

# Latine undergraduate students indicate need for greater Latine cultural representation within HSIs

## Research Brief

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This research brief is a part of a larger series that examines Latine undergraduate student perceptions of “servingsness” at California State University, Sacramento, a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). These briefs are drawn from the Finding Comunidad: Exploring Servingsness at a Hispanic Serving Institution project.

Briefs in the series can be found on the project’s website or by scanning the QR code: <https://www.usingourvoiceshsi.com/publications>



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**This brief reports on Latine student perceptions of cultural representation at Sacramento State, a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), through photovoice and a student survey.** We present integrated findings from photovoice and the survey alongside administrative data from Sacramento State. The brief concludes with implications for institutions of higher education.

## Key Findings

**While Latine students identify culturally-relevant academic and campus experiences, there are indications that more work needs to be done to increase these experiences and foster a greater sense of belongingness for Latine students on campus.**

- As of spring 2023, Latine faculty to Latine student ratio at Sacramento State was 1:62.
- Qualitative results found that students identify specific professors and courses where they feel represented but felt that their overall academic experience lacked culturally-relevant pedagogy and content.
- Among survey respondents, 1 in 4 respondents do not feel that faculty include their culture in course topics.
- One in 5 survey respondents said they have considered leaving Sacramento State because they felt isolated or unwelcome.



Image 1. Picture of Latine faculty member at California State University, Sacramento.

## Why research Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)?

Latine undergraduate enrollment in the U.S. doubled from 1.4 million in 2000 to 3.2 million in 2016<sup>1</sup>. Higher education institutions fail to graduate Latine students at the same rate as their peers<sup>2</sup>. This includes Hispanic Serving Institutions. This failure requires an examination on how institutions can better support Latine students.

There are over 600 HSIs in the United States and they enroll approximately 63% of all Latine students<sup>3</sup>. The Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) designation is provided by the federal government to colleges and universities where they enroll at least 25% of Latine students. While the HSI designation implies that these institutions serve students, it is based solely on enrollment. The HSI designation does not provide guidance on ways to support Latine student success<sup>4,5</sup>. We need more research into the ways that HSIs can move beyond enrolling high numbers of Latine students to serving them.

## Introduction

Institutions of higher education continue to grapple with criticisms that they do not mirror the growing racial and ethnic diversity of young people as well as center ways of knowing that reproduce larger systems of inequity<sup>6</sup>. In fall 2021, 6 percent of faculty were Latine<sup>7</sup> while 21 percent of undergraduate students were Latine<sup>8</sup> in higher education across the United States. Thus, in 2021 the ratio of Latine undergraduate students to Latine faculty was 110:3 (3.3 million to 90 thousand). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in fall 2022 only 6% of full-time faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions identified as Latine, whereas 7% identified as Black, 13% identified as Asian, and 72% identified as White<sup>9</sup>. HSIs are not immune to this dire lack or representation of Latine faculty. At HSIs, independent of race, the average student to faculty ratio is 28 to 1, whereas the average ratio of Latine students to Latine faculty is 146 to 1<sup>10</sup>.

Scholars have pointed to the role that representation across faculty, staff, and curriculum can have on students. Previous research suggests that greater representation of Latine faculty was associated with greater Latine student success, including student retention and graduation rates<sup>11,12,13</sup>. Beyond faculty representation, Latine students do better when they feel faculty relate to their cultural concerns and their culture is reflected in the curriculum.<sup>14</sup> Scholars argue that faculty who teach in a way that embraces cultural diversity through topics discussed, readings assigned, and activities create an opportunity for students to have a holistic learning experience that enhances their critical thinking, information processing, and academic achievement. It also provides them an opportunity to develop a sense of purpose while also enhancing their psychological well-being and development of positive interpersonal relationships<sup>15</sup>.

This is supported by the Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of *Servingness* in HSIs<sup>16</sup>, a conceptual framework which helps us understand how student academic and nonacademic outcomes are affected by institutional structures and external influences on servingness. For example, Garcia and colleagues argue that representation through faculty and staff as well as within curriculum, pedagogy, and programs are structures for *servingness* which support student success through culturally validating experiences<sup>17</sup>. They argue that regardless of the race of a faculty member, faculty must enhance their knowledge and skills of teaching racially minoritized students at HSIs.

In this brief we present findings from mixed methods research exploring Latine student perceptions of servingness at California State University, Sacramento, a Hispanic Serving Institution. We report on analysis of photovoice and student survey data regarding Latine student perceptions of cultural representation at the institution. We also integrate administrative data on Latine students and data at the institution. Insights from the project can inform how HSIs can better serve Latine students and their success.

## Findings

The question of Latine representation on campus was highlighted across both cohorts in their photovoice themes as well as uplifted by our survey results. An examination of the qualitative photovoice themes and survey findings resulted in two integrated themes: (1) Greater representation of Latine culture in academics is needed; and (2) Emerging representation of Latine culture across campus and within organization identity. These integrated themes are represented below and include the supporting photovoice and survey findings.

### **Greater representation of Latine culture in academics is needed**

Across methods, we find that students identified an opportunity for greater representation of Latine culture within their classroom experiences, curriculum and faculty. This emerged within the photovoice process, as shown in the photovoice theme “representation of the Latine culture is needed in our classroom” and is supported by student survey responses. We also present administrative data on Latine faculty at Sacramento State to contextualize these findings.

*Photovoice Theme: “Representation of the Latine culture is needed in our classroom.”*

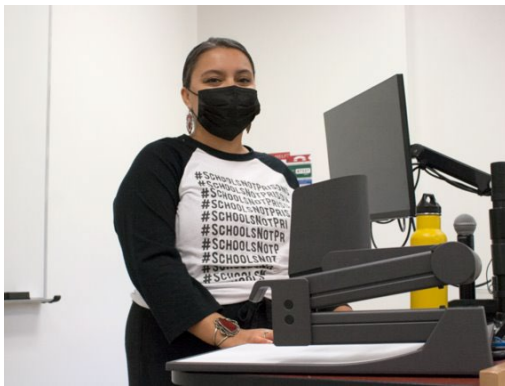


Image 2. Picture of Latine faculty member taken to exemplify Latine representation among faculty and a place in which they felt Latine culture was reflected.

Student co-researchers spoke directly to representation with their theme, “**Representation of the Latine culture is needed in our classroom.**” They summarized their theme as follows: “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.”

*Student survey responses*

On average, student respondents only slightly agree that faculty ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) and administration ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ) represent the Latine community. The classroom goes beyond just faculty representation and includes course content. On average, within their classroom experiences, student respondents slightly agree that faculty include their culture in course topics ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ), readings ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ), and course assignments ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ).

*Latine Student to Faculty Ratio*

Institutional data from spring 2023 comparing the number of Latine faculty to Latine undergraduate students in each college demonstrates the lack of representation among Latine faculty. Across the seven academic colleges at Sacramento State there were a total of 1,780 instructional faculty. Among those faculty, 509 were tenured, 218 were on the tenure-track, and the remaining 1,053 were contingent faculty, or faculty that hold non-tenure-track positions. Of the total 1,780 instructional faculty, only 154 self-identified as Latine. Additionally, among those 154 Latine instructional faculty, only 59 were tenured ( $n = 40$ ) or on the tenured track ( $n = 19$ ). The remaining 95 Latine instructional faculty were contingent faculty.

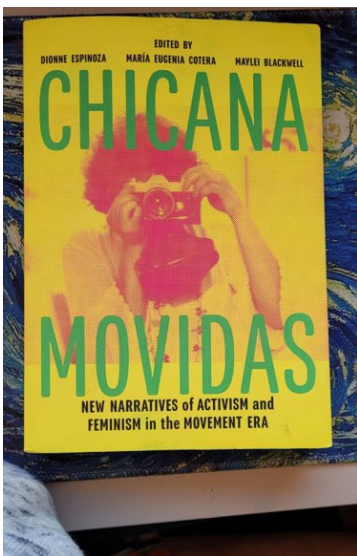
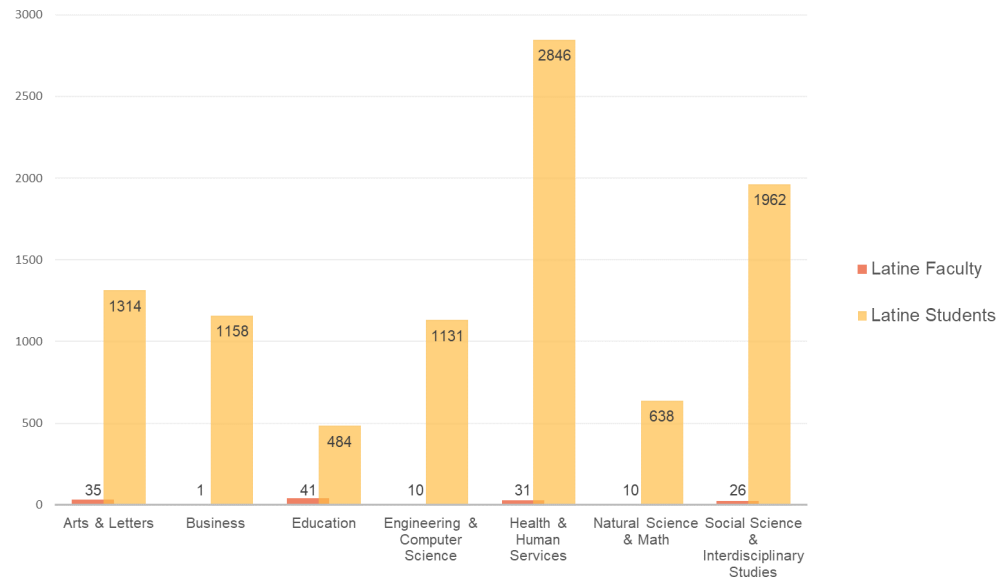


Image 3. Picture of a book entitled, “Chicana Movidas” being read as part of a course and taken to show representation in academics.

Figure 1. Number of Sacramento State Latine Students and Faculty by College, Spring 2023  
Looking across this graph, the college with the highest Latine faculty to student ratio is the College of



Education, where there were 12 Latine students for every 1 Latine faculty. On the other end, the College of Business only had 1 Latine faculty member and 1,158 Latine students. It should be noted that this one faculty member is a contingent faculty member.

### Emerging representation of Latine culture across campus & within organizational identity

Across methods, we find that many Latine students recognize that there are opportunities to gain greater awareness about their Latine culture on campus. At the same time, Latine students report feeling unwelcome. This emerged within the photovoice process, as shown in the photovoice theme “Great intentions, needs attention” and is supported by student survey responses. These are presented below. Given the potential links between organizational identity, or how members of the institution define what is central to them as an organization, and student belongingness, we also examined whether students were aware of Sacramento State’s HSI status, presented below.

#### Photovoice Theme: “Great intentions, needs attention.”

One theme identified by student co-researchers entitled, “**Great Intentions, Needs Attention**” highlights how Latine students urge the campus to do more.



Image 4. Part of the face and body of an Indigenous Latine student seated in front of the new Science building on campus. Their face was obstructed to illustrate how they felt unwelcome in this new building.

They wrote, “We have found some representation on campus but not enough. We have found representation through artwork on campus, although sometimes the stories behind the artwork are unclear. We worry that some spaces are meant to check the box for diversity and inclusion, but we do not feel that we belong. In the first picture (Image 4), we see that new spaces are created, but where do Latine students belong in these spaces? Some of us have experienced being questioned for being in particular spaces or being turned away when asking questions. In the second picture (Image 5) we see a place that was made for all of us, yet it is a place where we do not always feel welcome. The Multi-Cultural Center is for students of all cultures but does not seem welcoming from the outside. A place meant for many yet

feels hidden and unwelcoming. These are just two examples of where we have questioned Latine visibility.”

### *Student survey responses regarding belongingness*



Image 5. Picture in front of the bright, well-advertised storefront of a commercial coffee shop on campus which overpowers the Multicultural Center to the right which appears dark and without a sign.

Our survey findings similarly reveal a tension between belonging on campus and the need for greater representation. On average, student respondents feel a strong connection to the community on this campus ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) and that their culture is valued on campus ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ). Additionally, over half of student respondents report they agree with the statement, "on campus there are enough opportunities to gain knowledge about my own cultural community" ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). **By the same token, 1 in 5 student respondents said they have considered leaving Sacramento State because they felt isolated or unwelcome** ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ). Of particular concern, 14.3% of survey respondents reported feeling discriminated against in the last 12 months at Sacramento State.

### *Student survey responses awareness of Sacramento State's HSI Designation*

We found that visibility of Sac State as an HSI is lacking. **A little less than half of Latine student respondents (49.2%; n = 188) are aware that Sacramento State is designated a Hispanic Serving Institution.**

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study is critical to expanding our understanding of how HSIs, which serve 63% of all Latine students<sup>18</sup>, can go beyond enrolling high numbers of Latine students to serving these students and supporting their holistic success. By engaging students as co-researchers we incorporate their lived experiences directly into our understanding of how institutional elements affirm students' cultural and racial ways of knowing to support them and their communities.

This study finds that while many Latine students are finding their culture represented in courses and staff on campus, others feel that Latine culture is not included in their course materials, and the faculty they see. Moreover, one in five reported they have considered leaving Sacramento State because they felt isolated or unwelcome. Alarming, we found 14.3 percent of survey respondents reported feeling discriminated against in the last 12 months at their institution, which is too high a number as no student should experience discrimination on campus. These findings suggest that greater efforts are needed to foster belongingness for Latine students on campus.

Greater belongingness may be fostered through greater representation across academics. Across methods, the study finds that Latine students identify greater opportunity for culturally-relevant pedagogy in their courses. Qualitative results find that Latine students want their academics to integrate their cultural backgrounds. This is reinforced in our survey results where Latine students, on average, only slightly agree that faculty include their culture in course topics – in fact 1 in 4 Latine students surveyed do not feel that faculty include their culture in course topics. These findings reinforce the value of culturally validating experiences for Latine students within the curriculum and support recent changes to the inclusion of Ethnic Studies within the general education program (CA AB 1460) throughout the California State University system<sup>19</sup>. In fact, the qualitative theme *representation of the Latine culture is needed* highlights Ethnic Studies as a discipline where they find their culture reflected across the curriculum. Nonetheless, we caution that this requirement does not silo the knowledge and skills related to race and ethnicity into this requirement. We must make certain that students do not feel that Ethnic Studies is the *only* place that they will engage with curriculum that honors their cultures, perspectives and experiences. **A recommendation includes working with a variety of academic**

**departments to review curriculum for representation of Latine culture, including authors and perspectives. This review of curriculum must center Latine faculty, student, and staff voices as they are often the experts of Latine culture and curricular representation.**

An additional way that Latine culture can be integrated into academics is through the hiring of Latine faculty. As part of the qualitative theme *representation of Latine culture is needed in our classroom*, Latine students identify the need for a greater number of professors that reflect their backgrounds. The survey results echo this, where on average, Latine students only slightly agree that faculty represent the Latine community. This is further contextualized by qualitative findings which emphasized that greater representation is needed and administrative data that find for every 1 Latine faculty member there were 62 Latine students. These findings support previous research that suggests having a diverse faculty can contribute to a more inclusive curriculum that reflects a wide range of perspectives and experiences in course readings, topics, and activities<sup>20</sup>.

Recognizing that students need to see more Latine faculty representation, some postsecondary institutions have committed to implementing faculty tenure-track cluster hiring to increase support for Latine students<sup>21</sup>. Nonetheless, institutions of higher education need to consider the role contingent faculty play in support of undergraduate student success. As of fall 2021, 68% of faculty members in U.S. institutions of higher education held contingent faculty employment<sup>22</sup>. Across public institutions, Latine faculty are more likely to be hired for contingent faculty positions than tenure-track positions<sup>23</sup>. Often contingent faculty teach more courses and have more student-faculty interactions than tenure-track faculty. At the same time, they lack the protection of academic freedom, representation in shared governance (e.g. program and curricular decisions), and job security of tenure-line colleagues<sup>24</sup>. As these institutions move towards hiring more tenure-track faculty that support Latine student success universities will need to be thoughtful in setting clear objectives for these hires and examine their hiring practices, processes, and procedures. **Institutions will need to examine their long-term plan and intentional retention efforts that support and value the unique contributions of Latine faculty, including tenured, tenure-track and contingent faculty, to the mission and identity of the institution being an intentionally serving HSI.** Faculty who understand the cultural and social dynamics of the communities served by HSIs can better engage with these communities which can lead to stronger partnerships, community-based research, and outreach efforts that benefit both the institution and the community. **Thus, these faculty need to be valued and supported in their efforts which must be reflected in policies and practices related to hiring, retention, promotion, and tenure.**

Lastly, we found that the majority of Latine students surveyed (50.8%) were unaware that Sacramento State is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Scholars have urged higher education administrators, faculty, staff and students who are at institutions that have received the HSI designation to incorporate the designation into their organizational identity and explore what it means to be Latine serving<sup>25</sup>. Using a “cultural lens” to explore the institutional identity places the institution as the one accountable to examining its structures and historical legacy for serving racialized populations. This exploration by faculty, staff, and administrators allows them to actively work to disrupt barriers to success for Latine students<sup>26</sup>. **We recommend that institutions of higher education establish a collaborative HSI advisory board made up of faculty, staff, students, and community members that advise the institution on policies and practices to intentionally serve the Latine community, such as initiatives targeted to support Latine students' holistic success.** Through uplifting and examining its HSI designation, the university can foster greater belongingness.

Our findings suggest that an HSI designation does not de facto result in culturally-affirming institutions that serve Latine students. By engaging students, we incorporate their lived experiences directly into our understanding of how institutional elements affirm students' cultural and racial ways of knowing to support them and their communities. The research team continues to engage in ongoing analysis of findings and implications for policy and practice.

## Methodology

This project utilizes a mixed method, participatory action research methodology. The first phase of the project utilized photovoice. Photovoice situates individuals as experts whose knowledge and lived experiences are valuable for transforming institutions meant to serve them<sup>1</sup>. Two cohorts of Latine undergraduate students at Sacramento State used photovoice to examine how they, as Latine students, define student success and see the institution as serving them. Student co-researchers in each cohort engaged in 8 rounds of photo taking and critical discussions related to the project aim. After these rounds students engaged in pile-sorting<sup>2</sup> and identified shared themes that emerged from the process.

The first cohort consisted of 9 Latine undergraduate co-researchers who conducted photovoice during the spring 2022 semester. They took 161 photos and engaged in critical discussions over 45 hours. They identified a total of 8 cross-cutting themes about Latine student success and how Sacramento State, their HSI, serves them or can better serve them. The second cohort consisted of 6 Latine undergraduate co-researchers. They conducted photovoice throughout the fall 2022 semester. They took a total of 54 photos and engaged in critical discussion over 42 hours. They identified a total of 10 cross-cutting themes. Each theme consists of representative photos and a collectively constructed narrative.

After completing the photovoice process, student co-researchers from each cohort came together to develop a survey. The survey examined how the themes they identified during the photovoice process generalized to the larger Latine undergraduate student body. Students were asked to respond to a set of survey questions that asked them to rate their agreement from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (7). Survey data was collected in the spring 2023 semester. Three hundred eighty-three ( $n = 383$ ) of Sacramento State Latine undergraduate students completed the survey.

## Why collaborate with students?

Research that centers Latine students' experiences is valuable for transforming those institutions meant to serve them. This research draws on multiple higher education frameworks including the Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness in HSIs<sup>3</sup> and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model of college success<sup>4</sup>. These frameworks link organizational structure and campus environment to student success outcomes. This suggests the ways that student experience the institution is key to understanding their success. Thus, more research needs to integrate the perspectives of Latine students themselves.

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**Table 1. Representation of Latine culture in academics is needed**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Faculty represent the Latine community	3.36	1.71
Administration represent the Latine community	3.46	1.64
Faculty include Latine culture in course topics	3.10	1.74
Faculty include Latine culture in course readings	3.24	1.76
Faculty include Latine culture in course assignments	3.40	1.77

*N* = 383.

**Table 2. Representation of Latine culture across campus & within organizational identity**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I feel like I am part of the community on this campus	3.34	1.74
In general, my culture is valued on campus	2.67	1.43
On campus there are enough opportunities to learn about my own cultural community's history	3.01	1.58
I have considered leaving Sacramento State because I felt isolated or unwelcomed	5.23	2.04

*N* = 383.



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## About the Research Team

The research team members include Latine faculty, Sacramento State students and alumni. Dr. Amber Gonzalez and Dr. Kevin Ferreira van Leer lead the project. Graduate student research assistant Maria Razo-Soto supports the project. The team includes co-researchers made up of current and former Sacramento State Latine undergraduate students. At the time of data collection, all co-researchers were undergraduate students from various departments at Sacramento State. The majority of student co-researchers are first generation and transfer students. Currently 9 of the co-researchers continue to make-up the research team.

## Message from the Research Team

- We are Mariposas con Voces and Songs of the Hummingbird, two cohorts of Latine undergraduate student researchers at Sacramento State.
- Among us there are multiple identities – Chicanx, Mexican, Mexican American, Indigenous, Salvadorian, and Latina – we are diverse. We sometimes feel forced to label ourselves as Latine without consideration of our multiple identities.
- We are more than just students and our identities change as we grow. We challenge ourselves to be the best version of ourselves.
- While we have some similarities, we also have different experiences and perspectives. We use these to lead us rather than limit us.
- We are determined to better ourselves and our families' lives through education.
- We aim to create change in higher education for the better, inviting change to benefit the students rather than the institutions.
- We stand to share our voices and experiences.

## Acknowledgements

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