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Are We Ready?: A Review of Getting College Ready: Latin@ Student Experiences of Race, Access, and Belonging at Predominantly White Universities

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Are We Ready?: A Review of *Getting College Ready: Latin@ Student Experiences of Race, Access, and Belonging at Predominantly White Universities*

Abstract

Getting College Ready: Latin@ Student Experiences of Race, Access, and Belonging at Predominantly White Universities by Julie Minikel-Lacocque describes the pre-college and college experiences of six Latin@ college students (four female and two male) at a specifically predominantly White flagship higher education institution in the Midwest United States. By delivering those six Latin@ students' voices through the author's interpretation based on the lens of Critical Race Theory, she presented their challenges applying to college, maintaining enrollment, and being successful at the college as underrepresented minority students, most of whom were first-generation college students. The author also discussed effective ways to help those students become successful college students.

Keywords

Latin@ Students, Underrepresented Students, Critical Race Theory, Higher Education

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Are We Ready? A Review of *Getting College Ready: Latin@ Student Experiences of Race, Access, and Belonging at Predominantly White Universities*

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Getting College Ready: Latin@ Student Experiences of Race, Access, and Belonging at Predominantly White Universities by Julie Minikel-Lacocque describes the pre-college and college experiences of six Latin@ college students (four female and two male) at a specifically predominantly White flagship higher education institution in the Midwest United States. By delivering those six Latin@ students' voices through the author's interpretation based on the lens of Critical Race Theory, she presented their challenges applying to college, maintaining enrollment, and being successful at the college as underrepresented minority students, most of whom were first-generation college students. The author also discussed effective ways to help those students become successful college students. **Keywords:** Latin@ Students, Underrepresented Students, Critical Race Theory, Higher Education

In *Getting College Ready: Latin@ Student Experiences of Race, Access, and Belonging at Predominantly White Universities*, author Julie Minikel-Lacocque described the pre-college and college experiences of six Latin@ college students (four female and two male) at a specifically predominantly White flagship higher education institution in the Midwest United States. [In this book, the author particularly used a more gender-inclusive term, Latin@, rather than Latino(s) or Latino/a(s) to refer to students.] By delivering those six Latin@ students' voices through her interpretation, she aimed at discussing their challenges for applying to college, maintaining enrollment, and being successful at the college as underrepresented minority students, most of whom were first-generation college students. The author also discussed effective ways to help those students become successful college students.

The author designed and conducted this research based on the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), CRT in education is “a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 25). Several scholars also emphasized the importance of addressing racial inequality in the educational context (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The author particularly mentioned the rationale of selecting the CRT framework for her study:

[CRT] moves us away from a deficit model of perceiving the educational experiences of People of Color and toward a vision that allows for understanding and honoring the gifts and experiences that People of Color possess. It also centers the experiences and voice of People of Color, which have historically been in the periphery of academic literature (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 148).

For this study, the author employed an interview method. She interviewed the six students individually over a period of one year during their freshman year at the university, and she also

did one focus group interview. After three years, she conducted follow-up interviews with the students. Additionally, she interviewed staff members who worked in a department that assisted underrepresented students at the university. However, she did not specifically mention how she chose the participants for her study. In Chapter 7, she briefly mentioned that she attended the program orientation for Latin@ students to recruit participants for this study, but it was not detailed enough. I was wondering if she recruited all six students with the same method. I was also wondering about the total number of students who were interested in the study and how participants were selected. Additionally, I would like to know why she chose the specific university for her study site. I assumed that this study was her Ph.D. dissertation project, so she may be a Ph.D. student at the chosen university. However, she did not describe this procedure clearly in this book, so it is possible that there may be a different reason.

Since CRT “challenges notions of ‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ researchers and exposes deficit-informed research that silences, ignores and distorts epistemologies of People of Color” (Yosso, 2005, p. 73), the author analyzed the interview responses and tried to understand their underlying meanings through her own interpretation. To do that, she acknowledged her own positionality as a White female researcher, who had not had the same experiences as the participating students. However, to understand those students’ experiences, she tried to develop close personal relationships with her participants throughout the interview process by spending personal time with them, helping with their homework assignments, and/or giving a ride if necessary. She also shared her interpretations with the students to increase the accuracy of her findings. Checking with the participants to determine whether they feel that the findings are accurate can be a useful strategy to increase qualitative validity (Creswell, 2009).

Through this study, the author emphasized the types of support underrepresented college students need to help them be successful. First, the author suggested redefining the definition of a successful student. Traditionally, most higher education institutions have used GPAs as the only indicator to measure and determine the level of success. That is, students who have higher GPAs are often considered successful students. Therefore, we assume that academically successful students would not have any problems and difficulties. One of the participating students in this study, Crystal, had a relatively high GPA (around 3.7), but she did not feel “at home” or like she “belong[ed] on campus” (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 62). The author suggested that universities need to provide personal-level support to be able to build close relationships with students. University staff members should provide continuous attention to and care of all students regardless of their GPAs. This kind of support would eventually help increase underrepresented students’ retention rate.

Furthermore, the author discussed the importance of social and cultural capital to prepare those students for success. It seemed that students who came to the university with social and cultural capital felt more successful and comfortable on campus. For example, Mario had substantial social capital; his father’s friends were working at the university as staff members, and they helped Mario gain admission and provided financially useful information. Although his GPA was pretty low (around 2.6), he considered himself a successful student. However, students without such capital felt less successful and more uncomfortable. The author also highlighted the significance of college preparation experiences. The students who had such experiences prior to beginning their college lives showed better adaptation to being college students. Through the college preparation programs, those students were able to make friends with other Latin@ students, be familiar with college-level courses, and live on campus apart from their families without feeling lonely.

Since I personally had college experience as an international student at a state flagship university in the Midwest, I assumed that their experiences may be similar to what I went through. Some aspects, like feeling isolated and alone, were somewhat similar. However, other

parts were completely different because my racial, socioeconomic, and cultural background was different from those students. It was interesting and also surprising to know the difficulties that they had in college preparation, financial issues, and a lack of family support.

In addition to understanding students' difficulties, this book provides me, as a university faculty member, an opportunity to think about better ways to promote diversity at a university and help underrepresented students. As the author mentioned, most flagship universities have been criticized for their lack of diversity and have therefore been trying to increase diversity on their campuses. The author suggested that above all things, universities should raise awareness of White students regarding the importance of diversity, and those students need to learn how to embrace students from other cultures and/or socioeconomic status. I highly recommend this book to other people, especially faculty and staff members at higher education institutions. This book will be a useful resource for understanding the difficulties of underrepresented students on campus.

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