

Engaging Chicanx/Latinx Ways of Being and Knowing

Transforming University Mentorship

Marcos Pizarro with Erick Macias-Chavez and Mar Montes

The following conversation between two Latina university students took place in a reflective gathering six weeks after a leadership retreat organized by the Chicanx/Latinx center on our campus. It demonstrates the power of creating opportunities for Chicanx/Latinx students to be seen and to see themselves as both capable and powerful.

PALOMA: I started to mindfully apply the practice of—where you're in a classroom and you feel like you're not as smart as your white peers, imposter syndrome—to mindfully know that I am smarter than these other kids and that I am capable and that I do know what I'm talking about. Yeah, me and Angela know 'cuz we're in this Honors class and it can be a bit intimidating at first just 'cuz we're like the only two Latina students, maybe three or four Latinx students, in that lecture seminar. So yeah, I practice being mindful that I know what I'm doing, I know what I'm learning, I know what I'm talking about.

ANGELA: I just want to say that I was really proud of you because I saw that you didn't really participate all that much, but after the retreat I really saw a difference in you and you started voicing your opinion and it was really good. Like the professor was even saying, "Oh good question!" and getting all hyped up, and I was like "Yes, Paloma!" I was so proud that things that we learned in the retreat, you are really putting it to use, to better yourself.

PALOMA: Thanks Angela, I appreciate that. I'm gonna ace this final tomorrow!

Over the past decade, a collective of faculty, staff, and students at San José State University (SJSU) has worked to build a community of transformative support for Chicana/Latina students. The heart of that work is an ethical approach to community building that nurtures epistemologies of hope and collective upliftment grounded in Chicana/Latina ways of being. These resonate with our students and their families in ways that lead to deep community and, eventually, as Paloma demonstrates, to academic engagement and success.

The Chicana/Latina Student Success Center at SJSU is known simply as the Centro. Our efforts in fighting for and eventually creating the Centro on our campus have always been grounded in the evolving body of research on Chicana/Latina student experiences in higher education. We created a framework for understanding the needs of Chicana/Latina students in our institution based on that literature and on our expertise working with our community. This framework is built on Tara J. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model, which centers the powerful strengths that exist within Chicana/Latina communities. This strengths-based approach is intended to help Chicana/Latina students see themselves as having a deep supply of resources that are conducive to university success.

We explicitly and implicitly created spaces for our community to address the deficit thinking that has long dominated mainstream approaches to Chicana/Latina K–20 schooling (Valencia 2012). Angela Valenzuela's (1999) analysis of subtractive schooling is a critical tool because it unpacks the manifestations of deficit thinking and corresponding school practices that shape the experiences of so many Chicana/Latina students. We expose the ways in which these processes lead many students to experience both

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stereotype threat (Steele 2010) and imposter syndrome (Bravata et al. 2019). These can be debilitating without direct interventions that challenge the ways in which internalized racism shapes the psyches of Chicana/Latina students (Perez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli 2006). The extra intercultural effort and emotional regulation required of students can be draining and both emotionally and intellectually harmful to them, often resulting in a sense of racial battle fatigue (Dowd, Sawatzky, and Korn 2011; Mayorga et al. 2018; Pizarro and Kohli 2020; Smith, Allen, and Dantley 2007).

The model developed in the Centro is based on recognition of the fact that without intentional interventions, most Chicana/Latina students have to confront these challenges individually and without the context or tools to understand how these forces have shaped their schooling and evolving academic identities. The support we provide is always paired with a strengths-centered approach that emerges from Yosso's work, as we have learned that building a sense of academic self-confidence requires students to believe in their collective as well as individual power and possibility. Through this approach we build interwoven academic and racial/ethnic identities that are affirming to Chicana/Latina students and help them create paths to academic and professional success (Pizarro 2005).

A Five-Point Model

As it has evolved, the model practiced in the Centro involves five main processes. Although mapped out in linear form below, they are always simultaneously occurring and recurring. In our work as a collective, we:

- *Foster positive, supportive interactions and healthy relationships to build a community that includes students, faculty, and staff.* Chicana/Latina students often have an understanding of the world and schooling that is relationally grounded, and so we build personal relationships that support their social, cultural, and academic needs and growth.
- *Validate and connect Chicana/Latina students' cultural assets, resilience, and academic abilities as we affirm their intersectional identities and lived experiences.* We support students in coming to understand that who they are is vital to their academic success and that their ethnic/racial identities can be interwoven with their academic identities.
- *Nurture Chicana/Latina students' holistic well-being.* We provide multiple means of meeting students' emotional, physical, social,

cultural, and academic needs at individual and collective levels. At the same time we strive to confront institutional barriers that often amplify those needs.

- *Build Chicax/Latinx students' sense of belonging at the university.* We make it explicit that the Centro and the university by extension are “theirs” and that our community on campus is central to the larger institution. We build on this sense of belonging to facilitate engagement and success in academics, majors, and careers.
- *Develop Chicax/Latinx student leaders.* We provide students with the opportunity to see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in the daily life of the Centro and to connect those realities to academic pursuits in clear ways. Students know that they belong. They are supported in seeing the ways in which they can be—and are—leaders on campus and in their areas of academic interest.

The work of the Centro is deeply informed by Chicax studies research, pedagogies, and ethics. Chicax studies faculty on campus played a lead role in the development and implementation of the Centro’s model. Our own research, as well as that of Chicax studies colleagues on other campuses, informed all aspects of the Centro’s implementation. Our focus on praxis—the living and evolving application of theory and research with the goal of engaging in racial justice—has helped the Centro become a transformative space.

Racial Justice Methods in Chicax Studies

Over the course of almost two years, I (Marcos) collaborated with two undergraduate students (Erick and Mar) to engage, as members of our Chicax/Latinx community, in an analysis of the work of the Centro and its impact on students. We approached this project not as research but as an extension of our roles as deeply invested community members. We saw our work as intensive community engagement, a perspective informed by Chicax studies racial justice methods whereby researchers serve as facilitators, community supporters, and advocates (Pizarro, Nkosi, and Rios-Cervantes 2019). Each of us had been involved in the Centro in significant ways, long before we sought to unpack what was happening in the Centro as a team. It was Erick and Mar, as students, leaders, and workers in the Centro, who resisted the idea of designating themselves as researchers, because their community engagement mattered to them

and reflected who they are. This challenged me and my positionality as well, because it was impossible for me to separate my academic interest in the Centro as a scholar from the fact that I was central to the long process leading to its creation. My involvement was also informed by my own experiences as an undergrad seeking and finding community with other Chicana/Latina students—experiences that had been essential to my survival and eventual success as a student. The more we engaged with the Centro as community members rather than as researchers, the more rich and meaningful our team conversations became, leading to the insights that we highlight below.

At the same time, we recognized that our intentionality in this work distinguished us from others who went to the Centro or attended Centro-sponsored events. We reflected on our experiences in the Centro as a group, seeking to uncover the deeper meanings of interactions that others might not think twice about. In addition, at the request of the Centro leadership, we reviewed and interpreted the feedback provided by students, particularly around the cornerstone programming of the Centro, the annual Student Leadership Retreat (SLR).

We centered the SLR in our work because it was the most intensive of the Centro programs and covered all facets of the Centro model over the course of a weekend. Every year, a group of about fifty students was taken to a retreat space off campus to engage in a leadership and community-building process. The SLR included workshops, storytelling, creative activities, celebration, and fun, all centered on the approach described above.¹ We participated in all levels and facets of the SLR and subsequently reviewed the feedback provided by SLR participants. This feedback was provided first through an online survey, followed by an in-person community circle and debrief for all participants six weeks later.²

Given our effort to engage in racial justice as a process and not just as a goal, we sought to let the students provide the analysis to the greatest extent possible. We worked to maintain our commitment to Chicana studies racial justice methods by centering SLR participants as the knowledge keepers (Pizarro, Nkosi, and Rios-Cervantes 2019). Below, we relate their insights to the components of the Centro model laid out above, focusing on the first four parts of the five-part model.³ Our objective in this essay is to honor our community and to leave space for an evolving definition of success that expands our understanding of the goals of racial justice and of Chicana/Latina students, families, and communities.

Building Healthy Relationships

SLR participants emphasized the relationship-building aspects of the retreat as most important, in terms of both the depth and the impact of the relationships they established. In the SLR, “familias” are created so that students meet with the same small group of peers to engage in *conocimiento* activities and unpack each of the aspects of the SLR.⁴ For many students, especially those in their first semester, being part of an SLR familia was the first time they felt meaningfully connected to our campus.⁵ “The SLR familia was extremely impactful to me because it was one of the first times that I felt like I belonged and formed a bond with my peers at SJSU,” one student said. “I really adored everyone in my familia and the *conocimiento* activities were a large part of why I felt included.” Through our involvement in the Centro we knew that students needed this kind of connection. They needed ways in which they could see their own experiences mirrored in others to combat the sense of isolation that defines the on-campus lives of many first-generation Chicax/Latinx students, even in minority-serving institutions. Another student expanded on this idea, saying, “I felt real community. I met people who were helpful and caring, and I developed enough courage to be vulnerable with them.”

The power and importance of the familia was the intentionality behind the process, as students were supported in staying connected after the retreat and ideally for the remainder of their time on campus. As one SLR participant explained, “Having familias was a great way of developing a support system. My familia and I follow up with each other and we can help each other if anything comes up. Before the SLR I didn’t have a lot of people that I could have reached out to.” This sense of connectedness and community care was essential to combat so many of the challenges Chicax/Latinx students experience in transitioning to the university. One student shared what that looked like in one of her greatest times of need in her first semester on campus.

I definitely felt less alone than when I first came in. I’ve always been homesick and I still get homesick but it’s a lot less now. I felt like we developed a support system. A couple weeks ago I was really sick and I wouldn’t go to the doctor. Everybody kept telling me to come to the Wellness Center and I didn’t want to come and then finally someone ended up referring me. And I posted it on Snapchat and like a lot of [my SLR familia members] actually commented and they were like, “Are you okay? Can I get something for you? Is there any way that I can help you?” And I think that was really cool because I’ve never experienced that before.

As we found in our many conversations with students in the Centro before, during, and after our time working on this project, there were few other opportunities for this kind of relationship building on campus. This led us to wonder how many Chicana/Latina students the university lost through attrition because they never found this sense of support and connection. As another SLR student explained, “SLR helped me find the community I was looking for. I feel completely secure talking to my peers from the retreat. It was a very significant experience because I desperately needed to find home in my first semester here at SJSU.”

The relationship building that occurs at the SLR emphasizes peer connections, but this is complemented by ensuring that students also forge relationships with faculty and staff. In each of the sessions led by faculty and staff, they are paired up with Centro student leaders and everyone shares their personal stories, emphasizing the challenges they faced. Newer students experience the same challenges, and they can see their own strengths and successes reflected in those of the student leaders, staff, and faculty. Throughout our work in the Centro, the impact of this approach on SLR participants was apparent. As one told the community, “I learned so much about self-recognition and cultural wealth. I met people and faculty who understand my situation, share similar familial and academic experiences as me, and got to share a bit of each other’s stories. It was a beautiful experience.” These connections were built explicitly through the workshops, which many saw as cornerstones of their learning. One student commented,

Perez’s workshops on the educational debt and imposter syndrome helped me feel more confident in my own ability. Professor Gonzalez sharing his experience as a transfer student helped me a lot as a transfer student myself. It allowed me to see myself in academia. I also really enjoyed being able to hear from the [Centro student leaders] and their stories and experiences. It makes me feel closer to them and it makes me feel empowered to share my own experiences.

The relationship building with staff and faculty was cemented by the fact that everyone was together throughout the SLR, so that students ate, played, and studied alongside the same faculty and staff who were providing workshops and who were resource providers on campus. One student noted, “Talking to professors in the free time impacted me the most because their advice helped me be more secure in my voice by relating to their experiences.” The advice sought and provided was often personal, as students asked questions they had always had but never felt comfortable asking of the professional staff on campus. It was also, often, academic.

I'm going to double-major in English and Spanish, which I thought I was never going to do and finish in four years, and that's crazy that I got this opportunity here talking to the professors at el Centro. Veronica [a faculty member] was the one who pushed me towards that direction and I feel like I would have never gotten that support anywhere else.

The hardest part of our work in bringing the story of the Centro and the SLR to readers through this essay is conveying the feeling that so powerfully pervaded the SLR space, the Centro when we returned, and the gathering where students reflected back on the SLR. Often, through our informal conversations, a student would help crystallize this feeling for us, as when one told us, "I enjoyed the people. The staff and faculty help make it feel like they're my parents."

Validating Students' Assets, Abilities, and Experiences

As mapped out in the overview of the model, a powerful component of the Centro's work is the way in which every facet of the SLR exists in conversation with the research and tools that make sense of the daily experiences of Chicana/Latina university students. We saw this recognition in virtually every gathering at the Centro. Two of the students who used the SLR reunion survey as a way to process their experiences echoed each other's observations.

The SLR workshops opened up my mind and helped me connect myself with my Latina community. They helped me realize that there are words to describe what I am going through, and seeing how many others were dealing with the same things made me not feel alone anymore.

I learned terms for things that I had been feeling and realized my experience was not something that I had to face alone. I gained a greater appreciation for my culture, things that before I had seen as strange but are actually a source of strength.

These students acknowledged the impact of acquiring a conceptual analysis of their experiences that reflected collective realities. They again touched on the isolation of being first-generation Chicana/Latina students and implied that without the work of the Centro, their isolation would have continued. Although the students did not say so explicitly, our experiences with them and the countless stories they shared of their experiences in classes made clear that this isolation affects their sense of belonging and engagement in their classes and majors. The second student quoted above

points toward the significance of the strengths-centered approach in the Centro, and this was amplified in the community conversation in which many highlighted the profound impact of the CCW model (Yosso 2005). As one student explained, “It gives you more worth. It lets you know all of the tools that you’ve had, but never really acknowledged. [It] definitely has helped out.” This was echoed in many conversations during and after the SLR. Another student shared the ways in which he had been reflecting on the CCW model.

I think it definitely has [impacted me]. I didn’t really know about [CCW] before. But coming to San José, I’ve been using all of them. Quite literally. Like my parents came from Mexico, from a small town. They didn’t know any English. For me it’s like, if they did it, I can definitely do this. I’ve been taught determination and persistence. Living in an RV . . . it’s not the worst. The other one is navigational [capital]—like helping my parents out and stuff. It’s definitely helped me throughout the years, but I just never knew about it.⁶

The use of CCW and the ways in which it was made accessible and tangible to students allowed them to see their power. Because the work of the Centro always connects that power back to academic and university success, it had important effects on how they saw themselves. Toward the end of our community reflection, one student shared, “I just want to say thank you because the retreat has allowed me to see myself in a different light. I feel stronger and more empowered.”

Nurturing Holistic Well-Being

There is a conscious effort in the planning of the SLR to care for the holistic well-being of Chicanx/Latinx students. The students highlighted different aspects of their needs throughout our time working with them in the Centro, particularly their emotional needs.

I feel like [the Centro] helped me out more with my emotional well-being. Because sometimes when someone feels lonely and they have stress it’s like, “Oh no, I can’t be here.” I felt like, “Why am I here?” Because if I felt lonely, I have stress on me. I was only working and studying. I wasn’t really enjoying my time. But then getting more involved on campus and meeting people who actually make me whole, like feel fulfilled; intelligent conversations about things they’re passionate about, I think that’s really nice. And just making community really, really helps toward one’s emotional well-being. Just feeling like I belong on campus made me feel so much better about everything else.

This student makes important connections between their emotional needs and their need to feel connected to intellectual work that is meaningful to them. In our conversations, as the students often focused on what was most impactful for them, they did not explicitly piece together the holistic approach of the Centro, but they did highlight key components of well-being and occasionally made some of these broader connections.

Before the Center was open like you couldn't really go to a place [like this]. . . . Now, when I walk throughout the school like I see people that I know, that I see at the Center, and I can just say hi and like talk to them real quick even if it's for a minute to see how we're doing. But also with other resources, so if I need to go to CAPS [Counseling and Psychological Services] I know there's someone here that's with CAPS. Just everyone come in here and then from there we can branch out so it's like a one-stop shop, but also like a bridge to other places.

This student emphasized the fact that one of the core members of the Centro team works for CAPS and brings a mental health focus to the sessions she does at the SLR. The student also hits on one of the key approaches of the Centro, which is related to caring for students' holistic well-being: we understand that Chicanx/Latinx students often are not made to feel welcome to approach professional staff in any number of offices across campus, and so we ensure that students know that any needs they have can be met through the Centro. This approach addresses the multiple institutional forces that challenge Chicanx/Latinx students (some are noted below), which they may not be able to confront without the support received in the Centro.

Fostering a Sense of Belonging

Creating a deep sense of belonging for Chicanx/Latinx students is essential to the mission of the Centro, and it is one of the most powerful impacts of the Centro and the SLR. Something that came across clearly in all our work with students was the profound effect of having the physical space of the Centro as a haven and reprieve from what can often feel like hostile spaces across campus. Knowing that there is a place where they can come and be seen, acknowledged, understood, and connected to others is transformative to their experience at the university.

The reason why I come to the Center the most is because I can come in, not that people know me but people will say hi. I'd say there's a culture shock [on campus], but just to be able to come in and speak Spanish and say hi to everybody, for me is really helpful, and getting to meet new people is also.

There are many ways in which students' sense of belonging is fostered through the Centro. As this student explained, being seen is critical, and that is nurtured through their connectedness to others. Feeling comfortable speaking Spanish is crucial because of the ways in which language and culture sustain people. This creates a sense of cultural belonging in an academic space.

You're back home and you know everybody and everything, and then you don't want to come up here [to SJSU] because you don't know anybody. But then you walk into the Center and everybody is saying hi. Everyone wants to talk. So for me it's helped in the sense of like comforting: giving me a place that feels inviting and supportive.

Together, the students showed us many distinct and connected aspects of belonging that were important to them, including being able to share their stories and engage faculty in spaces that are comfortable and not as intimidating as office hours. "I came to El Centro and I felt more in community. I found the place where I just want to tell a story or I just want to talk to professors. I am welcomed." Others found that the Centro was a space in which they could apply the insights they gained from the SLR and grow through that emerging knowledge.

I think for me [what affected me was] the Imposter Syndrome. I was finally able to overcome that with being at the Center and seeing a lot of different faces going through the same struggle, and one big thing was knowing that you're not in it by yourself. So, you always have someone that you can call upon and ask for help and I've been doing that a lot more now that the Center's open.

The impact of the Centro as a space and of the SLR as a community-building experience is transformative and confronts the often overwhelming isolation that Chicana/Latina students experience in university spaces.

Every time somebody passed me by that I know and I can say hello, I think that's very nice. Because in the beginning of the semester I just walked around campus and I truly felt alone, like I wasn't there, like I was just a ghost. I feel like now I belong on campus. Now I am truly here.

For our team of community members, who wanted to understand the ways in which the Centro and the SLR impacted students, it was clarifying that in open-ended conversations, the students reflected exactly what we had seen in our observations at the Centro, the SLR, and multiple events and gatherings. The students tell the story of the Centro's mission without being prompted to do so. They demonstrate how the SLR and the work of

the Centro reflect ways of being in Chicanax/Latinx communities, which creates a sense of home and belonging for students. And as the Centro then develops collective ways of knowing on the foundation of these ways of being, Chicanax/Latinx students build an emerging community of support for intellectual engagement that becomes hopeful and transformative for them. As one student explained toward the end of our community conversation,

For me it was [most impactful] having professors at the retreat because at that time of the year I still hadn't gone to any office hours because I just felt like I probably didn't have anything in common with them. I don't know what to talk to them about. But after the retreat I was like, oh wait, I really need to talk to them, they're people too. So I started going to my professors' office hours and I started building relationships with them.

This student demonstrates how the emerging collective epistemologies that are nurtured in the SLR lead beyond a sense of belonging and toward a sense of ownership of their education, in which Chicanax/Latinx students apply their emerging self-confidence to their academic pursuits. As Paloma and Angela commented in the opening of this essay, the work of the Centro allows students to recognize and harness their power, to apply it to academic spaces, and to rely on one another in the pursuit of academic goals. This leads not only to academic success but also to meaningful forms of engagement that redefine the role of Chicanax/Latinx students at the university.

The lessons from the Centro and its model that are put into practice through the SLR provide a road map for ethnic and cultural centers and projects designed to enhance Chicanax/Latinx student success in higher education. This work should be grounded in the insights of Chicanax studies by providing an assets-centered approach that acknowledges the transformative possibilities that exist within Chicanax/Latinx ways of being. These in turn shape ways of knowing for our students and can be used to develop holistic and hopeful epistemologies that can redefine the ways in which universities engage students. Chicanax/Latinx students need Chicanax studies and student spaces that provide them with the opportunity to see and nurture and share their power, as the students have done with us in the Centro at SJSU.

Postscript on Supporting Chicanax/Latinx Students during Covid-19

This project was conducted prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our subsequent work with the Centro during the pandemic revealed its

particularly detrimental effects on first-generation, working-class Chicana/Latina students. While the Centro continued to engage in almost all of its programming, including the SLR, the need to do this remotely diminished many of the benefits of the Centro and its approach. As the SLR participants made clear above, it is gathering informally at the retreat and in the Centro space that most powerfully builds community and relationships. Much of this was lost in online versions of the SLR and other Centro programming. Furthermore, the pandemic increased the demands on Chicana/Latina students to support their families financially and in other ways, such as by caring for siblings and elders, and made it difficult for them to devote much time to Centro activities.

Our best work during Covid has been to honor the Centro model by focusing on the holistic well-being of our students. We have created support networks through which student leaders, staff, and faculty reach out directly and engage students to make sure they are connected to and feel part of the Chicana/Latina community on campus. This has allowed the Centro to continue its work, centering the strengths of our students and their families and communities as we support them through the multiple challenges of pursuing their academic goals during COVID.

Notes

This essay was written by Marcos Pizarro, but it is the product of the collective work of a team that included Erick Macias-Chavez and Mar Montes, who were no longer involved with the work of the Chicana/Latina Student Success Center at the time of writing. Their insights shaped our approaches to the project at every level and are woven throughout the essay. They reviewed the manuscript but did not participate in the writing.

1. In forthcoming work on the Centro and the SLR conducted by a core group of faculty, the emphasis on *conocimiento*, *cariño*, and *confianza* in the Centro's approach has been highlighted as essential to supporting the engagement and success of Chicana/Latina students. An article by Luis Poza and colleagues will be published in a special issue on higher education in the *Journal of Leadership Equity and Research*.

2. Quotes from students in this essay come mainly from the online survey responses and from the in-person gathering with students six weeks after the SLR.

3. The final step of the model, leadership development, needs to be understood through a longer-term analysis.

4. We know that for some of our community members, family can be unhealthy and even toxic, so we approach this concept as something we build together, creating the version of *familia* that each group needs and wants.

5. The model of the SLR is that about half of the participants are first-semester frosh and transfer students. The retreat connects them with others who have been on campus longer and have already begun to emerge as leaders in the Centro and/or on campus.

6. This student, who relocated to attend SJSU, was denied housing on campus and came up with the solution of buying a small, used RV as the best way to address his financial and living situation.

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