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## A Hierarchy of Environmental Design for Latin\* Men at PWIs

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### Abstract

To understand the transaction between the environment and students, this study examines a Latin\* cultural center in facilitating community and sense of belonging for Latino men at a predominantly White institution (PWI). This study used critical race theory, specifically LatCrit to interrogate Strange and Banning's (2015) hierarchy of environmental design. Findings nuanced the understanding and experience of community, engagement and safety of Latino men within a racialized space at a PWI. Implications for practice are discussed to better understand how Latin\* cultural center environments contribute to the behavior and experience of Latino men.

*Keywords:* Latin\* students, Latinx/o students, Latino men, Latino men undergraduates, Mexican college students higher education cultural center, campus ecology, sense of belonging, hierarchy of environmental design, PWIs

Between 2000 and 2016, the number of undergraduate Latin\* students who enrolled in colleges and universities more than doubled from 1.4 million to over 3.2 million (de Brey et al., 2019). Given this sharp increase, a better understanding of the transactional relationship between



Latin\* students and the college environment is important. Specific to Latinx/o men, in 2015, Latinx/o men accounted for 11.2% of bachelor's degrees conferred to U.S. citizens (Snyder et al., 2018). The most current data of students entering in 2011 showed that undergraduate Latinx/o men had a 50% chance of attaining a bachelor's degree with a reported 50.7% graduation rate (Snyder & de Brey, 2019). As increased numbers of Latin\* students arrive to campuses, they will no doubt interact with the campus environment, specifically Latin\* cultural centers. It is the transactional relationship between Latin\* students and the college environment that creates the psychological construct that informs both sense of community and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Castillo et al., 2006; Crisp et al., 2015).

While there is a growing understanding of campus climate and Latin\* students (Ancis et al., 2000; Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rankin & Reason, 2005), little focus is given to the physical environments and artifacts of sense of belonging and community that exist within racialized and ethnic spaces for Latin\* students, specifically Latino men. To further nuance this transactional relationship of the person and environment, this study seeks to examine how the ecology and racialized space of the Latin\* cultural center facilitates sense of belonging and community for Latino men at a predominantly White institution.

### Literature Review

Lewin's (2013) equation of  $B=f(P, E)$ , describes the transactional relationship between a person and their environment. In this equation,  $P$  represents the person,  $E$  represents the environment, and  $B$  represents the behavior (Banning & Bryner, 2001). Lewin believed that behavior was not determined solely by the physical environment, but rather by the psychological environment of people (Walsh, 1973). From ecological psychology and person environment theory, Lewin's equation emerged for what would become the foundation of campus ecology (Banning, 1978). The study of campus ecology is one that looks to understand the interaction and relationship between students and their environment, specifically the college campus (Banning, 1978; Banning & Bryner, 2001). Both people and the environment offer different and unique characteristics, making for a fluid and nuanced transaction between the two. Furthering the study of campus ecology, Strange and Banning (2015), provided a hierarchical understanding of the psychological environment of people with their hierarchy of environmental design. This study utilizes and interrogates the hierarchy of environmental design through a Latin\* focused lens by



centering Latino men as the person, the Latin\* cultural center as the environment, and sense of belonging and community as the behavior or outcome.

### **The Person**

For purposes of this research, the term Latin\* is utilized as an encompassing expression that recognizes multiple genders and gender identities within the Latin\* population (Salinas, 2020). Utilizing Latin\* honors individual identity regarding gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, language, and citizenship (Salinas, 2020). The Latin\* term is used when describing those who ethnically identify as having Latin or Latin American cultural roots while acknowledging the nuanced gendered identities within said populations (Salinas, 2020). When describing a specific gendered population within the Latin\* community, such as Latino, Latina, Latinx, Latinx/a, Latinx/o, Latinx/a/o, the gender specific terms are utilized to offer both clarity and recognize the gendered identity of the person or population being discussed. Doing so, acknowledges the fluidity and complexity of gender within the Latin\* community, and the language that accompanies such, while honoring individual gender identity (Salinas, 2020).

A dynamic variable of Lewin's (2013) ecological equation is that of the person. This variable is nuanced and consists of one's social identities, experiences, and perspectives. When considering Latin\* students in such an equation, the transactional relationship with the environment is complex. Students of color, specifically Black, Asian American and Latin\* students, perceive the campus environment differently because each ethnic background has a deeply ingrained and unique set of cultural values and experiences (Ancis et al., 2000; Hurtado et al., 1996; Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1983). These values and experiences are disregarded on predominantly White campuses thus resulting in hostile, intimidating, and harassing environments (Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Through critical navigation skills, which include oppositional behaviors to White normativity, Latin\* students constantly interact and navigate an environment and culture that centers on White normativity (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Despite the use of critical navigation skills, Latin\* students often find institutions of higher education unsafe and violent (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). This lack of safety and increased hostility intensifies with increased media promotion of anti-Brown and xenophobic political agendas, policies, and rhetoric. In 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center coined the term "Trump Effect"



(Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016) to reflect the negative impact the election of Donald Trump had on campus climates. Muñoz et al. (2018) found that the Trump Effect greatly impacted campus climates and experiences for Latin\* students, specifically Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and undocumented students. Participants reported an increase in racist and anti-immigrant sentiment on campus, exploitation of undocumented student labor and citizen fragility, while also indicating that peer solidarity contributed to personal resilience (Muñoz et al., 2018). The Muñoz et al. (2018) study identified distinctions within campus climate to include political influence and its impacts on Latin\* students, specifically their mental, emotional and physical safety. The navigation of hostile campus climates for Latin\* students, including undocumented and DACA students, required resilience to succeed in an environment that was the result of White supremacy and normativity (Muñoz et al., 2018).

Research on Latinx/o men's experiences (Gloria et al., 2009; Gonzalez, 2000; Pérez & Sáenz, 2017; Pérez & Taylor, 2015) indicates that these students had a need and want social and physical spaces to engage with peers to foster a sense of belonging and community while growing in their Latin\* identity. Providing such social and physical spaces, especially ones that are informed by the collection of people within that environment, is important during a time when Latinx/o men are nationally vilified. Cultural centers offer such a space where students can explore their identity while receiving a level of cultural nourishment (Lozano, 2014).

### **The Environment**

The impact of the environment on behavior can be applied to the relationship between a campus environment and students (Banning, 1978; Banning & Bryner, 2001). The ecology and environmental culture of a college is composed of many elements, including but not limited to cultural properties, formal policies, and procedures and the daily routines of the institution (Kuh, 2001). Those elements inform how students interact within the environment and also how students assign purpose to such environments. Strange and Banning's (2015) hierarchy of environmental design included three purposeful linear environmental conditions (see Figure 1). The hierarchy of environmental design conditions are safety and inclusion, engagement, and community (Strange & Banning, 2015). The conditions of safety and inclusion and engagement must be met if the community condition is to be accomplished.



**Figure 1***Strange and Banning's Hierarchy of Environmental Design*

*Note:* Adapted from C. C. Strange and J. H. Banning, J. H., 2015, *Designing for learning: Creating campus environments for student success* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 140). Jossey-Bass.

The environmental condition of community is the foci of this research, as it offers a sense of belonging, a commitment to a larger purpose, and encourages engagement (Strange & Banning, 2015). “Communities establish a status of full membership for participants in an environment, offering them opportunities to engage over time in distinct history, tradition and culture” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 161). Students of color spend significant time making sense of the multiple layers of race, culture, gender, citizenship status, and language, all of which inform their experiences on campus (Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Cultural centers, defined as a physical location on a college campus with a mission and purpose to directly serve a specific student demographic, can offer a space for such sensemaking (Young, 1991).

To be successful in creating a place of community and facilitating a sense of belonging, race/ethnic based cultural centers must have a consistent, yet flexible, physical environment that defines common purpose, characteristics, and unique qualities (Strange & Banning, 2001). These environmental qualities can be defined through non-verbal social messages in the form of physical artifacts which include artwork, images, symbols and signs that give a sense of culture



and expectations (Banning et al., 2008; Strange & Banning, 2015). The physical environment of cultural centers is situated as a unique environment designed for a specific group of students (also known as a human aggregate).

Barrett (2014) found that physical environments promoted community through sense of belonging, social activities, and social support network. Similar findings were reported by Reif (2014), who found that physical space impacted student involvement and sense of community. Reif (2014) and Barrett's (2014) findings indicated the physical environment and human aggregates were important in the formation of community and informed behavior in the space. When situating the physical environment, human aggregates, and the formation of community, race/ethnic based cultural centers offered a unique setting.

Cultural centers were established in the 1960's and 1970's as result of political and social unrest experienced on college campuses (Jones et al., 2002). Black cultural centers were some of the first race-based cultural centers, many as a result of the Black Student Movement and Civil Rights Movement (Patton, 2006b). Black students sought to organize and utilize such centers to assist them in combating the discrimination, isolation, and racism that they experienced at predominantly White institutions (Patton, 2006a). These cultural centers, including Latin\* cultural centers, have continued to serve as social, political, and academic vehicles for students of color at predominantly White institutions (Jones et al., 2002). Lozano's (2014) study of a Latin\* cultural center at a predominantly White institution, found that students often engaged with the space as the result of relationships with campus mentors, peers, and targeted programs. Additionally, the cultural center has served as a culturally familiar space, hub for involvement, and a place that addressed the lack of Latin\* presence on campus.

### **Behavior and Experience**

The experience of community and sense of belonging emphasizes the physical and social environments and their role in both personal and collective learning and growth (Bickford & Wright, 2006). Community and sense of belonging are the result of action-oriented behavior which allows for such a phenomenon to be experienced. Community and sense of belonging, like any other behavior-oriented experience, is fluid and has a natural ebb and flow that mirrors one's physical and human environment.



In Strange and Banning's (2015) hierarchy of environmental design, the linear nature in which students might experience a sense of community and belonging is only if safety is first achieved; this later facilitates engagement within an environment. When situating an environment and those within it, how and when Latin\* students experience a sense of belonging, community, acceptance, respect, and value may be more nuanced (Strayhorn, 2012). This nuanced experience of sense of belonging and community for Latinx/o men can be informed by campus climate, national and local politics, and systemic oppression as it was likely that they "perceive themselves as marginal to the mainstream of life [of college]" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 324), especially on a predominantly White campus (Strayhorn, 2012).

Examining the perception of Latin\* students sense of belonging, Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) conducted a longitudinal study of first- and second-year Latin\* students. It found that Latin\* students who lived on campus had a higher level of sense of belonging. It was also found that students who participated in co-curricular events on diversity and who were native Spanish speakers perceived a more hostile and unwelcoming environment. These findings indicated that students with strong cultural ties viewed the institution as less welcoming and affirming (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

Similar findings by Nuñez (2009) indicated that academically and communally engaged Latin\* students reported a greater sense of belonging, but also experienced a higher level of hostility on campus (Nuñez, 2009). Despite active and thoughtful engagement with their institution, Latin\* students navigated hostile campus environments (Nunez, 2009). Such hostility can be experienced as a result of the campus culture and climate (Astin & Oseguera, 2003; Castillo et al, 2006; Fry, 2002; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). This relationship between the individual and campus environment creates an undeniable pressure and recognizes that despite curricular and co-curricular engagement, Latin\* students are impacted in non-ethnic spaces on college campuses.

One way Latin\* students make sense of their environment is through peer interaction and group membership with other Latin\* students. This interaction assists in the development of the necessary skills to be successful within an institution of higher education (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). These memberships and peer group interactions with other Latin\* students can be critical to fostering the feeling of being at home and increasing Latin\* students' sense of belonging.





Such sense of belonging is impacted by mentorship, Latin\* representation in both faculty and students, and an inclusive curriculum (Hernandez, 2013).

Building on such understandings, Garcia (2017) found that Latin\* students experienced a sense of belonging within campus environments when they had a level of responsibility within the socio-cultural environment, there is racial and ethnic representation, one is personally cared for and valued, there is a shared set of values, and when Latin\* identity was recognized and valued. These communal values, informed by identity, culture, and race, were also important for the Latinx/o men to rely on peers to foster a sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions (Pérez & Sáenz, 2017). These memberships, interactions, and environments are important to consider when discussing the impacts of Latin\* cultural centers at predominantly White institutions.

Understanding the ecology of the ethnic and racialized space of a Latin\* cultural center may offer a more nuanced understanding of how such a space may facilitate a sense of belonging and community for Latinx/o men (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This research builds upon the work of Patton (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) and Lozano (2011, 2014) in the pursuit of understanding cultural centers and the role they play in the college experience of students.

### Method

This study is an ethnographic case study utilizing a qualitative methodology. Through qualitative ethnography, a greater depth of understanding of Latino men can be explored through the study of the physical environment, the individuals who interact with such space, and the conditions that exist (Berg, 2004; Gildersleeve & Sifuentes, 2017). Critical race theory, and specifically Latin\* critical theory, known as LatCrit, is utilized. Through employing a LatCrit theoretical framework, research can focus on building coalitions and progress for the pan-ethnic Latin\* community (Bernal, 2002; Hernandez-Truyol et al., 2006).

LatCrit extends beyond the Black and White racial binary to acknowledge the experiences of Latin\* people, and address the intersections of sex, class, legal status, and gender (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). This extension is important as it provides a “fuller, more contextualized analysis of cultural, political and economic dimensions of white supremacy, particularly its impact on Latin\* people in their individual and collective struggles for social justice and self-understanding” (Davila & Bradley, 2010, p. 42). This Latin\*-centric theoretical



foundation, allows for exploration of how environments, in this case the Latin\* cultural center, perpetuates either racial subordination or empowerment (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Further, LatCrit is grounded in counter narrative storytelling to disrupt the marginalization of Latin\* individuals in aspects of race, ethnicity, language, and immigration/legal status (Hernandez-Truyol et al., 2006; Oliva et al., 2013).

Utilizing a critical perspective within the ethnographic method, this study focuses on the behaviors and experiences of Latino men to create a physical and cultural emancipatory environment within a Latin\* cultural center (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2013; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). The questions that guide this study are; how do Latino men experience sense of belonging in a Latin\* cultural center at a predominantly White institution and what role does race play in a sense of belonging in the Latin\* cultural center?

### **Data Collection**

This study examined undergraduate Latino men (the person) and the Latin\* cultural center (the environment) at a predominately White institution to further understand sense of belonging and community (the behavior). Data was collected through semi-structured photo elicitation interviews and researcher observations. A total of 18 semi-structured photo elicitation interviews were conducted lasting 60-90 minutes and two observations of the Latin\* cultural center were conducted. The process of photo elicitation provided participants both the opportunity to produce images of physical spaces that served as important markers of community and sense of belonging for them while providing rich context and descriptions of the environment through semi-structured interviews.

For the photo production, participants were instructed to identify and photograph physical spaces or artifacts within the Latin\* cultural center that contributed to their sense of belonging and community. The photos served as means to capture the environment variable within the Lewin (2013) ecological equation. It was through participants' photos and interviews that both the participants and the researcher built an increased understanding of the role of physical space on sense of belonging (Harper, 2002). Each photo produced by the participant was discussed in detail during the interviews. As the men looked at their photos, they were asked to identify the meaningful physical characteristics, reflect, and assign meaning to the aspects of the photo, and describe how the photo represented feelings and experiences of personal belonging and



community. Participants were asked to share why and how the physical space represented in the photo facilitated a sense of belonging and community, what such a space meant to them as a participant/member of the Latin\* cultural center, and the role that their ethnicity and race had in ascribing such meaning to those physical spaces. The photos were utilized during subsequent interviews to explore and nuance themes that emerged as result of first-cycle coding.

Researcher observations facilitated the identification of specific group patterns, artifacts and symbols, which are all important items within ethnographic data collection which aimed to center ecology of a space (Fetterman, 2010). Photo elicitation allowed participants to guide the research process through both their image creation and narrative to ensure experiences were captured in a consistent manner and provided a critical emancipatory opportunity (Berg, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997).

### **Participants**

Through a purposeful sample, participants were contacted because they met one of the following three criteria: 1) participated in a Latin\* Cultural Center event or program; 2) visited the cultural center a minimum of twice per week; or 3) employed at the cultural center. In addition, the participant must self-identify as a Latinx/o man and be an undergraduate student. A total of six self-identified Latino undergraduate men were included in the study. All participants identified as cis-gendered Mexican men and first-generation college students. This study took place at a midsize, four-year, public institution in the mountain region of the United States. The site was selected for this study based on two primary institutional characteristics: student demographics and presence of a Latin\* cultural center. The research site was a predominantly White institution with the fall 2017 undergraduate class of 56% White students and 19% Latin\*. The Latin\* population was the largest minoritized population at this respective institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a). Within the 2009 cohort of 126 Latinx/o men, 51 graduated within five years, resulting in a 40.5% graduation rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017b).



**Table 1***Participant Profiles*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Class Year</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Legal Status</b>	<b>State of Origin</b>	<b>Cis-Gender</b>	<b>First-Generation</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Carlos	First-Year	Undeclared	U.S. Citizen	U.S. Born – Dual Citizen Mexico	Yes	Yes	Mexican
Felix	Senior	Accounting & Finance	Resident	Mexico	Yes	Yes	Mexican
Hugo	Soph.	Marketing	Un-documented	Mexico	Yes	Yes	Mexican
Lucas	Soph.	Mexican American Studies	Resident	Mexico	Yes	Yes	Mexican
Maximo	Soph.	Criminal Justice	U.S. Citizen	U.S. Born	Yes	Yes	Mexican
Raul	Soph.	Criminal Justice & Criminology	Un-documented	Mexico	Yes	Yes	Mexican

**Data Analysis**

Data collected from photo elicitation interviews and observations was transcribed and coded to create a heuristic as a method of discovery and understanding (Miles et al., 2014). Data was sorted into patterns and coded utilizing a first cycle and second cycle (Saldaña, 2016). Comprehensive field notes were taken during observations of the Latin\* cultural center. As central to ethnography, the researcher relied on the participants' stories within the interviews along with observations to develop an overall cultural interpretation of how sense of belonging and community was facilitated and experienced within the Latin\* cultural center (Wolcott, 2008). Two strategies were utilized to ensure trustworthiness. Data from interviews, photos, and researcher observations were triangulated to develop an understanding of sense of belonging.



Member checks were conducted to ensure accuracy of themes, findings, and the experiences of participant voices was represented appropriately. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checks are “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314).

### **Findings**

The conditional aspects of safety and inclusion, involvement, and community outlined in Strange and Banning’s (2015) hierarchy of environmental design were found to be central themes by the participants, but in reverse order. For all the men in this study, their racial, ethnic, citizenship/legal status, class, and gender identities greatly influenced the transactional relationship had with the Latin\* cultural center environment. It was the ethnic and racialized focused environment that facilitated community which later supported involvement and the sense of safety. A Latin\* centric hierarchy of environmental design is offered to acknowledge the nuanced experience of Latino men within a Latin\* cultural center at a predominantly White institution.

### **Community**

According to the men in this study, the physical space of the Latin\* cultural center was one of the first signifiers that this space was different from others on campus. It was the physical artifacts within the Latin\* cultural center that indicated a level of person-environment congruence. Maximo was one of the first men to discuss the physical artifacts and images within the Latin\* cultural center that centered on Latin\* individuals and culture.

Throughout the center there's things that represent us and that creates a sense of belonging because those are individuals that fought so we can have a place here. Being able to see that in the center, facilitates everything to me; like that sense of belonging and that sense of being safe. (Maximo)

The physical attributes and artifacts of the Latin\* cultural center influenced a sense of purpose for these men. For Lucas, the center reminded him of home and he quickly compared the small artifacts in the kitchen saying “you always have something in the kitchen . . . whether that be a drawing, a family picture, a little, um, the center pieces your mom took from a quinceañera.” The physical artifacts and attributes of the space had a level of familiarity and cultural relevance that facilitated a sense of belonging and community. Maximo explicitly stated that it was images within the Latin\* cultural center that gave him inspiration and hope because



there “is artwork that represents me.” Raul internalized the visual messages of the center and discussed the images as serving as motivation and a sense of purpose while at college and beyond.

It creates a sense of belonging for me because this is where we've been at and look where we're at now. From Cesar Chavez, Che Guevara, and Frida Kahlo. It's like, look what they'd done. It's crazy because, I feel like that plays a part subliminally because you're like, okay, they did it and they look like me. I could do something as well. (Raul)

For the men in this study, the physical representation, from the furniture choice, layout, flexibility of space, artwork and physical artifacts, created an “home away from home.” For Carlos, this home away from home was represented through the furniture within the Latin\* cultural center. When discussing the furniture and layout, he stated “the grandma couches and everything, I honestly feel like sometimes I'm going to my grandma's house, like her old house that she had.” Carlos talked about coming to the center, sitting on the couches, talking to others in Spanish with some “Mexican music bumping” in the background. These activities were something that allowed him to re-align himself with others in a setting that was familiar and had purpose. The physical environment of the Latin\* cultural center was one that facilitated a community through person-environment congruence, cultural familiarity and ethnocentric empowerment.

A central theme to campus ecology is the human aggregate that exists within a space. Maximo attended the center’s welcome event as a first-year student during the first week of classes. It was the first time he saw a human aggregate where he saw himself represented and in a familiar community. Maximo shared:

I was like, whoa! I came to orientation all I saw was White people. . . . I came to the center and I see all these Latino individuals . . . just being here and seeing there's culture, I'm not at a loss.

Reflecting on that memory, Maximo immediately responded “I just feel grateful for the space or the fact that it is a home away from home to me that makes me feel pride.”

For the men in this study, it was the commonality of experience and a shared understanding of this experience that made the human aggregate of the Latin\* cultural center



critical to their utilization of the space. For Maximo, the cultural center facilitated a level of cultural community as a minoritized individual on a predominantly White campus.

Being able to go into that space even though they might not know your story, you still share the same aspect that you are a minority on campus and sometimes you are looked down upon. So, it's just like being able to go into those spaces and be with individuals that feel the same way towards the campus, brings a sense of belonging. (Maximo)

The space was prized because as Lucas stated that “it is one of the few spaces we have and it’s plenty for us to get help and succeed.” It became evident that the human aggregate of the Latin\* cultural center facilitated a level of being accepted and valued in the space. Reflecting on such sense of belonging, Hugo went on to say:

Well, since I was still like clueless about college experience and stuff, I was kind of scared and I was like, oh, this is going to be really hard . . . then I come into the [cultural center] and I started talking to the actual people. . . . I had already started to feel more . . . welcome. You know, so it was like the first place that I could come to.

The human aggregate, in addition to the physical attributes and artifacts within the space, greatly assisted in the development of a sense of community. The visual representation, both human and physical, facilitated a level of community that the men did not experience outside of the Latin\* cultural center. Utilizing Strange and Banning’s (2015) definition of community as one that offers a sense of belonging, security, and engagement, it was clear that the racial and ethnic congruence of both the physical space and the human aggregate impacted Latino students experience at this PWI.

### **Engagement**

It was the sense of community and belonging within the Latin\* cultural center that promoted increased academic and co-curricular engagement. For many of the men in this study, the conference room, complete with images of prominent Latin\* trailblazers such as Frida Kahlo, Cesar Chavez, and a massive wall painting of Che Guevara, was a space of learning and engagement. For Felix, it was his engagement with his major and an upper-class student who introduced him to a few student organizations and guided him on which classes and professors to pursue. Felix eventually joined a business and professional fraternity based on such



introductions. Maximo was invested in building a space and culture of engagement through modeling.

I have to be a role model to those that come after me and I always like to look in the future, to set an example in the right way. It's just like, 'Hey I'm Latino, I'm a Latino man, you're a Latino kid or individual and if I make it to college, I know you can make it.' I've always had that thought in my head. (Maximo)

For Raul, it was the community built in the conference room that facilitated a great deal of engagement. The conference room was small but important. A large oval table with rolling chairs filled the room with images of notable Latino figures, upcoming cultural events and resources hung throughout. It was the community that Raul found specifically in the conference room that facilitated strong academic engagement his first-year, but that engagement evolved over time to incorporate more community upliftment. Raul discussed how the communal space of the conference room helped him start a student organization focused on easing the high school to college pipeline for undocumented, DREAMer, and DACA students while providing scholarships to Latin\* high school seniors. Raul indicated that his engagement was focused on giving back with no expectation to get something in return, but instead to “know that you were doing your part to, like do, that cycle.”

### **Safety and Inclusion**

Situating Strange and Banning’s condition of safety and inclusion, it was clear that all the participants experienced a level of safety within the Latin\* cultural center not found elsewhere on campus. During a time of ongoing racist and anti-Brown rhetoric by Donald Trump and policies that directly targeted the Latin\* community, the Latin\* cultural center took on a different role and meaning. When reflecting on the greater campus environment, Lucas stated “Like the fact that on this, on the entire campus, we've got to be on our toes just in case anything were to happen.” The racist and anti-Brown violence in the forms of rhetoric and behavior created a sense of community that was based on ethnicity and citizenship status for these men. At a time when Mexican men were being vilified by the President of the United States as rapists, drug dealers, and murderers, these men found refuge and community in the physical space of the cultural center. Hugo, impacted by those words and beliefs, shared that he was “confused and worried. Like is that seriously what people think about us?” He went on to say that “the center





would be one of the only places where people knew the truth.” Understanding that central Americans were being villainized across the country for political gain, Lucas acknowledged it was through community and support where one could find safety.

In a time like this, we grow together as a whole to help each other, to be there for each other. Because we know we're all going through the same struggle and we know it's hard to go through it alone. (Lucas)

Situating the idea and concept of community as one that offers a sense of belonging, security and engagement in a sense of purpose (Strange & Banning, 2015), it is evident that the community for these Latino men was positioned as a political, physical, and communal refuge.

[those within the center] they're going to know what you're going through, what you might experience. They're basically going to understand more than other building here. I would say that's the main purpose of way. I like at the end of the day the [Latin\* cultural center Name] has people that understand what you might be experiencing. And for me as the main selling point. (Lucas)

The ability for the Latin\* cultural center to serve as a “safe haven” as Hugo indicated, was a result of the physical space and the human aggregate that facilitated the necessary conditions of community. When discussing how the national political climate was impacting the Latin\* students on campus, Maximo shared that “we still know the struggles of our families have been through.” For Maximo, he found solace and safety within the Latin\* cultural center as result of a commonly understood experience. Informed by the physical environment and the human aggregates of ethnicity, race, citizenship, and gender, the men in this study attributed safety to the Latin\* cultural center. Safety was a result of a shared ethnic community with a shared sense of purpose and value given the political climate both on and off campus.

### **Limitations**

The experiences of the six men in this study provide great insight on the role of the physical and human environment in facilitating sense of belonging and community within the Latin\* cultural center. While the findings acknowledge the unique experiences of these Latino/Mexican men, these findings cannot be generalized to all Latinx/o men given the pan-ethnic, racial and gender identity composition of the Latin\* community. Additionally, all participants identified as cis-gendered Latino/Mexican men which limits generalization of



findings for non-gender binary and gender nonconforming Latin\* students. Another limitation in generalization is that the men in this study identified as Mexican and the Latin\* cultural center was heavily influenced by the Mexican student demographic which utilized the space. Because all participants identified as Mexican, these findings are limited to giving voice to one group within the pan-ethnic and racialized Latin\* population. To understand the role of the Latin\* cultural center's facilitation of sense of belonging and community for Latinx/o men, participants must have interacted, participated in programs, or been employed with the respective cultural center. It was this familiarity with the cultural center that allowed for a robust data collection. Given such criteria, there may be limitations to applying such findings to Latin\* undergraduate students who do not interact or participate in their respective Latin\* cultural center.

### Discussion

The ethnocentric and racialized human aggregates of a culturally influenced physical environment informed the behavior that facilitated a sense of belonging and community for the Latino men in this study. Aligning with the findings of Patton (2004, 2006b) and Lozano (2014), the racialized and ethnic space of the cultural center provided an environment where they belonged, mattered and could find solace, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Patton (2006a) found that cultural centers were significant because “students learn what it means to matter” (p. 8). For the men in this study, the Latin\* cultural center provided a small space, in a larger hostile environment, where they mattered and belonged. Like Lozano (2014), the Latin\* cultural center served as a physical representation and reminder that these Latino men mattered.

The hierarchy of environmental design proposed by Strange and Banning (2015) acknowledged that the majority can greatly direct the cultural and physical environment of a campus. For the Latin\* cultural center research site, given that the majority identified as Latin\* and more specifically, Mexican, the transactional relationship between the person and environment was one that centered ethnic identity. This resulted in an ecological relationship that positioned ethnic and familial community as the basis for engagement and safety. It was the Latin\* cultural center that offered a counter space and allowed them as students of color to build the community that they needed and wanted (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Hernandez (2013) and Gonzalez (2000) found that the absence of a culturally relevant physical spaces and Latin\* representation impacted sense of belonging for Latin\* students. For the men in this study,

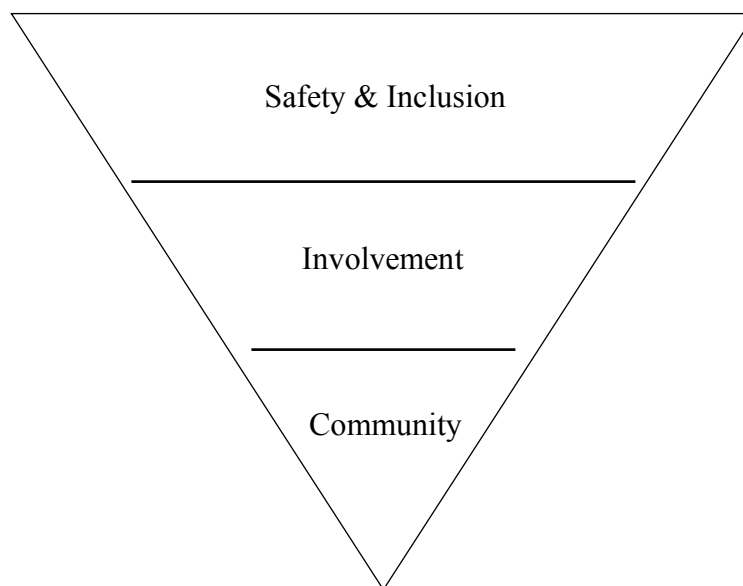


the Latin\* cultural center was a place of affirmation and filled the void of cultural representation on the greater campus.

The Latin\* cultural center assisted in the development of collective resistance, which included sustaining a counter-space and building community that affirmed cultural knowledge while challenging the dominant narrative (Ballón, 2015; Yosso et al., 2009). The findings of this case study of a Latin\* cultural center showed that a shared ethnic community promoted engagement and facilitated safety. This re-ordering of Strange and Banning's (2015) hierarchy of environmental design showed that the impact of ethnicity, race, gender, citizenship status, and language on the transactional relationships that Latino men have within their physical environment (illustrated in Figure 2).

### Figure 2

*A Hierarchy of Environmental Design for Latin\* Men*



It was a community, with a sense of purpose to support one another and thrive in a predominantly White space, that promoted engagement within and outside the Latin\* cultural center. The Latin\* cultural center served as a safe haven that facilitated mental and physical safety from racialized discrimination and rumored Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids. When taking into account race, ethnicity, gender, and the hostile political climates towards Latinx/o men, the hierarchy of environmental design proposed by Strange and Banning (2015)



can be inverted to identify community, engagement, and safety and inclusion, as the linear path towards meaningful and fully engaged environments.

### **Implications for Practice & Research**

Latin\* cultural centers are wanted and needed for Latin\* students at predominately White institutions. The first implication to consider is the ways in which Latin\* cultural centers provide purposeful outlets and resources for Latin\* men. Latin\* cultural centers should be able to intentionally identify culturally and ethnically relevant opportunities for engagement and involvement within the cultural center. Such opportunities would allow Latin\* students to not just see or experience community, but to provide meaningful ways to be involved in the community. The physical environment, physical artifacts and messaging should be conducive to culturally congruent engagement opportunities.

Another implication of the findings is for Latin\* cultural centers is to be explicit about the safety they can/will provide. The men in this study experienced safety within the Latin\* cultural center but such safety is often indirectly implied. The Latin\* cultural center should provide a space for Latin\* men to be emotionally vulnerable in an affirming and safe space. As Latinx/o men, specifically Mexican men, continue to be victimized as result of politics and policy, Latin\* cultural centers should explicitly identify how they offer mental, emotional, and physical safety for such a student. It must be stated that these resources and outlets should acknowledge and account for citizenship/legal status, gender, race, and class within the Latin\* student community as these identities inform, and sometimes dictate, what safety means.

The study examined the ecological factors of a Latin\* cultural center in the facilitation of undergraduate Latino, specifically Mexican, men. Further research is needed to address the experiences of non-Mexican men and the role of the Latin\* cultural center. Particularly, understanding the relationship between Afro-Latin\* and Black Latin\* students and the Latin\* cultural center. Additionally, examining the experiences of Latin\* students through a lens of citizenship/legal status and other intersectional identities within a cultural center environment is important work to be considered.

### **Conclusion**

Latin\* cultural centers at predominantly White institutions, offer a needed and wanted environment for many Latin\* students. Interrogating the environmental design of these cultural



centers through the racial and ethnic lens of the Latinx/o men experience offers a unique opportunity for Latin\* cultural centers. This study furthers the understanding of how environmental and human aggregates inform the behavior and experience of Mexican men. Additionally, this study contributes to the understanding of environmental design considerations for Latinx/o men when anti-Brown and xenophobic political policies and rhetoric are being advanced on a national level. Such politically hostile rhetoric, policies, and actions influence the behavior of making meaning of community and specific environments. In which case, it is the idea and experience of community that promotes involvement and a sense of safety within the walls of the Latin\* cultural center.



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