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Take The Time to Listen: The Meaning of Support to Under-Represented University Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the meaning and sources of support for under-represented university students in the United States. Social support (Thoits, 2011) and validation theories (Rendón, 1993) informed this research. After the facilitation of focus groups with 16 Latinx students, two African American women, two White women who were non-traditional students and one person who did not identify their race, the undergraduate participants identified 58 distinct faculty, staff, and administrators who were described as supportive. Qualitative analysis using NVivo 12 yielded the following themes related to the meaning of support: being present, strategizing for academic success, a welcoming personality, support through campus employment opportunities and the absence of support. Although faculty members were primarily identified as sources of support, other university employees also played an important role. The themes demonstrated that university-based support was meaningful and important to these students.

Keywords: Social support, under-represented students, institutional agents, focus groups, university employees

The lower retention and graduation rates of African American and Latina/o undergraduate students at predominately White institutions in the United States has continued to confound researchers and student success practitioners. Complex correlates included pre-college experiences, institutional characteristics, and student level characteristics. In other research, faculty members were frequently described as integral to the undergraduate college experience through their informal and formal interactions as well as their student-centered approach to learning (Bongiorno, 2022; Fisher, 2007; Fuentes et al., 2014, p. 136; Roksa & Whitley, 2017). Interactions with faculty of color were particularly important (Holmes et al., 2007; Justiz & Rendón, 1989; Neville & Parker, 2017). We know less about student interactions with staff members and administrators (Regan et al., 2014). The purpose of the present study was to describe the types of support that under-represented students received from faculty, staff, and administrators. Additionally, I sought to identify which categories of employees provided the specific types of support. To identify these members of the university community, undergraduate students (five Latinas, two Latinos and one African American woman) were trained in focus group moderating and data recording. This work was informed by social support and validation theories.

1. Social Support and Validation Theories

According to Thoits (2011), social support referred to the functions performed for an individual by significant others known as primary group members; however, secondary group members may also engage in these functions (p. 146). The functions could include emotional support such as love, encouragement, caring, esteem, value and sympathy; informational assistance that helped the recipient solve a problem, and instrumental support which provided material or behavioral assistance to solve problems or tasks (Thoits). Much social support research focused on the connection between support and health outcomes (Kessler et al., 1995; Thoits, 2011). The literature also examined the role of social support in buffering stress (Reis, 1984) and determined whether perceived support was more effective than real support at reducing distress (Wethington & Kessler, 1986).

Research on college student persistence recognized the importance of support from family, peers, and faculty (Bordes et al., 2006). Social support was correlated positively with favorable perceptions of the university environment which was a proxy for student retention (McNaughton-Cassill et al., 2021). Yet, most of this research failed to explain what students meant when they said that a member of their community had been supportive. Others have theorized that institutional agents had a role in supporting low status students by transmitting social capital, participating in advocacy activities, and engaging in institutional brokering (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Stanton-Salazar's framework explained how faculty and student affairs personnel support students. However, he hypothesized that high status individuals in the university community were best situated to provide this support. His work neglected the role of other university employees.

Validation theory has argued that to increase under-represented students' sense of belonging and involvement in higher education, the students needed to experience self-worth, confirmation of their ability to learn, and an appreciation for their life experiences (Rendón, 1993). Validation was most effective early in the college experience and was distinguished as academic and inter-personal (Rendón). Academic validation referred to instances when in- and out-of-class agents reached out to students and help them trust their ability to learn. These agents conveyed that they valued what students brought to the classroom and gave students an opportunity to study topics that had personal relevance (Rendón Linares & Munoz, 2011). Inter-personal validation referred to the work that in and out-of-class agents did to foster students' personal development and social adjustment by building a caring, supportive relationship (Rendón Linares & Munoz). In their study of Latinx college students, Dueñas and Gloria (2020) found that a sense of belonging was a positive predictor of perceived mattering to the university. Involvement in student organizations was one contributing factor to students' sense of belonging and mattering. Holmes et al., (2007) asserted that Black faculty and staff were essential for African American students at pre-dominantly White campuses because they were role models, mentors, and informal advisors. This theory claimed that all university employees could validate under-represented students. Together, these theories informed the present study by defining the types of support and validation that university personnel could potentially provide.

2. Supportive Faculty, Staff, and Administrators at Post-Secondary Institutions

Through their comprehensive literature review, Crisp et al., (2015) identified nine factors that influenced Latina/o student outcomes: sociocultural characteristics, academic self-confidence, beliefs, ethnic/racial identity, coping styles, precollege academic experiences, college experiences, internal motivation and commitment, interactions with supportive individuals, perceptions of the campus climate/environment, and institutional type/characteristics. Interactions with supportive individuals were described as mentoring relationships, on-campus ties to faculty, and encouragement. Hernández (2000) suggested that connecting Latina/o students with supportive individuals can "serve as a powerful way to help students cope with the college environment, feel welcome, and want to stay at the institution" (cited in Crisp et al., 2015, p. 259).

In their study of first year students at a large southwestern university in the United States, Bordes et al., (2006) found that social support was associated with persistence decisions among Latina/o students. They concluded that perceived mentoring had a positive effect on persistence decisions but no effect on perceptions of the university environment. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, formal ties to the campus and to professors were associated with higher grade point averages for Asian, Latina/o and Black students (Fisher, 2007). The quality of the relationship and frequency of interactions with faculty members also had a positive effect on Latina/o college students' grades (Anaya & Cole, 2001).

Gloria et al., (2005) concluded that support from family, friends, and faculty mentors reduced the non-persistence decisions of Latina/o undergraduates. Positive perceptions of the university environment and experiencing cultural congruence were negatively correlated with non-persistence decisions. They suggested that Latina/o undergraduate students who felt that the university was caring and culturally supportive were less likely to drop-out. Moreover, individual cultural translators (students or faculty) helped racial/ethnic minority students overcome the cultural dissonance that they experienced at a predominantly White public university (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Cultural enclaves like Latina/o and African American student organizations also served this purpose (Museus & Quaye). Faculty members were important agents of the institution who influence students' experiences. However, staff were also present and could serve as mentors to students.

Staff members have rarely been considered in studies of mentoring and validation. Yet, they have outnumbered instructional staff and have had a more consistent presence on university campuses because of their varied roles and often year-round employment (e.g., residential life, dining, housekeeping and grounds, financial aid, and administrative assistants). Examining the experiences of students and staff at five predominantly White institutions, Harper and Hurtado (2007) reported that the staff members were "fully aware of the degree to which minority students were disadvantaged and dissatisfied…they knew about the extent to which racial segregation existed" (p. 19). However, the staff felt powerless to voice their observations to senior administrators and White colleagues. Harper and Hurtado's study suggested that staff could serve as a source of support to under-represented students because they were aware of these challenges.

Administrators from Hispanic Serving Institutions emphasized the importance of having a sizeable number of Latina/o faculty and staff to serve as role models, represent a campus conscience, and comfort students (Dayton et al., 2004). Yet, staff were ambiguously defined. Sandoval-Lucero et al., (2014) concluded that work-study supervisors and counselors were sources of support to African American and Latina/o community college students at a majority-minority institution. Although Rendón (1993) was addressing community college administrators when describing the importance of validation for under-represented students, her recommendations were relevant to faculty, staff, and administrators at predominantly White, four year institutions. Others have asserted that in-class validating agents such as faculty, coaches, counselors, advisors, tutors, and teaching assistants affirmed academic competence through positive feedback on assignments and complimented students on their academic knowledge, skills and effort (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Out of class validating agents included family members, co-workers and college staff "who meet with students out of class to affirm their capabilities and efforts and support their academic and social adjustment to college" (p. 43).

Although Felten and Lambert (2020) did not examine racial/ethnic differences in support to undergraduate students, their work described the importance of relationships and mentoring for students' academic success. Their study included faculty, staff, students, and administrators at a variety of post-secondary institutions. They found that meaningful mentoring conversations included a "space for students to be heard and to be human… 'nitty-gritty' guidance and knowledge… 'warm handoffs' that facilitate yet more relationships…" (Felten & Lambert, 2020, p. 136). Mentors were staff, faculty, administrators, and peers. Relationships mattered for students, particularly for those who were marginalized. Moreover, cultivating relationships that supported undergraduate students were the responsibility of everyone on campus.

3. Institutional Agents and Empowerment Agents

Stanton-Salazar (2011) made a distinction between institutional agents and empowerment agents. He claimed that institutional agents provided low-status students with the social capital they needed to be successful in school. Institutional agents were people who "occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, pp. 1074-1075). Not only was this person well positioned, but they also transmitted the resources, opportunities, privileges, and services that were highly valued and differentially distributed within the system. Stanton-Salazar claimed that institutional agents re-created the stratification system by imparting resources to people from the same background as the agent. For institutional agents to become empowerment agents, Stanton-Salazar argued that the agents must transmit resources and support that challenged the existing stratification system.

At predominantly White institutions, transmitting social, cultural and human capital to African American and Latina/o students was classified as a counter strategy. Citing Zimmerman (1995:583), Stanton-Salazar (2011) claimed that providing institutional support was not sufficient. The empowerment agent helped the student develop an awareness of their goals, how to reach them, which resources were necessary, and how to gain mastery over one's life. This consciousness raising experience required a sociological perspective to identify the structures, policies, and practices that impeded students' efforts to achieve their goals (Stanton-Salazar). He suggested that students must learn to decode the system. In other words, they must know which actors and organizations were "most predisposed and committed to the empowerment of low-status individuals and communities" and how to enter into useful relationships with institutional agents who may not be equity minded (Stanton-Salazar, p. 1092). Stanton-Salazar assumed that social capital could only be transmitted by high status people. Within the university context, employees other than faculty members and administrators may participate in this process.

To understand what support meant to under-represented students and which types of university employees were perceived as supportive, undergraduate students conducted focus groups with other undergraduates at a regional, public, predominantly White university in the United States.

4. Sample and Method

Participants in the focus groups were a convenience sample of individuals solicited through faculty announcements, participants from a campus-based Latina/o leadership program, and referrals from the trained focus group leaders. Undergraduate students (five Latinas, two Latinos and one African American woman) were trained in focus group moderating and data recording. During the spring and fall semesters of 2016, the students conducted eight focus groups with a total of 21 undergraduate students. Sixteen participants were Latinas/os, two were African American, one did not report their race/ethnicity, and two were White. Nineteen were women. Six were non-traditional students (students older than 24 years of age) of whom five were women. In terms of the institutional context for possible support, the university employed 533 staff members, 515 faculty members and 36 administrators in the fall of 2016. The initial purpose of the data collection was to identify a cohort of university employees whom students recognized as providing support to under-represented students. With this information, additional employees would be encouraged to serve as advocates and mentors to close the graduation gap that existed between African American, Latina/o and White students.

During the focus groups, participants were asked: Who at the university has provided you with academic, financial, emotional and other types of support? The participants were provided with examples of support to help their recall. The participants recorded the names of the individuals on post-it notes and affixed them to large sheets of paper that represented each type of support. There was no limit to the number of people they could nominate. The only condition was that the individuals had to be employees of the university. Later in the focus group, the participants explained why they chose these individuals. The participants were also asked if they had a mentor to elaborate the support they received. A final question asked the best way to connect other students with mentors. Responses to the last question were not analyzed in the present study.

Audio recordings from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Although the four categories of support: academic, financial, emotional, and other provided a starting point for the focus group discussions, I sought to understand the students' meanings as stated in the transcripts rather than rely exclusively on the four initial categories. I used QSR International's NVivo12 to code the transcripts first with open coding and later axial coding strategies to identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The open coding resulted in 222 distinct codes as well as names of 58 university employees. An iterative process of reorganizing the codes resulted in five themes which are elaborated below. Additionally, I discuss the status of the university employees by initial type of support mentioned. The names of nominated faculty, staff, and administrators have been removed and replaced with pseudonyms. The intent of this study is not to generalize the findings to the entire university nor to suggest that the named individuals represented an exhaustive list of supportive individuals. In the present context, I explore which groups of employees were identified as supportive and describe the meaning of support to the students. From this study, readers begin to understand how under-represented students at a predominantly White, public university in the United States perceived support. The themes identified in this study extend beyond the local setting and confirm patterns from the literature review.

5. Findings

The nomination of faculty, staff and administrators was initially organized by type of support, position, and university department. In this section, I describe type of support and position only. The four initial types of support were academic, emotional, financial, and other. The most common form of support reported by participants was academic support. Of the 47 individuals who were identified as providing this support, 42 were faculty members (89%), three were staff members (6%), one was a graduate assistant and one's status could not be determined from the name. For emotional support, 35 individuals were mentioned. Twenty-one were faculty members (60%), nine were staff members (26%), two were administrators (6%), two were graduate assistants (6%) and one person's status could not be determined.

Participants nominated fewer university personnel as providing financial support. Only 14 individuals were identified. In this category, there were seven faculty members (50%), four staff members (29%), two administrators (14%), and one graduate assistant. The final category, other support, resulted in 17 people being identified. Ten were faculty members (59%), three were staff (18%), three were graduate assistants (18%), and one was an administrator. Some employees were identified across multiple dimensions. In this section, I distinguished graduate assistants from staff members because they had different employment expectations. Overwhelmingly, faculty members were the primary sources of support to students. However, this study demonstrates that administrators, staff members, and graduate students also provided support to undergraduate students.

The nominations served as a way of identifying the breadth and depth of support for these students. They also represent the tenuousness nature of the support. For example, the two staff members who were nominated across all four types (financial, emotional, academic and other) were no longer employed at the institution by the time the last focus group was completed. The only other person nominated across the four dimensions was a faculty member. Although the category counts pertain to a local university, they identify a pattern that is often overlooked in the literature: staff, administrators and graduate students also provide support to under-represented undergraduate students. In addition, the categories "none" or "no help" were mentioned 15 times. The lack of support will be examined later as a theme. The next part of the analysis represents the analytic coding of the interview transcripts for the meaning of support. This information was solicited by asking focus group participants to specifically explain how the nominated individual was supportive. I used an iterative coding process of the focus group transcripts to arrive at the themes presented below (Tracy, 2013). Table 1 represents the broad themes and their subcategories.

5.1. Being Present

The most prominent theme was that supportive faculty, staff and administrators were present for the students. By that, the focus group participants meant that these university employees took the time to listen. They asked questions. They cared. They offered encouragement and guided the students. Together, they could talk about anything. Students also reported that these employees "knew me." According to one student,

> I'm not the type of person that talks [about] my emotions but Dr. J again, my advisor, he just, I don't know I had a difficult time like transitioning like my freshman year, he was there for listening. Just basically told me that everyone goes through this and you know just because you get a bad grade in a class or fail a class that does not mean it's the end of the world that you should not give up, you know keep going to college, like it's ok. You mess up and you got to pick yourself up and keep trying.

A staff member was described as providing support in the following manner:

> So, she sees me when I go to talk to [a counselor] ready to break down in tears but she is just a very loving and caring person who would go out of her way. It does not matter if you know her or not. She will just go out and help you. If you're crying, instead of being a weird secretary who just sits in the office, she will like come over and be like, "can I give you a hug, you want a piece of candy?"

One faculty member was identified as knowing the student because of these interactions:

> He knows everything about me. He even walked into Professor B's class to see how I was doing. So, I admire him for that. He knows how I am. He knows my personality and he's always been there for me. I also cried in front of him over the summer because I thought I was doing bad with math, I'm really horrible at math. But he gave me confidence. He told me I can go on with it. He's very understanding. I love Dr. H. He's real laid back and I love his corny jokes…He would walk in the classroom, he'll be like, "What's up?"

Being present was focused attention that occurred outside the classroom. For many faculty members, providing this level of attention and support competes with the measured and rewarded aspects of their work: teaching, research, and service. For staff members, these interactions may contribute to their sense of work engagement and satisfaction (Hermsen & Rosser, 2008).

5.2 Strategizing for Academic Success

Supportive university employees helped students by giving academic advice, particularly through course selection, planning their courses for the four years, explaining the steps in completing a degree, and helping students weigh options. This type of support was more informational and provided guidance related to courses of action (Thoits, 2011). For instance, a student stated that she chose a university faculty member,

> Dr. M because she also does the same but she helps me find classes that I would like and she listens more. So, she is more realistic about it. Like if I tell her, "I don't want to be here." She tells me, "oh ok you can take this semester off but this is how it would look like." That helps me as well.

Another student described regularly meeting with the department chairperson who was her course instructor. "My freshman year, the first day of classes I went to his office hours like, I took chemistry in high school for two years and I'm not too sure like mmm, you know, how I will be transitioning to his class, I always come to him at least once a week to ask him about chemistry stuff." This student recognized early in her academic studies that meeting with the faculty member for her course was important. A student for whom English was her second language appreciated the advice her professor gave with regards to her writing.

> He basically just the other day gave me advice of what I need to do to do better on my exams and how to keep up to date instead of saying, "you need to do this or this." He said, "probably thinking deep in this area instead of this area." …He is not like some … teacher that [is] grading my paper all red …He was just correcting my English, "like you need help on this" but you know, it did not affect my grade much. It's just giving me feedback, which it is really helpful instead of giving me a zero for my English.

Students from these focus groups reported that academic advising, whether planning the four years, choosing courses, or receiving helpful feedback on assignments was an important form of support. Strategizing for academic success also included financial aid troubleshooting and scholarship information. Some of the focus group participants were first generation college students. The financial aid office staff members who were nominated in this category took the time to explain costs as well as identify relevant scholarships. For example, a student said that:

> My freshman year coming into [this university] I lived on campus. I wasn't really sure how much money I would owe or just anything about college at that point, so I came to the Financial Aid Office. Then I talked to Ms. G and she broke it down for me, how much I would owe them every year and if I lived back at home how much they will owe me, stuff like that.

Another student identified herself as "…first generation student as well. [The financial aid counselor] did help me with some different scholarships and things that I could not try to do myself." This theme emphasized the importance of explaining processes and resources to support student success. For first generation, under-represented students, the degree completion process was not self-evident. These students valued the explanations that institutional agents provided.

5.3 A Welcoming Personality

Students identified employees who were understanding, flexible, non-judgmental, nice and approachable as supportive. These patterns seemed to reflect personality traits rather than instrumental or informational forms of support. One student remarked that, "Dr. O, he has always helped me with issues that are really academic, he was understanding when I had an emergency during class and he helped me through some issues, some personal issues." Another student, referring to a staff member who served as her campus employment supervisor said, "She's just helpful. She just is. I used to work with her and now I don't, and it's still not even awkward. She's just really nice person. She's like a mom."

In terms of flexibility, faculty members and advisors were described as providing extended deadlines on assignments or additional time for a meeting. According to this student, "Professor Jacobs is my adviser and even if I show up late to the meeting, he tries to make time because he knows I am coming from far away." A non-traditional student who was working full time and raising two children described,

> Some classes they really penalize you for things like that [missing class] and unfortunately I couldn't get out of work. Like I have to work. First, I pay the money and if I wouldn't [have] taken off all the days … I would have got fired on the spot. So, there were no choice but just to miss the classes and I was really thankful for the ability to still take the class and not have worried about the fact that I had to miss the actual lecture.

The relationships between student, faculty and staff were structured by their roles, but the welcoming and understanding approach that these employees used ultimately resulted in students defining them as supportive.

5.4 Support through Campus Employment Opportunities

Some students mentioned that university employees had offered campus-based employment or they had met a supportive employee through their on campus job. Campus employment provided much needed instrumental support and resulted in a social bond that was often described as caring. According to one student, "For other [support], I just put health service staff…I had a lot of jobs…I worked in health services and the staff in there are amazing. Like, to me they are just super caring… they are just super helpful in regards to anything." An offer of employment was also perceived as supportive. "I just started telling Dr. G about my situation…and she suggested some summer classes. 'I can't afford that.' And she was like, 'If I can help you in any way, I have a position. I have a budget for a student worker over the summer that helps me with this project.'" On campus employment opportunities offered financial resources and an ability to remain connected to the institutional agents.

5.5 The Absence of Support at the University

Students had the option to record that they had no support from faculty, staff, and administrators. Some students indicated that they relied on family or peers instead. Others, like this student stated that, "I just felt like I never really had anybody that I could talk to if I'm feeling down or if I'm not doing good in any of my classes, I just stayed to myself. I'll just usually go home at the end of the day, sleep it off, and the next day I'll just try to do better." The demands of full-time work and two children caused this non-traditional student to report that, "Maybe because all I ever do is going to classes and work, I haven't really experienced anything. Some of the things, I just had negative experiences with. There was not really any help there. It was more like brutal." With no support, the students' connection to the university was fragile.

6. Discussion

Previous literature suggests that supportive faculty can create a positive environment for undergraduate students (Bongiorno, 2022; Bordes et al., 2006; Crisp et al., 2015). However, we often do not know what support means to students (except Felten & Lambert, 2020; Zalaquett, 2005). The findings presented here suggest that institutional agents play an important role for under-represented students. When traditional categories of support are used, students were able to identify institutional agents who were engaged in support and validation. Whereas prior research focused primarily on relations between students and faculty members (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Fisher, 2007), the present study demonstrates that staff, administrators, and graduate students were offering support to undergraduate students in a variety of ways. Overall, these agents provided social support, emotional support, and cultural capital for students. This confirms the findings of Sandoval-Lucero et al., (2014) and Felten and Lambert (2020). Less clear is whether these individuals served as empowerment agents, a distinction that Stanton-Salazar (2011) made.

This study also demonstrated that university students valued the support of institutional agents. This extends the literature focused on validation activities for community college students (Rendón, 1993; Barnett, 2011) as well as the relation between social support and positive perceptions of the university environment (McNaughton-Cassill et al., 2021).

6.1 Limitations

This present study includes an over-representation of Latinas and a small number of men of color relative to their presence at the university. Also, I cannot identify which employee classification (faculty, staff, administrators, graduate assistants) was statistically more likely to support undergraduate students because these data were not collected through random sampling techniques. However, the findings confirmed that future research must include staff members and administrators as sources of support. According to Hermsen and Rosser (2008), time spent with students contributed to greater work engagement for higher education staff members. Excluding staff members from studies of student support and validation ignores their contributions. As Felten and Lambert (2020) concluded, cultivating a relationship-rich culture is the responsibility of everyone on campus.

6.2 Implications

The present study suggests that institutional agents support Latina/o, African American as well as non-traditional undergraduate students by being present, strategizing for academic success, offering employment, and having a welcoming personality. The interpersonal validation that was reflected in these themes assisted in the social adjustment of under-represented students (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Rendón Linares & Munoz, 2011). To the extent that these students succeed at a predominantly White, public, regional university in the United States, they represent a counter narrative, inspire peers, and invigorate institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yosso, 2006). On campus employment has the potential to develop communication, interpersonal and time management skills as well as well as applied learning opportunities (Rossmann, 2019). The present study indicates that on campus employment creates a support system for under-represented students. However, the wages for these positions are currently unable to compete with positions located off campus. As such, fewer students may choose on campus employment. Finally, the absence of support from university employees suggests that some students may rely on family and peers to meet their support needs as found by Bauman et al. (2004) and Sánchez et al., (2005). Or, these students are navigating the institution alone. For these students, weak ties to the institution may contribute to less satisfaction with the educational experience. Understanding the meaning of support to university students can be used to implement activities that enhance their post-secondary education and lead to greater persistence.

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Table 1

The Meaning of Support Provided by Faculty, Staff and Administrators

Being Present	Strategizing for Academic Success	Welcoming Personality	On-Campus Employment
Cares about me	Academic advice - Planning courses - Explaining course options - Explaining the steps	Nice	On campus employer
We can talk about anything	Scholarship advice	Understanding	Offer of employment
Knows me	Financial aid troubleshooting	Approachable	
Listens	Tutoring	Flexible	
Asks questions	Letters of recommendation	Non-judgmental	
Guides me	Career advice		
Offers encouragement			