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Patrick Velasquez Ph.D.

Director, Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services (OASIS), University of California, San Diego

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A Qualitative Study of a Summer Bridge Program's Contribution to the Persistence of Underrepresented Students of Color at a Selective, Predominately White Institution

Abstract

This proposed presentation will describe a qualitative study of the experiences of ten underrepresented students (African Americans, Chicanos, and Filipinos) of color who attend a public, selective, predominately white, research institution: the University of California, San Diego. More specifically, it will examine the effects of those students' participation in a summer bridge program on their "ease of transition" (Hurtado and Carter, 1997) and their academic and social integration during their freshmen year (Tinto, 1993). In addition, the study provides a context for assessing the students' experiences by also examining their perceptions of the campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1999) at their institution and their subsequent "sense of belonging" (Hurtado and Carter, 1997).

Patrick Velasquez, Ph.D.

Director, Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services (OASIS), University of California, San Diego

The persistence and graduation rates of underrepresented students of color continue to lag stubbornly behind those of white students and some Asian groups (Wilds, 2001). At the particular institution at which this study took place (UCSD), underrepresented students of color experience critical outcomes (persistence, graduation, grade point average at time of graduation, etc.) that are lower than those of the campus average. The political and educational climate at public institutions of higher education in California has been radically altered since the passage of California Proposition 209, which effectively banned affirmative action at all public institutions in the state. Subsequently, efforts to provide a "critical mass" (Tinto, 1993) of underrepresented students of color have been severely hampered, with a resultant decline in the quality of campus climate.

At the same time, underrepresented groups such as Chicanos, other Latinos, and Philippines continue to grow rapidly in California. Thus, those groups will be counted on to supply the labor force (which generates public revenue) in the near future (Hayes-Bautista et al., 1988). Without increases in the college graduation rate of such populations, the social and economic fabric of the state is in jeopardy. Likewise, recent research (Hurtado, 2000; Smith and Associates, 1997) documents the important contribution made by diversity to the learning of all college students.

Therefore, a diverse student body that experiences equitable educational outcomes is critical to institutional viability and vitality.

Summer bridge programs represent an intervention (Tinto, 1993) designed to provide an extensive socialization to the institutional expectations and protocols of higher education (Attinasi, 1989). At UC, San Diego, the Summer Bridge Program is part of the cfipuS learning center, where it incorporates the program into an intensive array of holistic, academic year services designed to facilitate the academic and social integration (and subsequent sense of belonging) of participating students.

Ten students who participated in UCSD's Summer Bridge Program in 1998 were interviewed to gather data on their perceptions and experiences during Summer Bridge and throughout their freshmen year. The students were selected for an interview based on two factors: high academic achievement during their freshmen year and extensive use of the campus learning center throughout their freshmen year. These factors were utilized to determine the extent to which (and in what ways) the Summer Bridge Program and its academic year follow-up contributed to the students' successful adjustment. The study utilized a semi-structured interview (Merriam, 1998) that asked the students to reflect on and describe their experiences in Summer Bridge and throughout their freshmen year. To provide a meaningful context, the students were also asked to describe various elements of the campus climate at UCSD. Finally, they were asked to describe their sense of belonging (a critical outcome determined by Hurtado and Carter, 1997, to affect persistence decisions among students of color) and the factors that contributed to it.

In terms of the study's results, the students were unequivocal in describing positive effects on their transition to UCSD from participating in the Summer Bridge Program (as well as the learning center's academic year services). Their responses indicated that they formed diverse, close networks of peers during Summer Bridge that contributed to their social integration. The courses they took during Summer Bridge facilitated the development of their analytical, critical thinking, and communication skills, all of which are important outcomes of cognitive and intellectual development among college students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). The courses (which included a strong focus on diversity and equity issues) also contributed to their ethnic identity development (Tatum, 1997; Phinney, 1993, 1990). In addition, the students reported that they formed supportive relationships with UCSD staff that provided them with important "funds of knowledge" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) that enabled them to negotiate the institution.

The students reported similar, positive results throughout their freshmen year at UCSD. Their use of academic workshops offered by the learning center contributed to their achievement and academic integration (Tinto, 1993) in part by providing them a collaborative "learning community" (Tinto et al., 1994) that was a positive contrast to the toxic competition and individualism (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1999) that marked UCSD's freshmen courses. The students' first-year experiences also featured an intensive level of participation in ethnic student organizations that contributed significantly and positively to their social integration.

The responses from students describing the campus climate at UCSD showed that these positive experiences were achieved in spite of generally unsupportive conditions

(Velasquez, 2000). The students perceived a distinct lack of structural diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999), i.e., insufficient numbers of underrepresented students, faculty, and staff of color. In turn, as would be predicted by the literature (Smith and Associates, 1997; Tinto, 1993), this lack of structural diversity contributed to strong perceptions among the students of their own marginalization at UCSD and a lack of commitment to diversity and equity among the campus' leadership.

Within such a negative context of campus climate, the levels of sense of belonging reported by the students predictably reflected what Hurtado and Carter described as "membership." The students felt an enormous sense of comfort and validation in certain niches within the university rather than a sense of comprehensive integration into the institution as a whole.

The proposed presentation will provide a description of the context for the study (i.e., the political and educational climate in California, including the manifestation of resistance to the resegregation of higher education by Latino legislators). It will also provide a description of the Summer Bridge Program and its academic year follow-up. Finally, the presentation will describe and explain the design and results of the study itself, including policy implications.

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Presenter

Dr. Patrick Velasquez is a third-generation Chicano born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. His grandparents emigrated to the U.S. from central Mexico during the early 1900's. He earned a Bachelors Degree (Social Work) and a Masters Degree (Urban Education) from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He worked as a coordinator for the federal Teacher Corps Program at UNO in the early 1990's. He later served as executive director of the Chicano Awareness Center, a multipurpose community agency in Omaha.

Dr. Velasquez moved to San Diego in 1988. He earned a Doctoral Degree in Higher Education Policy and Student Development from the Claremont Graduate University in California in 1995. His dissertation focused on the process of cultural development among Chicano students and its impact on their persistence in higher education.

Dr. Velasquez has worked in the campus learning center (OASIS) at the University of California, San Diego since 1989. He directs a staff of twelve professionals who provide tutoring, counseling, and mentoring programs with a priority on serving underrepresented students of color. His research interests reflect issues of equity and diversity for underrepresented students of color, including how institutions of higher education can construct supportive conditions for such students.