Success is being an example: Trajectories and notions of success among Latinx faculty, staff, and students in academia

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Success is being an example: Trajectories and notions of success among Latinx faculty, staff, and students in academia

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ABSTRACT
This study explores trajectories and experiences of Latinx faculty, students and staff at a large, public university in the US. Using interviews and photo elicitation, we document the origins and different paths followed by Latinx into higher education. We note challenges faced by undocumented students, and the role of mentors to encourage participation of Latinx. We reflect on notions of success experienced by Latinx in academia, frequently associated with altruistic values of service to others. This notion of service can be turned into effective mentorship of students and junior faculty to strengthen the success of Latinx in academia.

Introduction
In 2016, I was asked if I would like to be recognized at a Latino recognition event organized at the University of Washington, and I was initially puzzled: is it a recognition of the quality of my work, or of the fact that I am Latino? It turned out to be both, and I found the event to be very inspiring. When exiting the second such recognition event for Latinx faculty in 2018, one of my recently graduated Latina doctoral students commented: “If we don’t celebrate our accomplishments as Latinos, nobody will.” Latino recognition was helping render visible the success of Latinos and Latinas on the faculty, which was an inspiration to other faculty and students. Latino recognition of university students inspires community college and high school students. Altogether, recognition of Latinx success in higher education inspires the Latinx community to succeed in higher education, and in other domains. Latinx recognition events scream ¡Sí se puede! (Yes we can).

Between the two recognitions in question, several things had changed. Most noticeably, while the first event had the traditional, gendered label “Latino,” the second event had adopted the gender-neutral “Latinx” label. Latinx is increasingly being used in social media, where it is replacing earlier gender-neutral labels such as Latino/a or Latin@. The Latinx label still sounds strange among non-specialists, but it is gaining increasing use in higher education, where it is disrupting traditional notions of inclusion and shaping institutional understandings of intersectionality, particularly with people living gender-fluid and hybrid identities (Salinas & Lozano, 2017).

In addition to the change in label, at the events in question the number of Latino faculty recognized grew by 50% between 2017 (19 awardees) and 2018 (29 awardees); some were repeat awardees, but most were new. This increase is significant, but still a small sample, considering the size of the faculty: in 2016, there were 15,308 professional, instructional, and research faculty on all three campuses, according to UW Human Resources records. Out of these, 3.3% or 511 are Hispanic, which is the label used in HR forms (for a discussion on the implications of the ethnic and cultural mix of Latino and Hispanic labels, see Strmic-Pawl, Jackson, and Garner (2018)). The number should be higher than 1,800, if the proportion of Latinx reflected the 12%
propportion of Latinx in Washington State. Underrepresentation of Latinx in academia, and in its pipeline of higher education, has been widely reported (Gaxiola Serrano, 2017; Gonzalez, 2015; Murillo, 2010). Common themes in the literature of Latinx in education include: (1) difficulties in access to higher education (Flores & Chapa, 2009; Núñez, Sparks, & Hernández, 2011) and, in particular, access to STEM fields (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2006; Rochin & Mello, 2007); (2) support for Latinx students, especially social and familial support (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004; Crockett et al., 2007; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006; Rodriguez, Ratanasiripong, Hayashino, & Locks, 2014); (3) persistence, resilience, and success among Latinx students (Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Kurpius, & Rund, 2011; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Wei, Ku, & Liao, 2011; Zalaquett, 2006), sometimes through qualitative (Cavazos et al., 2010) or case studies (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004); (4) feelings of belonging and representation among Latinx students (Flores & Garcia, 2009; Hagedorn, Winny, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007; Nuñez, 2009), particularly processes of acculturation and acculturative stress (Castillo, Cano, Chen, Blucker, & Olds, 2008; Castillo et al., 2004; Crockett et al., 2007; Raffaelli et al., 2007; Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008); (5) stress and mental health concerns among Latinx students (Castillo et al., 2004, 2008; Crockett et al., 2007; Hwang & Goto, 2008; Wei et al., 2011); and (6) the role of gender educational outcomes of Latinx students (Flores & Garcia, 2009; Raffaelli et al., 2007; Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Sy & Romero, 2008).

This study explores some of these key themes in the literature, with particular emphasis and insight on the variety of journeys and experiences, the particular challenges of undocumented students, and the role of mentors and role models in helping advance the success of Latinx in higher education. The study is based on a small sample of 30 qualitative interviews conducted with Latinx faculty, staff and students at University of Washington. The small sample does not allow for generalization to a broader population of Latinx, but suggests topics that warrant additional investigation for representative findings.

Data collection and analysis

Between 2017 and 2018, I spoke informally to numerous Latinx on campus. In addition, I used variations of a photo-elicitation technique I’ve called Fotohistorias (Gomez & Vannini, 2015) to interview 30 Latinx faculty (n = 12), students (n = 12), and staff (n = 6; note that some students also work as staff, so I count them under their preferred role). In Fotohistorias, participants are asked to take pictures or bring objects or photos that represent their experiences about a particular topic. The photos or objects are then used as a conversation prompt to explore the topic in more depth. This technique of photo-elicitation helps establish quick rapport with interviewees, and helps to engage with complex and abstract thoughts, feelings, and experiences by focusing the conversation on the image or object supplied by the participant, externalizing the abstract concept onto something tangible or concrete (Yefimova, Neils, Newell, & Gomez, 2015). Furthermore, the conversation follows a semi-structured interview guide in which participants add context, missing details, memories, additional insights, and personal meanings and interpretations to the objects and images they share (Gomez, Gomez, & Vannini, 2017).

Through photo and object-elicitation interviews with Latinx faculty, staff, and students, I sought to document their place of origin and their journey to higher education, with an emphasis on their trajectories, their notions of home and sense of belonging, and their understanding of success. A Latina graduate student collaborating with me interviewed some of the participants, including an interview of me as Latino faculty. The resulting book, LatinX @ UW, in which I am both a researcher and a participant, offers a rich sample of the stories and images we collected (Gomez, 2018). Under a more analytical lens for academic audiences, this article presents the key findings from our study of Latinx in higher education. Per participants’ preference, some names were changed to protect their identities. Table 1 summarizes some of the characteristics of the pool of participants.

With IRB approval from the Human Subjects Division (exempt determination, 11/1/2017), we recruited participants starting with those who attended the first Latino recognition event in 2017,
and then expanded to include staff and students in addition to faculty, reaching out through mailing lists, word of mouth, and snowball, seeking to reflect a wide variety of disciplines and experiences. In each case, we asked participants to bring a few photos or objects that reminded them of their place of origin and of their journey to higher education. We conducted interviews in either English or Spanish, following the preference of the participants; we recorded the audio, and we frequently took pictures of the participants or their objects and pictures during the interview. In some cases, participants also sent us additional photos after the interview. We transcribed the interviews in their original language, and coded using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. We then analyzed the transcripts in several iterations to detect emerging patterns and themes (Saldana, 2015). Finally, we edited the selected fragments for brevity and clarity, and translated them into the other language for a bilingual dataset. The following section presents some key findings of the themes that emerged in the interviews.

**Trajectories of Latinx in academia**

Five main themes emerged in the interviews with Latinx faculty, staff, and students at the university: we come from different places, we got here following different paths, undocumented students face particularly difficult challenges, Latinx role models and mentors, and notions of success as making a difference in the world. We briefly present and discuss each theme, with examples drawn from the data. We use participants’ first names or pseudonyms, according to their preference. All photos are used with permission of the participants.

**Latinx come from different places**

When we started spreading the word that I wanted to talk to Latinx at the university, several wrote asking if they would qualify because they were not “typical” Latinx. What they meant, we then learned, was that sometimes don’t speak Spanish, or come from families with mixed backgrounds, or followed many detours on the way to where they are now. If they self-identified as Latinx, that was enough for us to include them in this study. For many, the question “where do you come from” is a complicated one that evokes smells of food, sounds of music, or voices of grandparents. They sometimes think of their place of birth or of childhood memories as the place where they come from; other times, it is a place where parents or grandparents came from, or a place where they feel their roots are.

Guadalupe’s story may be close to what many people might think is “typical” for Latinx: she is the descendant of *braceros*, Mexican laborers brought to the US as part of a government program for seasonal agricultural workers. The program was active between 1942 and 1964, and brought to the US an average 200,000 workers per year. Guadalupe introduces herself, showing me a picture on her phone:

**Guadalupe**: I brought several things about my place of origin. I start with this photo on my phone. It’s from a small town called Villa Jiménez, Michoacán. My dad’s entire family is from Villa Jiménez, and that’s where my family’s roots come from. That’s where the story begins. My grandpa migrated to the United States for the first time in 1956 through the *bracero* program. He came to the state of Michigan, where he was sent to collect fruit and vegetables in the fields.

**Table 1. Participants’ Characteristics.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Countries of origin (or ancestry)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guadalupe is the first in her family to graduate from college. She is proud of her heritage. She brings cherries and apples to the interview. These fruits are symbols of the fields where her family works in agriculture. She shows me her decorated graduation cap, which she dedicates to her parents for the gift of a college education, two generations after her grandfather started picking fruits and vegetables in the fields of Michigan (Figure 1).

Other Latinx share a different story: they, or their parents, came to the US to do a Ph.D. Cecilia, for example, is the daughter of international students from Chile and the Philippines who met at Berkeley:

Cecilia: In those days Berkeley was free, no tuition. They both stayed in the International House, where they met, and then they moved to the Midwest, where I was born. My mother is Filipina and my father is Chilean. My mother published a memoir of her childhood growing up in WWII Manila. In the book, you can see a photo of a traditional Philippine dress. She wore it on her journey by ship to the United States. She wore that dress on the boat, and I wore it for my wedding 30 years later.

We come from different places, and our cultures and identities mingle and mix. While Guadalupe brought cherries like the ones picked by her family in the fields, Cecilia showed a picture of her mom’s dress. Others showed us grandma’s sewing kit, a bracelet or a pair of earrings, a shawl or a pillow, a mechanical calculator, a photo album or a musical instrument. Each of these objects represents a deep connection with what makes each one of us Latinx, and what we consider home.

Linda is one of the participants who called me to ask if she qualified as Latina for my study. Her story might be less “typical,” but it is a powerful reminder of the variety of places of origin that make us Latinx. Linda was born in Korea, and when she was a child, her parents wanted to emigrate to the US to give her and her siblings a better education. They hired someone to help with the immigration papers, but that person tricked them and got them a visa for Paraguay instead of the US. They were scammed. She grew up and went to school in Paraguay; she is Latina thanks to a con man. She shows me a picture of the moment she felt she was Latina for the first time (Figure 2):
Linda: I brought some pictures of the moment I felt I was a Latina. This was truly the moment I felt that way. This was in my first or second year of middle school, in Paraguay, where I grew up. Students with the highest academic scores were selected from each class to carry the Paraguayan flag. I remember thinking, Oh! This is not going to happen to me, because I wasn’t born in Paraguay. But there was a teacher who advocated for me. She believed that I should be selected because I had the highest academic scores in my class, meeting the criteria. The school principal had already selected Walter, who had the second highest scores. So I was also selected, and here I am carrying the flag. It was this feeling that it doesn’t matter where you’re born because of the contribution that you are making to the country. So when they gave me the sash and the flag, that was very special; that I have the honor of carrying the flag and representing the country. That was the moment when I was like any other Paraguayan, that I was part of the Latina culture.

Participants in my study came from or had roots in Argentina, Chile, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Honduras, Korea, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Spain, Venezuela, and Latin USA. Being Latinx is not a single place of origin, but a multiplicity of stories and memories. Being Latinx is not a straight path or a single destination either. In the next section, we discuss some of the forks in the road that brought us here.

Many paths in the Latinx experience

Being at a prestigious research university, it is not surprising that education plays an important role in the stories of the Latinx faculty, students, and staff we interviewed. For Ana Mari, for example, political exile and education are linked together. Ana Mari: “I did always want to be a teacher; my dad had started off his career as a rural school teacher and by the time we left Cuba he was Minister of Education, so I grew up in a house where education was the closest thing to a family religion.” For Andrés B, on the other hand, education is what drew him away from political activism, for the pursuit of science (Figure 3):
Andrés B: At a certain point, democracy returned to Chile, everything was going well, and I had to make a decision with regard to dedicating myself to a scientific profession or staying in Chile as a politician, and I opted to dedicate myself to science. It was clear to me that if I was committed to science, I had to leave Chile, because as a friend said to me once, if someone wants to do science, one has to do the best science they possibly can. For that, I needed to come to the United States to educate myself—something that caused a bit of controversy with my family, my friends, and with myself. How are you going to go live in the United States if they propitiated the coup on Allende? If they sustain Pinochet’s dictatorship, and have the entire Latin American subcontinent under their heel? At the time, I rationalized it by saying: Well, I am going to study, and I want to dedicate myself to science, independent of politics.

For Andrés Z, on the other hand, a Mexican college education gave him a ticket to get a job in the US: “I interviewed in Mexico in order to work at Microsoft. When I found out I got the job, it was like, no kidding, I just graduated from college and I don’t have experience. But when they said I got it, I couldn’t stop smiling all day.”
For several participants, educational opportunities opened the doors, but love is what made them stay. For example, Marisol plays her guiro, a Puerto Rican musical instrument she has carried with her ever since she first left Puerto Rico, and explains how education played into love. Marisol: “Then I came to do my Master’s, 20 years ago, and I stayed. I married a gringo after all; I never imagined it, because I am very Puerto Rican and very pro Puerto Rican independence.” Anggie, similarly, talks over a cup of Colombian coffee about how she left Colombia to study, and stayed for love. Anggie: “At first, what brought me here was the desire to explore, to learn. I wanted to practice my English, too. I stayed because my dream was to study and prepare myself professionally, and I stayed for love.” Mónica shares a similar story about leaving Peru to study and staying in the US after she found love. For years, she thought that staying was just temporary, until the day she and her husband bought a house. During our interview, she looked up a picture from Facebook from the day in which they got the keys for their new house, a compelling visual expression of her shifting sense of belonging (Figure 4).

![Mónica’s Facebook picture from the day they bought their house (used with Monica’s permission).](image)

**Mónica:** This has been a very gradual thing: circumstances, years, children and work, education, but with my children getting older, about 9 years or 10 years ago, from one moment to the next, I realized that I wasn’t going to return and it was like a bucketful of water. I don’t know how to explain it, but it was a moment when I realized that I was not going back. I had a friend in Peru who I always told: I live in Peru. And he told me: No, you do not live in Peru. When we saw ourselves buying a house, it was a moment when I said this is it. I realized I’m definitely putting my roots down here. In this Facebook photo, we are with my husband the day we bought it; the day we received the keys.

**Undocumented Latinx face additional challenges**

For other participants, opportunities for better education could only come later, after years, or sometimes generations, of hard work. The ladder is longer if you have to start below ground level. The path has been especially hard for those who come from families with low socio-economic status, and particularly for those who are or have been undocumented. Some participants shared memories of clandestine border crossings and deportation. For example, Vero remembers: “We were deported a couple of times. At that time you just got deported, and you just came back in. There’s not one single journey, and I was so young. I do remember visiting, once I had my papers.” Similarly, Rocio
remembers specific details of a little jail and of her mom crying, which she shares with us in a mix of English and Spanish:

**Rocío:** My parents decided to cross the border to the US, and the first time we tried was in a bus, **pasamos por Tijuana. Pero en el checkpoint** they put us in a little jail because we didn’t have visa. I remember my mom crying. We were detained I think a day, and then we were returned to Mexico. My mom was scared about traveling again, but **el coyote le dijo ándele señora, no más una vez más, yo la paso. And we tried one more time, y pasamos la segunda vez.**

Joaquin, on the other hand, puts his memories of border crossing into perspective as he shares a picture of himself with his brothers the day before they crossed (**Figure 5**):

**Figure 5.** Joaquin and his brothers the day before they crossed the border (used with Joaquin’s permission).

**Joaquin:** That is the day before we crossed, with my brothers. The three of us crossed. It was like a celebration, we were going to cross. There are few photos; you know, when you come here, you leave everything behind. We did not tell anyone, it was like, “let’s go and don’t look back.” It’s like that city in the Bible, if people looked back, they turned into salt. We had beautiful moments, once we started to make a life here, without looking back. I think that helped us a lot, after things were broken, one was displaced, both physically and economically, also spiritually, sentimentally. With more experience, one learns that in the middle of the things that are happening. Although as a child I did not understand, there are still beautiful moments. We are going to school, learning English, remembering where we came from. My mom has always worked in everything, selling wallets, pictures, food, mattresses, everything; always an entrepreneur, all the time, the Latin mom who keeps everything together, fighter, outstanding.

Displaced physically and economically, and starting again from scratch. This is a hard experience that is shared by others, lifting themselves out of poverty and going to school. Diana is close to graduating from college, and she reflects on how hard it has been, especially because she is undocumented (**Figure 6**):

**Diana:** Because for so many years I have had the dream of being able to come to the university, and now I’m doing it. I am already close to my dreams. I want to continue and go to graduate school and do all that. It has been difficult, because I am 24 years old and I had to transfer from a community college to here, and at the same time work, because I do not have papers, and when I graduated high school there was no financial aid. Yes, there were scholarships and all that, but it was not enough; you had to work very hard to get a scholarship. So for me it was like easier to say, “I’m going to a community college while I get more scholarships and I work
more, save money to pay two more years in college.” Before, I struggled a lot with my identity of being undocumented, because the first thing my parents said to me was: “Do not tell anyone, nobody can know that you came here like this, that you do not have documents, because if they find out they can deport us, they can tell the immigration people that we are here and we do not want anyone to know.” It was a secret that I always kept, and it affected me a lot. I always had to have a lie to say. But when I arrived here, I met people who weren’t embarrassed or shy about being undocumented. They were proud. Then, I was able to understand that I did not have to deny my identity and hide it. Rather, I had to take it out, and that it would help many people. Sharing my story and that I was proud that my parents made the effort to be here; my parents are still struggling to give me what they can. That means that my ancestors have taught them that they have to fight to have a better life and to be able to give better things to their children and their communities.

Undocumented students have a steeper, longer ladder to climb than other Latinx immigrants in our study. The challenges are bigger, the stakes are higher (Lara & Nava, 2018; O’Neal et al., 2016; Sahay, Thatcher, Núñez, & Lightfoot, 2016). There are approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in the US, and although around 65,000 of them graduate from high school every year, less than 10% go on to post-secondary education; of these, less than 3% complete a degree, and even fewer continue on to graduate school (US Department of Education, 2015). Undocumented students face additional challenges in higher education, including uncertainty, lack of funding and scholarship opportunities, stigma and discrimination, challenges getting internships and participating in study abroad programs, and access to mental health and legal aid, among others (Borjian, 2018; Gomez & Fonseca, 2017). Their success in higher education requires extraordinary persistence, grit, resilience, and creativity (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Borjian, 2018; Cavazos et al., 2010). The participatory photography method we employed in this study helps surface subtle details of this uphill battle, such as Rocío’s attachment to a pillow that symbolized her link to her home and family when she was undocumented (Figure 7):

Rocío: I have this pillow since I was little. My grandma made it, so this reminds me of back home with my grandma. I like to think that “home” changes a lot. I’m not from here nor from there. Sometimes I feel that my home is here, sometimes I feel my home is in Morelia, Michoacán, where I was born. But I realize that home is where my loved ones are. Now I have the fortune of going to Mexico every six months to see my family, but when I was undocumented the pillow was what reminded me of them. I feel that right now the political climate is so toxic for many of us that sometimes we get tired of saying that we are undocumented and unafraid. Although we do want to reiterate that we are, and that we are not afraid, fear still exists, we can’t really say we are not afraid, because we are afraid.
Fear is a constant companion for undocumented immigrants, and it exacerbates the challenges faced by Latinx to thrive in education.

**Latinx role models and mentors**

Overcoming innumerable obstacles after being undocumented as a child, Vero just recently obtained her Ph.D. She reflects on her path, and on the difficulties Latinx confront in academia, including the lack of role models (Figure 8):

**Vero:** Academia is not always a welcoming place for people of color. In high school, I never had a Latino teacher. I had to wait all the way to community college where I had two. I knew of Gloria Anzaldúa going to the libraries, but other than that I didn’t really see Latinas in academia. Latinos in the academy, people of color in the academy, that needs to continue to be highlighted. Because we still don’t exist here, we still don’t have enough Latinx faculty members, or enough Latinx administrators and students. With the marginalization that continues, our students need to see stories like these [in this study], because it shows that we exist, that we persist, and we also thrive. I think these stories are very positive, or can be positive because they can show our estudiantes what is possible. It might not be their journey, but at least it will show them that things are possible.

Mentors and role models are a frequent topic of conversation in our study. In addition to the well-documented importance of mentors in education in general (Bean, Lucas, & Hyers, 2014), mentorship has a particular importance among Latinx and other minorities in education (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015; Salas, Aragon, Alandejani, & Timpson, 2014; Vela et al., 2016). For several participants in our study, mentors and role models “who look like me” play a particularly important role. Like Vero, Magdalena notes: “I didn’t have a lot of role models, I didn’t have a lot of teachers that look like me. So when I came to UW and I saw that I could be in a place where there are people that look like me, that are there to support, that really helped me to gain a lot of confidence and give me purpose, in terms of what I could do as well.” For India, now a tenured professor, having a woman of color as a doctoral supervisor provided an important role model: “I feel like having a woman of color as my Ph.D. chair helped a lot. I began to see that there were other role models, other people that look like me in the academy, and it made it possible for that to be a place where I can survive and thrive.”
Similarly, Jessica craved role models who “look like her,” but she also realized that true mentorship required more than being a role model:

**Jessica:** I have found that having a Latino role model wasn’t enough. It’s a start, but it’s harder to have those role models learn to be more than role models so that they can become mentors. I think that’s when it gets tricky, because I’ve been placed in positions where somebody was perceived by others as a role model, and perhaps being a mentor, but to me, as a first-generation student in college, I wasn’t getting what I needed to get there. I ended up getting that mentorship from another person who was not a Latinx role model. Again, this is from my perspective as first-generation Latina in college. What helped me in my path to my Ph.D. was to have someone literally walking me through every step, and providing an opportunity that I can meet with them regularly and say this is what I’ve written so far, and they give feedback. I think that opportunity to connect to someone just to give you feedback on a one-to-one basis is so important. So what is needed is not just a role model, someone I can identify with because she looks like me, but a mentor—one someone who can help guide me on the way.

On the other hand, René, a first-year assistant professor, was a bit shocked that he was now a role model for other Latinos:

**René:** All of a sudden, I was placed in a category, in an ethnic category, in a class category, and that was a little bit shocking for me. I see that for my students it means something, to have someone that comes from Mexico. They could be born here, but it’s not very common for them to see a Mexican immigrant, a Mexican American, in a position of authority, a person that is respected by their colleagues; for them it means something. I have realized that immigrant kids see me and it’s a little surprising for them. They really feel a connection, and they come to office hours and they ask me questions, because they realize that when they look at me, they think: “Wow! My parents may have a humble situation but they have given me certain opportunities, I could be just like my professor.” I think success for me is when you’ve done things that help others.

The explicit recognition of the role now played by Latinx faculty as both role models and as mentors of other Latinx students has led some to be more proactive and systematic about their mentorship. Showing me a promotional poster on her computer, Tatiana describes how she created Latinos in Mathematical Science, Lat@Math, to support and encourage first-generation Latinx students in math, once they made her realize the importance of her own role as a role model and mentor (**Figure 9**):
Tatiana: Six years ago, I taught an introductory calculus class. I started noticing that I had a large group of Latinx in my class, and some of them were part of CAMP (College Assistant Migrant Program), which is a federal program that helps students who work or who come from families that work in agriculture. They have to come and get a paper signed that shows how they are doing in class. Three or four of the students came in, explained to me what the program was about, that they were in my class, and asked that I sign the paper, and they started coming back. I told them that they had to come to office hours and so on, and so that is how one student in particular started to come in. On the day of the final exam I had my two classes, 240 students, in one of these large auditoriums, and I noticed that there were fewer Latinos taking the exam. Then, when I talked to this student, she explained that not all the Latinos who had gone to my class were registered in my class. So what happened was that a group of them had decided to come to my class, and this student said to me: “Look, the day we entered that room with 240 people and it was just us, three or four Latinx and everyone else looked so different, if you had not been there it would have been really terrible. The thing is, you look like us.” That made me think about the impact seeing someone that looks like you can have. So, it was the first time I thought that this thing of looking alike could really be very important. This student, whom I greatly admire, comes from a humble family. She told me, “My town is smaller than the dorm where I live now.” Her mom worked at a fruit packing warehouse in Eastern Washington and her dad was a truck driver, and this girl came and told me, “I do not know what it means to be a mentor, but can you please be my mentor?” It was really thinking about her and thinking about the experience of all these students that made me change, do things differently. I told you, my dad was first generation going
to college. My grandfather was an agricultural day laborer. My dad only went to school 6 months of the year during elementary school because the other 6 months he needed to work cutting sugarcane. My dad was like these students.

Now I am on the board of trustees of IPAM (Institute for Pure Applied Mathematics), which is a mathematics institute at UCLA. A few years ago, we created a program called Latinos in Mathematical Sciences. It was thinking about my students and how to support them that we started this.

**Success is making a difference in the world**

Mentorship is not just an important component for the success of Latinx students in academia; it is part of the measure of success for some of the Latinx faculty we interviewed. Success, for many, is helping and mentoring others and making a difference in the world. They are successful because they overcame many obstacles to get into college or into graduate school, or to graduate with an associate, a bachelor’s, a master’s, or a doctoral degree. They are successful because they now have a staff position, or a faculty role in a prestigious university. These are all important milestones and indicators of success. But the notion of giving back, of helping others, and of facilitating the success of others, is a common feature in the testimonies of many of the Latinx we interviewed. Success, for many, is not for themselves but for others.

Guillermo is the first one in his family to go to college: “I think of myself as successful just because I am here. I graduated from high school and went off college, and I’m very happy about that. I’m representing all the people in my family because nobody, none of us, have been able to make it to college.”

Antonio, on the other hand, celebrates that he made it into college because everything is harder for him as a result of a disability:

**Antonio:** Successes come in all different sizes. For me, getting into college was a success because it wasn’t expected that I was going to because I was born with a disability. I was born with cerebral palsy. I am Latinx, but there are also different identities that I hold and having a disability is one of them. It was just harder for me to do pretty much everything, especially academics, and I had to work extremely hard. Every challenge I had to face as a result was a reminder that I wasn’t supposed to do it. I wasn’t supposed to be successful, and so I had to overcome that in my mind. Just being able to do coursework and graduate from high school, that’s an amazing accomplishment in itself, but for me, getting into college was on my mind for my entire life, and when I was able to achieve that, it really meant a lot to me.

Anggie is graduating from college and heading into graduate school, where she hopes to learn “more tools to be of service in a community or in a group.” Genia, on the other hand, turns a bad experience she had in college into an opportunity to help others who may face similar challenges: “I’m actively trying to help people when I know that something happened to them or they’re going through something, whether it’s a small thing or a big thing, because people are affected by things in so many different ways.” Joaquin graduated from college and looked for a job among those who had helped him, with the office of minority affairs of the university, where he can help others. He points out that success is not his alone: “I believe that success is collective. It’s family, it’s a group. Then maybe there is still more to do, and always keep in mind that success is something continuous, a day-to-day thing. It’s good to think about it, to see how you can help family and the community.” In a similar way, Jessica studied for her Ph.D. out of curiosity about how to best help underrepresented minorities succeed in school, and she now works doing exactly what she had long dreamed of:

**Jessica:** I wanted to work in a space where I can influence how we support students doing things beyond existing or surviving in college, but actually thriving in college. I was looking at research on those challenges. We see a lot of students get involved in service learning, and some volunteering, but not so much in research, and that is a gatekeeper for graduate school. So I really wanted to tackle that challenge and get students to really thrive by participating in research, helping them to get engaged and supported through that experience. That’s what I am doing now and I really enjoy it.

Only about 5% of doctoral degrees in the US are held by Latinx, and Latinx make up only 4.1% of the professoriate in the US, even though Latinx make up about 20% of the population aged between 18–44 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Several studies discuss the barriers for Latinx in academia (Ek, Quijada Cerecer, Alanis, & Rodriguez, 2010; Espino, 2015; Espino, Munoz, &
Kiyama, 2010; Saldana, Castro-Villarreal, & Sosa, 2013; Suriel, Martinez, & Evans-Winters, 2018; Urrieta, Méndez, & Rodríguez, 2015) and, in particular, the barriers to tenure and promotion (De Luca & Escoto, 2012; Machado-Casas, Ruiz, & Cantu, 2013; Monzó & SooHoo, 2014). Faculty members who participated in our study reflected on their paths and their current success. While some emphasized the obstacles in the way, others emphasized their accomplishments, particularly as they relate to being of service to others.

Neuroscientist Andres B considers himself the honorary consul of the Republic of Macondo, a mythical town for Latin American literature and identity. He speaks of his initial reaction to being invited to a Latinx recognition event; nonetheless, someone helped him understand the importance of highlighting the successes of Latinx scholars (Figure 10):

Andres B: For me, the success at this moment could be being an example, an inspiration. When I got the first email about this recognition as a Latino, my first reaction was a bit of feeling insulted. I said: "Why are you giving me a recognition, because I’m Latino?" For me, in the last year, I haven’t been successful at finding myself grants because it’s difficult to get grants at the NIH, so the truth is that I do not feel particularly successful at this moment. So when I got this invitation to participate, I said, but why, because I’m Latino? I don’t even look Latino. I’m not dark-skinned or anything. So I found it a little insulting, and I talked with a friend, and my friend tells me, “There are very few faculty who have tenure, that are Latino, in an R1 institution.” I knew that this was a top university and I started thinking that, yes, the truth is that there are not many Latinos who get here. Now I feel that I arrived here on my own merits, not because I was Latino. The truth is that I have been fortunate, but I have also worked hard. And, well, this recognition at the end seems very good and that’s why you have to support the cause. That’s why I really liked your project, to highlight a little bit more Latinos who do other things.

Physicist Miguel, on the other hand, shows us a mechanical calculator that used to belong to his dad. He shares his pride in building complex things in faraway places by working with teams of great people as his success and contribution to society (Figure 11):

Miguel: In terms of success, a couple of things come to mind. I’m very proud of my students. We build radio telescopes in remote places; we are doing this technically hard and abstract thing. We are trying to see the first stars and galaxies that lived up to 13 billion years ago in the early universe. Does this say a lot about human condition? It says something about our origin story. I love working on that kind of complex
and challenging problem. To be honest, the real success is about building a good team of people to go after this. We contribute to society through a shared challenge. What I really enjoy is trying to figure out how to solve the problem. And science at this level is a team sport. It's not individual; it's teams. And, in fact, it's international teams, so it get fascinating. Success is figuring out how to do something really hard with a good group of people.

Finally, engineer Cecilia speaks of overcoming her fear and learning to fly, which led her to believe in herself and pursue a successful academic career for the good of the world (Figure 12):

Cecilia: I went from shy, fearful child to who I am today. I was very timid because of the way I grew up. To overcome my fears, I learned to fly. I learned to fly airplanes upside down, and I became the first Latina to win a spot on the United States Aerobatic Team. You can look up Cecilia Aragón aerobatics on YouTube; it's not very good quality, but it's kind of fun. I overcame my fear of flying and my fear in general, and after that I realized what was keeping me from success and getting my Ph.D. was my fear and my lack of confidence in
myself. So I went back to school, even though I had two small children, and I got my Ph.D. It was very difficult, but I did it; I figured out how and I graduated. Everybody says how impossible it is to get a tenure-track position; I never thought I would make it but I did. And here we are. As a faculty member, I love working with my students, helping them be successful and helping them find the success in creative life that I’ve always enjoyed. I love my research; I’m very proud of what I’ve done in Human Centered Design and Engineering. I feel it has the potential to change the world, and that’s why I’m here. I’m here rather than in industry because I want to mentor students, because I want to produce new research that exists for the good of the world and not merely for a company’s profits.

The pinnacle of achievement in academia may be becoming a university president. As president, Ana Mari reflects on her life as a Cuban exile, with her childhood photo albums in Cuba and her academic career in the US, where she still has a hard time feeling like she belongs (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Success is not about the position but about the work (photo R. Gomez).

Ana Mari: I always thought of myself as fairly Americanized because my English was fairly proficient. I didn’t speak with an accent. And then, you get to Yale and you realize how Cuban you are. So it’s not like I grew up with a real sense of belonging here, and that sense of not belonging wasn’t unusual.

RG: At what point did you start feeling like you belong?

AM: You know, I’m not sure I ever felt totally like I belong. I spent a year as acting president of the university, and sometimes I like to joke: I’m still acting like a president. I feel good about what I have accomplished and I’m accomplishing in my life, but I don’t think for me the success is the position, it’s about the work.

The selfless accounts of success as doing the right work for the good of the world, being an inspiration, and solving challenging problems need to be turned into effective mentorship of Latinx students in higher education, encouraging them to overcome the many obstacles they face, to continue on to post-graduate and doctoral degrees, and to pursue careers in academia. Mentorship is needed even more once in academia, to ensure the tenure, promotion, and success of Latinx faculty, who face important challenges of power differentials (De Luca & Escoto, 2012), race (Bersh, 2009; Espino, 2015; Urrieta et al., 2015), gender (Oliva, Rodriguez, Alanis, & Quijada Cerecer, 2013; Saldana et al., 2013; Suriel et al., 2018), and culture norms (Correa & Lovegrove, 2012; De Luca & Escoto, 2012; Garcia, 2016) in academia.
Conclusions

Through a series of interviews using photo or object elicitation with Latinx faculty, staff, and students in a large public university, we explore the different origins and paths followed by participants to their current place in higher education. There is no single typical story or trajectory, but a multiplicity of paths and challenges, as well as opportunities afforded by families, networks of support and, especially, role models and mentors that help Latinx gain access and advance in higher education and academia. Undocumented students face particularly hard challenges, which account for their low enrollment and even lower graduation rates, and which call for stronger programs to support them in higher education. Despite the hardships and the common feeling of not belonging, Latinx in higher education tend to see success as a shared experience, which many people contributed to, and as a selfless pursuit of common good and service to others. This points to an important role for senior faculty to mentor junior faculty, for faculty to mentor students, and for graduate students to mentor college students, in ways that help strengthen the pipeline of Latinx in higher education.

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References


