE model. This resulted in the findings being condensed into a final four themes, with the original co-researcher identifying ten themes included as dimensions of these larger four themes. Additionally, in review of our fieldnotes, a new subtheme was identified (i.e., a desire to graduate). Co-researchers reviewed and approved the final four themes.

### **Findings**

Four themes were identified on how co-researchers defined Latine student success, and how Sac State, as their HSI, can serve them as well as how their HSI can more fully realize their mission of serving Latine students. The themes and their individual subthemes (in italics), including representative photos and a collectively written narrative (shared in block quotes), are described below. In other words, the block quotes represent the co-created narratives developed by student co-researchers at the end of the photovoice process. We encourage the readers to look at the selected photos alongside the narratives as they read the findings.

## **Students' Desire for a Holistic Experience**

Co-researchers identified their desire for a college experience that centered identity exploration, identity development, agency and degree attainment. This theme, *students desire for a holistic experience*, encapsulates how Latine co-researchers perceived a successful college experience - one that allowed them to further develop their identity, obtain a college degree and play a role in their college community. To this end, this theme is made up of the following subthemes: 1) *developing ourselves outside of academics*, 2) *let our voices be heard*, and 3) *a desire to graduate*.

### ***Developing Ourselves Outside of Academics***

Co-researchers perceived that college included *developing ourselves outside of academics* (see Figure 1). Student co-researchers wrote:

The college experience is a unique journey for every individual. It's not just about academics, but also about discovering and exploring different aspects of ourselves. As we navigate through new experiences, we gain a deeper understanding of who we are and what we want. We make connections with others, learn about different cultures and perspectives, and grow as individuals. Our communities of friends, roommates and family are important to us and keep us sane through our academic journey. The college experience is a time of self-discovery and personal growth, where we learn to embrace our individuality and challenge ourselves to be the best version of ourselves.

This subtheme encapsulated co-researchers' conversations regarding college as a place for identity exploration and development.

### ***Let Our Voices Be Heard!***

The college experience also included the need for greater agency, or as co-researchers demanded, *let our voices be heard!* (see Figure 1). During the sessions, the campus community was responding to multiple instances of sexual assault on campus. This included listening sessions and safety initiatives by the campus as well as student government-led forums around the need for greater safety. The tensions around how students were being responded to were a backdrop to conversations about students' roles in the university decision-making. Student co-researchers outlined:

‘Actions speak louder than words’, in the sense that the school has to take action to give us, the students, the voice to speak on these issues [sexual assault and other issues of safety and belonging]. Without making us feel uncomfortable, silenced, unheard, or unseen by creating safe spaces to speak up. These spaces need to be more than just Associated Students Inc. (student government). We also need to know and have opportunities to learn about our rights as students. We have seen how students can make change by coming together on their own. Just imagine how much change we can make with an institution who supports us and provides us with a platform!

Witnessing the various efforts by other students to address safety on campus, co-researchers imagined a college experience where students were empowered, provided spaces to discuss issues on campus and included in decision-making within the institution.

### **Driven to Graduate**

Across the identified themes and photovoice sessions, it became clear that co-researchers had a desire to finish their degrees and graduate. Often, this desire was taken for granted by co-researchers and not named explicitly by them. This provided a backdrop for discussions around

what success looks like across the co-researchers. The prevailing assumption among co-researchers was that success primarily meant completing their undergraduate education. As demonstrated in the themes below, greater questions regarding access to institutional resources, improvements to academic spaces, and expectations all shaped how they might achieve this goal.

### **Access to Campus Resources and Culturally Affirming Spaces**

A second theme, *access to campus resources and culturally affirming spaces*, was identified as a way for their HSI to better serve Latine students. To better achieve their success, co-researchers discussed the numerous resources available on campus but found that greater access and culturally affirming spaces were necessary. Co-researchers questioned how they might better be able to access resources. Given the events occurring on campus during the time of data collection, a key facilitator of access to resources that was especially salient for students was campus safety. They also identified that across campus more opportunities for Latine students to explore and value their own cultures. As such, this theme includes the following subthemes: *1) where are the resources we pay for, 2) Safety, and 3) we need spaces to embrace our cultures.*

#### ***Where are the Resources We Pay for?***

Co-researchers questioned *where are the resources we pay for?* (see Figure 2) as salient to their success. Across the photovoice sessions, students introduced resources they utilized on campus. In doing so, they often introduced new ones to each other, which fostered conversations regarding knowledge of and access to these resources. The student co-researchers described this in the following narrative:

There are many resources here, but students may feel overwhelmed because they do not find what they need or are not aware of opportunities they can take advantage of.

This is true regardless of if they are new or have been pursuing an academic journey for more time. Access to resources depends on the following: student exposure to resources; and colleges and majors have different resources, such as tutoring or internships.

Stigma around certain resources, such as counseling services or CARES ASI Food Pantry, sometimes students are afraid to ask. It can be difficult to use some of the resources because we don't always know how to find them or they are hidden to us. We have the Sac State app, Canvas (the learning management system used on campus), and the website - too many places, where do we go to find resources? Although Sac State offers a lot of resources, they need to have more exposure so that we can reach and access them.

This narrative captures the many resources that co-researchers shared with each other throughout the session. As they shared, they learned that some were only available to specific majors or colleges (see the middle picture in Figure 2 on “ECS Internships and Career Services” only available to the College of Engineering and Computer Sciences) and interrogated why some resources were only available to specific students. Additionally, they reflected that access was further limited by stigma, confusing tools to access resources, and a lack of information about the resources provided to students. Co-researchers urged the institution to improve clarity on how and where to access clear information to the many resources available to students.

### ***Safety***

A crucial component of access to resources for co-researchers was *safety* (see Figure 2). During the fall of 2022 students initiated a discussion to address the repeated sexual assaults on campus. The student co-researchers wrote:

We worry that if students did not start the conversation the campus would have not acted. We know there are resources on campus like the emergency poles, and the Hornet Safety Escort program. Yet, many of these resources do not go far enough. For example, the Hornet Escort service doesn't align with evening class schedules, how can more people be hired? We need more lighting on campus. Why do we need to go through all these forums and emails for change? Where was the prevention? We have seen the campus say they will address these issues but we are worried that actions have not followed the campus discussion. How many more incidents need to occur before we are made to feel safe?

Lack of safety was described in the sessions as a barrier to many campus resources and even attending classes. Co-researchers emphasized the importance of safety on campus and underscored the need for the institution to proactively ensure students feel safe.

### ***We Need Spaces to Embrace Our Cultures***

Co-researchers also identified *we need a space to embrace our cultures* (see Figure 2) as a key component of facilitating their success. Co-researchers write:

Sac State needs to support Latine students in helping them connect to each other by providing designated spaces for students to learn about their culture. These spaces need to be more central in location and activities need to happen at them. Having these spaces will create a safe environment to feel comfortable to raise our voice and develop an appreciation of who we are and our culture.

Anchored by pictures of altars for Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations and cultural symbols (see Figure 2), co-researchers often shared key traditions they observed throughout the semester. They reflected that these observations, including opportunities to further learn about

them, were always separate from their campus experience but important to them and their motivations for college. As a result, they identified that the institution should more prominently develop spaces on campus to explore and share cultural traditions.

### **Need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Classroom Environment**

The third theme, *need for culturally relevant pedagogy and classroom environment*, illustrates the importance co-researchers placed on the classroom environment in facilitating their success at an HSI. Specifically, they discussed the need for greater representation in their classroom. Additionally, they felt that the course environment needed both physical and pedagogical improvements. This theme is made up of two subthemes: 1) *representation of the Latine culture is needed in our classroom* and 2) *improving our classes for student success*.

#### ***Representation of the Latine Culture is Needed in Our Classroom***

Co-researchers identified that *representation of the Latine culture is needed in our classroom* (see Figure 3). The student co-researchers penned:

We need more representation of our Latine culture in our classrooms and curriculum. We need more professors who reflect the diversity of our student body and who can bring unique perspectives and cultural knowledge. We need to have more of our culture represented in our curriculum in terms of readings, discussions, and activities. Although many of us have found this happening in Ethnic Studies, we need this in all areas. Professors need to include their students' backgrounds in the issues and topics they teach. We also need for our professors to use language that connects to us and that we can understand. Some of us expressed having a connection to certain professors who worked to create meaningful relationships with us.

The need for culturally relevant pedagogy was expressed strongly by co-researchers. Many had taken Ethnic Studies classes (and the photos of faculty and readings in Figure 3 were from these courses) where they found such representation but found it lacking in other areas of their coursework. For co-researchers, culturally relevant pedagogy included greater representation in curriculum, accessible language and developing meaningful relationships.

### ***Improving Our Classes for Student Success***

Additionally, students identified ways that the university could go about *improving our classes for student success* (see Figure 3). Student co-researchers write:

Our professors need to not only teach the material for the class but also help students learn about the resources and events on campus. They also need to be provided training on how to be more flexible and compassionate towards students' needs - recognizing that they are more than a student in their classroom. They need to humanize the learning experience. Our goal is to graduate but unsupportive faculty create barriers that add to the overall difficulty of our academic journey. Additionally, classrooms do not serve us. Classrooms do not provide an environment in which we can thrive. Often, small desks do not allow us to use our computers and notepads at the same time, and the chairs are uncomfortable. Our classrooms need to have more culture inside of them. We can include the art and beauty that we see outside the classroom, inside, to create a more inspiring environment.

In the sessions, students had identified artwork on campus (e.g., sculptures and murals) that had cultural motifs familiar to many of the participants. They discussed these as increasing their sense of belonging and pointed to these pieces of campus artwork in contrast to the classroom environment; this can be seen in the representative pictures.

## **Pushing Against Personal, Cultural, and Institutional Expectations**

The final theme *pushing against personal, cultural and institutional expectations* describes how expectations that co-researchers placed on themselves, as well as those placed by the institution, contributed to a sense of needing constant productivity and negatively impacted their well-being. They described making decisions that contributed to their feeling overwhelmed in order to finish their academic trajectory within an artificial timeline set by system expectations that were not created with them in mind. Additionally, they described the ways that Latine cultural expectations shaped these feelings. This theme is made up of the following subthemes: 1) *we are more than just students*, 2) *hustle culture*, and 3) “*ese vive en las nubes*” [they live in the clouds].

### ***We are More than Just Students***

Co-researchers felt constrained by institutional expectations that solely viewed them in terms of their academic responsibilities, declaring *we are more than just students* (see Figure 4). They wrote:

Yes, we are students but we have other identities and roles that we carry and bring with us. Such as being a mother, athlete, babysitter, family translator. We juggle family, school, and work, among other things. The institution’s expectations of what a student is does not match our realities! We take care of ourselves and have many responsibilities. We are individuals who have other things going on outside of school that make us who we are.

Often co-researchers found that their multiple identities and responsibilities were invisible in the classroom and on campus. This translated into difficulties managing academics and other

responsibilities as well as finding that faculty and staff often were not able to adjust their expectations or deadlines to acknowledge student realities.

### ***Hustle Culture***

Co-researchers identified the *hustle culture* (see Figure 4) that resulted from these institutional expectations, layered with their own. Student co-researchers wrote:

It feels like we make school our whole life and it is chaotic and overwhelming.

University initiatives like “finish in four”, push us to make impulsive decisions and push us out. It is a bit much and we forget that we are more than just students. We forget that it is okay to be unproductive and not just be a student. This university reinforces this when you get penalized if you do not graduate the year you claim. In our culture we hustle and don’t take breaks or prioritize mental health. We put a lot on our plate and it’s natural to be really busy. It’s not natural to not do anything - that makes us feel lazy. We are so busy we don’t pause and appreciate ourselves and our accomplishments. No matter how hard the outside world is on us, we still rise, we overcome, we succeed, we push through.

There are many unspoken obstacles that try to take us down.

Institutional expectations around graduation deadlines as well as co-researchers’ individual beliefs about success combined in ways that co-researchers described as pressuring themselves to measure their worth in productivity. This was represented in photos of their progress to degree indicators, constant emails and filled calendar, which was covered in tears, see Figure 4. They shared how over time the push to complete their degree took a toll on their mental health.

***“Ese Vive en las Nubes” [They live in the clouds]***

Lastly, they reflected on how these expectations were further complicated by cultural scripts, titling the final subtheme, “*ese vive en las nubes*” [they live in the clouds] (see Figure 10). The student co-researchers explained,

As Latine students, we may feel pressure to meet certain expectations and not show any emotions. We are told to not be ungrateful. Mental health in the Latine culture is very hidden and not spoken about due to lack of information, education, and knowledge. But this can make it difficult for us to fully understand and express ourselves. We learn to suppress our emotions and this can leave us feeling overwhelmed and lost. We should be allowed to have our feelings validated and not be confined into this stigma. For all students, mental health is a factor in their education and who they are as an individual.

We don’t know ourselves just yet, we are in our own shadow.

Co-researchers described how cultural messages around mental health further complicated their educational journey. Paired with the personal and institutional expectations described above, stigma around mental health in Latine culture was described as another barrier towards success in higher education.

**Discussion**

This study was conducted at one regional comprehensive public 4-year Hispanic-Serving Institution in Northern California. The purpose of the study was to explore how Latine students define student success, perceive their HSI as serving them, and envision how their HSI can better serve them. Through a photovoice process, the research study was centered on Latine undergraduate students’ lived experiences at an HSI. The findings provide an emic perspective on the role of HSIs in supporting Latine student success. Such experiences are important as

researchers have highlighted how such experiences are tied to the organizational identity, or lack thereof, of HSIs, and thus provide insight into the ways that an institution intentionally serves Latine students (Garcia, 2016). Specifically, through an iterative process of picture taking and collective analysis over 12 3-hour sessions student co-researchers identified four themes. Together, these themes indicate that Latine undergraduates identified a successful college experience as one that allowed them to further explore and develop their Latine identity and cultivate their agency while earning their degree. Additionally, the co-researchers' examination of how their Hispanic-Serving Institution served them underscores the importance of culturally affirming physical spaces on campus and interactions with faculty and staff. They outline how their college experience towards success is colored by personal, cultural and institutional expectations.

### **Insight into the Role of Campus Spaces and Institutional Agents**

This study documented the multiple ways in which campus environments support Latine student success. Findings highlight that physical spaces on campus, such as the classrooms, murals, and campus walkways, are central to their experiences in higher education. This builds off the work of Lujan and McNaughtan (2024) and Cano Matute et al. (2024), which discusses the importance of perceptions of physical spaces on campuses for Latine students. In addition to the importance of perceiving that particular spaces are welcoming to Latine students (Lujan & McNaughtan, 2024), our findings highlight the importance of physical safety on campus which students elevated alongside the culturally affirming nature of the physical environment on campus. They also highlighted the role of stigma in accessing specific spaces, like student food pantries. While previous researchers have identified the role of cultural centers and specific departments as important for cultivating student belonging (Cano Matute et al., 2024; McMillan

et al., 2025), which are present on the focal campus, co-researchers noted the need for physical spaces that support building connections across Latine students and cultural exploration. Thus, these findings suggest that physical spaces are necessary, but not sufficient, for cultivating Latine student belonging.

Beyond campus spaces, scholars have documented the role of student interactions with other students and faculty as important institutional elements for Latine student success (Cullar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2023; Salazar et al., 2025). Student co-researchers identified the importance of connections to specific faculty and the need for flexible and compassionate instructors as central to positive experiences at the university. Specifically, they discussed the importance of representation within the syllabi (e.g., readings, activities), accessible language, flexibility, and compassion. Similar to the findings that servingness may be enacted in specific classrooms and offices on campus (Garcia, 2016), student co-researchers found that Ethnic Studies, in particular, is a space where they see Latine culture integrated into curriculum and pedagogy on campus. Additionally, co-researchers emphasized interactions with other institutional agents - mental health staff, academic advisors - as central to their experience. Their discussion of where to find resources (e.g., social media, university web-based applications) and institutional expectations identifies a need for greater research into the role of student interactions with institutional representatives and online institutional tools in their holistic success at an HSI.

### **Support for the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model**

Museus (2014) highlights that campus environments that serve a diverse student body need to be intentional in creating environments that are both culturally relevant and culturally responsive. In the current study, student co-researchers highlighted the need for their HSI to include not only their cultural background and identities within various institutional elements but

also opportunities to learn about different cultures, highlighting that their collegiate journey is a time of self-discovery and personal growth (Theme 1). Students also noted that they need physical spaces that are centrally located on campus to provide unique opportunities for them to celebrate their culture, build community with each other, and navigate their collegiate journey (spaces), a finding connected to Lujan and McNaughtan's (2024) photovoice findings, highlighting that HSIs must learn about how physical spaces shape Latine students' academic experiences. This perspective demonstrates that Latine students are seeking campus environments that are culturally familiar and provide cultural validation while also providing meaningful cross-cultural engagement, all indicators of campuses being culturally relevant within Museus' (2014) CECE framework. Moreover, these findings affirm Cuellar and colleagues' (2017) argument that HSIs have a distinct opportunity to draw on Latine students' cultural knowledge and assets to create transformative educational experiences that foster personal growth for Latine students.

In addition to HSIs needing to be culturally relevant, student co-researchers also highlighted that campuses need to be culturally responsive, emphasizing that campus staff, faculty, and administrators need to proactively provide students with critical information and support services. For example, in the subtheme, *where are the resources we pay for*, students highlighted that access to resources is dependent on campus' actively exposing these resources to students rather than hiding them. Additionally, students noted that they may feel lost and overwhelmed during this time and need these feelings validated, emphasizing that their mental health is a central factor in their holistic success. These findings are connected to Museus' (2014) measure on the extent to which campuses are culturally responsive and provide support services that are humanizing with proactive philosophies and provide holistic support. These findings are

also in alignment with Garcia's (2016) recommendation that, if HSIs are truly serving, they must be intentional in creating an organizational structure that not only intentionally supports and affirms Latine students' cultural backgrounds and identities but also creates environments that respond to students' needs.

Museus' (2014) theoretical model highlights the need for postsecondary institutions to be culturally relevant and responsive to the identities and needs of their diverse student population. Additionally, Garcia and colleagues (2019) multidimensional conceptual model highlights the need for HSIs to examine their external influences on serving as well as their structures for serving. Our student co-researchers also draw attention to the need for HSIs to intentionally consider how their institutional priorities and metrics of success are communicated to students and their families, and the impact these communications have. For example, in the final theme, *pushing against personal, cultural and institutional expectations*, students highlighted that they felt institutional expectations did not honor the multiple identities that they brought with them nor validate their journey in identity formation. Additionally, students highlighted institutional messages about graduation timelines (e.g., "finish in four") or the number of units did not recognize that they had multiple responsibilities. These experiences played a role in students' feeling overwhelmed and questioning whether they could succeed, given the institutional metrics of success. Such experiences highlight the role of external forces, such as neoliberalism, which have resulted in academic momentum policies such as "finish in four," across institutions of higher education (Schnee, 2024). Additionally, students emphasized that they felt shame in feeling like they do not know who they are, contributing to their need for institutions to focus on the mental health of their diverse student population.

### **Implications**

The study findings have implications for practice at other HSIs and future research. For HSI institutions, several implications arise. First, findings suggest that students' experiences of the campus environment play an integral role in supporting their holistic success. These findings underscore the importance of safety, access, and cultural responsiveness. Other institutions should examine how students access the existing resources on their campus and address barriers to access. For example, cultural spaces, such as affinity centers, should be centrally located to enable students to access them and participate in activities that recognize and affirm their culture. Campus environments also need to be culturally responsive, providing learning and support systems that respond to the cultural norms of their students. In particular, our findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive practices within campus counseling staff. Students often do not access valuable resources because institutions do not share critical information about these resources in ways that ensure students actually see them and use them. For example, student support services, such as Career Centers and Advising Programs, need to intentionally and proactively provide students information rather than waiting for them to seek them out. Lastly, our findings underscore the importance of institutional expectations and their implications for students. Co-researchers were highly sensitive to messages regarding timelines for success, and institutions should consider the potential impacts of success initiatives that aim to promote specific timelines for student graduation.

The study offers several implications for future research. First, this study demonstrates the richness that results from working alongside Latine students in research. Future researchers examining the role of institutions on success should continue centering students in their research. Additionally, future researchers should consider examining the generalizability of these findings with Latine students at other institutions or using other methods. More specifically, given the

centrality of cultural expectations and mental health concerns, we encourage future researchers to examine the role of cultural and institutional expectations on student adjustment and success. Separately, many of the findings speak to the role for greater support and cultural responsiveness needed by faculty and student support staff - future research should examine the perspectives of these institutional representatives in serving Latine students.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations that may impact the transferability of findings from this study. First, the data for this study were collected at a large institution. It may be that the student experiences described were associated with the large student population and we caution extending these findings to institutions of higher education of other sizes. Additionally, the institution was situated in Northern California, a context where Latine youth represent the majority, which may yield different perceptions from those of Latine youth who have lived in contexts with different racial/ethnic demographics. In addition to these contextual considerations, the sample is small and may not extend to the experiences of other Latine students. Despite these shortcomings, this study provides a rich description of the lived experiences of a cohort of Latine undergraduates, which can inform those institutions meant to serve them.

### **Conclusion**

Hispanic Serving Institutions enroll approximately 63% of all Latine undergraduates in the United States. Their role in the success of Latine college attainment merits greater examination into the ways they support Latine students towards college completion. Overall, this study highlights Latine students' desire for a college experience that centers their identity development and degree attainment and underscores the role of culturally affirming environments in their experiences. Additionally, the findings emphasize the importance of student perceptions of cultural and institutional expectations on their success. Given this, future

researchers should examine the role of institutional expectations on student success and well-being.

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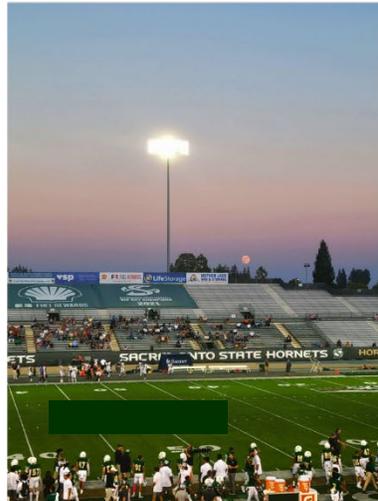
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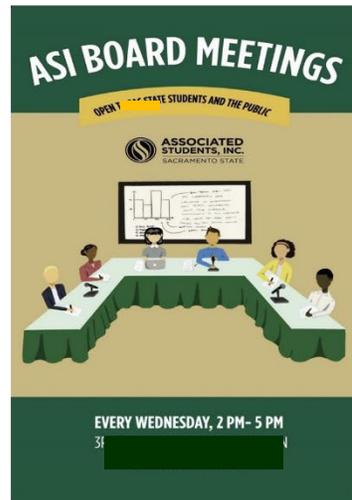
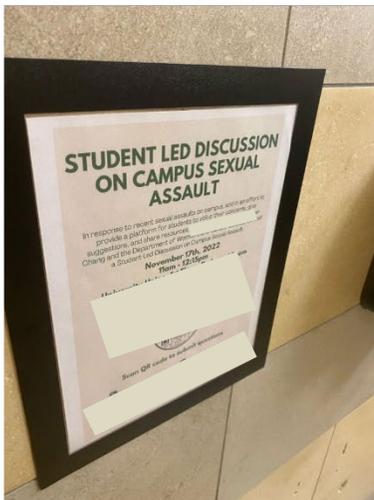
**Figure 1.**

*Students Desire for a Holistic Experience*

*Developing Ourselves Outside of Academics*



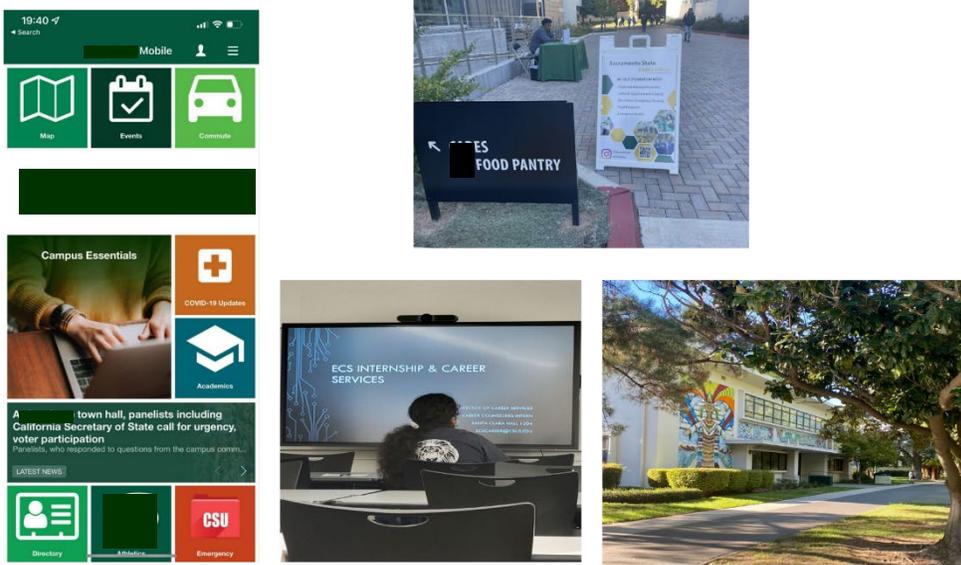
*Let Our Voices Be Heard!*



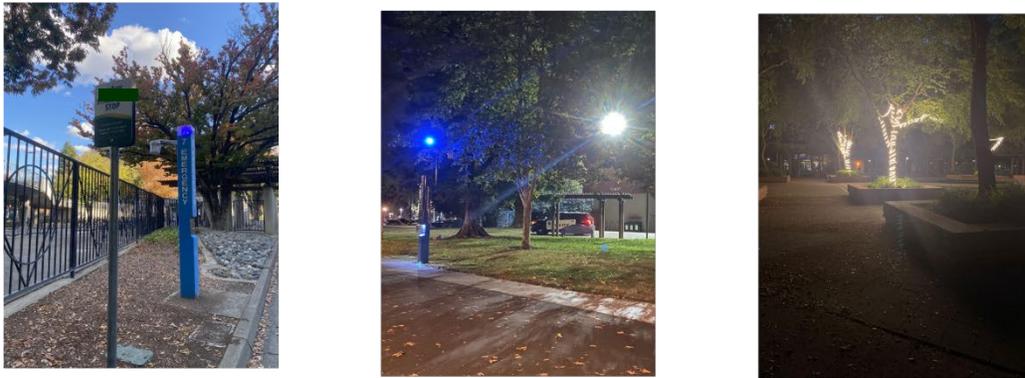
**Figure 2.**

*Access to Campus Resources and Culturally Affirming Spaces*

*Where are the Resources We Pay for?*



*Safety*



*We Need Spaces to Embrace Our Cultures*



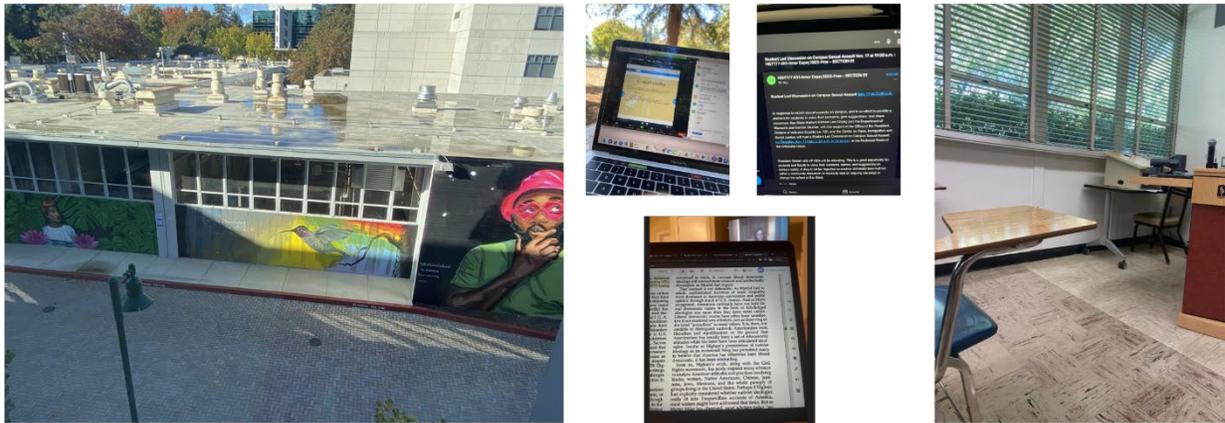
**Figure 3.**

*Need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Classroom Environment*

*Representation of the Latine Culture is Needed in Our Classroom*



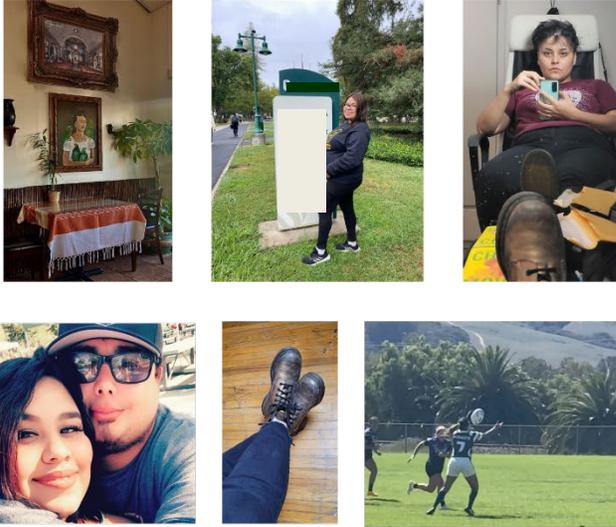
*Improving Our Classes for Student Success*



**Figure 4.**

*Pushing Against Personal, Cultural, and Institutional Expectations*

*We are More Than Just Students*



*Hustle Culture*



*"Ese Vive en las Nubes" [They Live in the Clouds]*

