

Community Colleges' Use of the Term "Latinx"

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This chapter provides a primer on the evolution of terminology used to classify the Latinx/a/o population in the United States, the origins of the term “Latinx,” and an analysis of how community colleges currently use the term.

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As of 2018, the Latinx/a/o population in the United States constitutes 18.1% of the total population, making it the largest ethnic minority group in the country (U.S. Census Quick Facts, 2019). As a group, Latinx/a/o are comprised of native and foreign-born residents who trace their origins to Puerto Rico and approximately 20 countries, including Mexico, Cuba, and others throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America (Salinas, 2017). In discussions and writing about this large pan-ethnic group, what continues to confuse higher education practitioners and researchers as well as society writ large (e.g., policy makers, popular media) are the changing labels used to talk about the Latinx/a/o population. Cohn (2010) noted that a question on the U.S. Census included the sole category of “Mexican” in the 1930s, and “Hispanic” was first used on the Census in 1970. Over time, there have been a number of pan-ethnic labels, including “Latino,” “Latina/o” and “Latin@” (the latter two terms better acknowledge females in this category). More recently, the term “Latinx” has increased in visibility and usage, especially in academia. This article offers a brief review of the various labels used to describe and discuss Latinx/a/o¹ students and then looks more closely at the use of this new term in community colleges. As community colleges work to be more inclusive of their students, we view discussion on the term “Latinx” and its usage as useful for administrators who want to think about their own language and the inclusivity embedded (or not) within. After reviewing the usage of “Latinx” or its variations in the community college sector, we draw implications for practice and policy as this term becomes more commonplace.

Brief History of Pan-Ethnic Terms

As previously noted, “Mexican” was the first term used on the U.S. Census to denote Latinx/a/o residents of any kind (Cohn, 2010). San Miguel’s (1987) historical work on Texas described the presence of Mexican citizens, naturalized American citizens from Mexico, and Americans who trace their familial origins to Mexico since before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The use of the term “Mexican” as the default term to describe all residents of Spanish-speaking origin is perhaps not surprising given the influx of Mexicans fleeing the Mexican Revolution in 1910 and the American government’s importation of Mexican laborers immediately after World War I and into the 1940s with the bracero program (Gonzalez, 2006). However, since 1945, trends in Latinx/a/o immigration have changed, for example, through the increase in Cuban immigration

¹ The focus of this analysis is on the “x” in Latinx/a/o. Throughout this piece, we opt to use “Latinx/a/o” over “Latinx” when specifically referring to groups of people. The order of the letters following “Latin-” is intentional in order for us to disrupt the gender binary with the “x” first as well as to disrupt the male normativity of the term “Latino.” See Salinas (in press) for further discussion of the distinctions of this usage.

to the United States following the rise of Fidel Castro in the late 1950s (Gómez, 2003). Immigration trends from nearly all parts of Central and South America remained relatively unchanged until the 1980s and 1990s (Migration Policy Institute Data Hub, n.d.). More recently, immigrants from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala fleeing widespread violence and corruption in those countries have increased (Passel & Cohn, 2018).

Within higher education contexts, a number of terms have been used across time periods and geography to describe students and programs. Often associated with the Civil Rights Movement as well as Ethnic Studies programs focused on the Latinx/a/o population, the term “Chicano” pertains specifically to Mexicans and Mexican Americans who claim or affirm their indigenous roots (Comas-Díaz, 2001). Chicana/o Studies, a field of academic study born directly out of the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s (Acuña, 2011), is still found in community colleges particularly in California, Arizona, and Texas though some of these programs may also be called Mexican American Studies or Raza Studies (Doran, under review). The student group *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (M.E.Ch.A.), whose origins trace back to the Civil Rights Movement, used “Chicano” or “Chicanx” in its name from its founding in 1969 until 2019 (Me(ChA)’s National Board 2019-20, 2019; Urrieta, 2004).

A contemporary term to the word “Chicano,” the federal term “Hispanic” was first used on the U.S. Census in 1970. As Comas-Díaz (2001) described, the term was used to collectively describe all Spanish speakers, but the term has applied incorrectly to include others who do not speak Spanish, such as indigenous populations throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean and people from Brazil. The U.S. Census Bureau has struggled to accurately count Latinx/a/o residents in a way that adequately differentiates between racial and ethnic categories, especially without a clear understanding of whether a “Hispanic” identity is a race, ethnicity, or something else (Cohn, 2010). For higher education purposes, it is worth noting that the federal designation for institutions known as “Hispanic-Serving Institutions” were created under a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1992 (*Excelencia in Education*, 2014), and the use of the term “Hispanic” remains part of that designation presently.

As of 2000, the term “Latino” was added to the U.S. Census (Cohn, 2000). Comas-Díaz (2001) argued that this term was closer to representing U.S. Latinxs/as/os, and Shorris (1992) made the case that the term was linguistically correct because it is gendered and therefore representative of the gendered structure of the Spanish language. However, it is this gendered characteristic that has fueled more recent changes. Preceding the term Latinx in gender-neutral terms, scholars used “Latin@” which incorporates the male “o” and the female “a” at the same time (Demby, 2013). Scharrón-del Río and Aja (2015) referred to this term of “binary embedded” (para. 1), signaling a shift toward not only racial/ethnic inclusivity but also gender identity inclusivity. Though first documented online in 2004, the term Latinx gained a resurgence in 2015 that has continued to the present (Gamio Cuervo, 2016). It is this resurgence, particularly of the “x,” that is the subject of this analysis as we examine the use of the term Latinx in community colleges contexts.

It is important to recognize that the term Latinx or its variations have not been analyzed in languages beyond English and Spanish, such as in Portuguese (Brazil), French (French Guiana), Dutch (Suriname), and other indigenous languages (Salinas, in press). Similar to how the term “Hispanic” does not include all Latin American people, the term Latinx “is geographically

inclusive of these countries, it is not necessarily phonetically inclusive” (Salinas, in press). Therefore, as stated earlier, for purposes of being inclusive of all Latin American people descent we used the term Latinx/a/o.

Methods

Bowen (2009) addresses document analysis as a procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both online and in-print versions. The purpose of examining said documents is to elicit and make meaning of the material to produce empirical knowledge. While document analysis has traditionally been used as a way to triangulate other data in other methodologies such as a case studies (Stake, 1995), the use of document analysis as a methodology can be seen as fivefold. First, Bowen (2009) and Owen (2014) assert document analysis can provide context within a study. Furthermore, document analysis provides information in which further investigation needs to occur as well as it provides supplemental research data and discusses essential information to a knowledge base (Bowen, 2009; Owen, 2014). This method provides a resource to track change and development on a specific topic (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis allows researchers to verify findings (Bowen, 2009; Owen, 2014).

Document analysis provided a gateway to collect and analyze data for this research study, which was utilized because of the cost effectiveness, availability, and the ability to collect data across different types of data sources, including community college professional conferences, academic journals, dissertations, online blogs and news. In their study, Salinas and Lozano (2019) used environmental scan to collect systematic information and trends in relationship to the usage of the term Latinx in higher education. In this study, we conducted an document analysis to track the usage of the term Latinx in spaces where community college practitioners, leaders, policy makers, and researchers engage and/or share information. We intentionally chose spaces (e.g., conferences) and publication spaces that focus on community colleges in their focus or on the content they present. Last, we examined community colleges’ websites to see how these institutions utilize the term Latinx. The collection and analysis of documents used for this study were published before April 2019. In all, we reviewed the conference programs of 3 community college-focused conferences over 4 years; the issues of 5 journals since 2015 (the number of issues varies by journal); and 7 doctoral dissertations focused on the study of community colleges that used the term Latinx.

We acknowledge that the scope of our search is limited given that it took place online. This study used both search engines from the Florida Atlantic University and Iowa State University libraries. The data used for this document analysis included conferences and association programs, academic journals, thesis and dissertations, and blogs and websites. Organizations may not always archive their past conference programs on their websites, and community college websites do not always include dates to denote when the information was last updated. However, where possible, we include as much information as possible to clearly describe how community college researchers, practitioners, leaders, and even students engage with the term Latinx.

Findings

Throughout the sources we consulted, a number of findings emerged. First, we found that community college professional organizations focused have by and large not adopted the term Latinx, even by organizations with a Latinx/a/o-centered mission. Second, we noted that among the community college journals, the *Community College Review* and *The Community College Journal of Research and Practice* have taken the lead on adopting Latinx. We observed similar upward trends in the usage of Latinx in doctoral dissertations on community colleges. However, among instances of this usage, that there is no clear definition for Latinx other than denoting the rejection of the Spanish language gender binary among users of the term. While its predecessor “Latin@” was used to disrupt the male normative “Latino” by combining the male “o” and the female “a,” Latinx or Latinx/a/o aims to be more gender fluid. Finally, we find that the term has been used without explanation or justification, signaling that the word may be more widely pervasive enough to no longer require explanation. Overall, we found that within the community college field on the whole, Latinx/a/o has been used with increasing frequency since 2016.

The scattered use of the term by professional organizations. Salinas and Lozano (2019) noted that in 2016 the term Latinx became prominently used at academic and professional conferences. Notably, the Latina/o/x Knowledge Community of NASPA published a blog in 2016 describing the term Latinx and called for its continued usage for those who embraced the term (Molina, 2016). While we, the authors of this present study, were not able to attend every session that used the term Latinx in the title, we were able to determine usage of the term from our review of session titles and abstracts usage of this term.

For this scan, we focused on professional conferences and associations which focus on community colleges, especially the conferences for the Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC), the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and the League for Innovation in the Community College (LICC). It is useful to note that CSCC represents a body of scholars doing work on community colleges, while the latter organizations’ convenings are predominantly attended by administrators and practitioners. In 2017 and 2018, the first two presentations utilized the term Latinx in their titles was at CSCC. In 2019, the usage of the term Latinx increased. For example, one presentation at AACC utilized the term Latinx; whereas, six presentations at CSCC used the term Latinx in their title or abstract. The LICC had one presentation in 2019 using the term Latinx. Of note, details of past convenings of the National Community College Hispanic Council, a leadership development and advocacy group affiliated with AACC, were not located, but the 2019 call for presentations repeatedly used the word Hispanic to outline potential topics of interest for those who attend that conference. Last, the Community Colleges Division of NASPA has a task force called the “CCD Latinx/a/o Task Force” aimed at the preparation and support of Latinx/a/o student affairs professionals in the 2-year sector.

The increased use of Latinx in community college journals. In this section, we examine five premiere peer-reviewed journals available which focus on community college research: the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* (CCJRP), *Community College Review* (CCR), *New Directions for Community Colleges* (NDCC), *The Journal of Applied Research in the Community College* (JARCC) and *Community College Enterprise* (CCE). Utilizing document analysis (Bowen, 2009), we discuss how, if any of, the authors define

the usage of the term Latinx, how many articles address the topic of Latinx, and how it compares to other research journals in higher education.

In total, searching through the online resources on *CCJRP* and *CCR* websites, only 15 articles and 1 book review have been published including the usage of Latinx throughout the articles. Ten of these articles appeared published online in *CCJRP*: 1 in 2016, 1 in 2017, 5 in 2018, and 5 at the time of this writing before April 2019 (the number of 2019 published papers might changed as some of this publications have not been assigned to an volume). All of these articles focused around aspects of Latinx experiences or included Latinx students in the analysis, and all but two defined the term Latinx. For those that did not define the term, the usage was used to describe sample populations of the studies, but did not define Latinx. However, 3 of these studies provided explanations for their use of the term.

For example, Castro and Cortez (2017) provided their own definition of the term and gave reason as to how the term was going to be utilized in their article. In a footnote located on the first page of the article, the authors noted:

The politics of identity and identity labels are always in flux. In this essay, we use the term Latinx as a gender-neutral term to refer to female, male, transgender, gender queer, and gender nonconforming individuals who racially, ethnically, and/or culturally identify as descendants of Latin Americas—including South and Central America as well as colonized and borderized territories of North America. Certainly, the extent to which gender matters in languages other than English is an unsettled question, and our aim here is simply to be inclusive of individuals who do not identify within the gender binary.

Unless we are directly citing other research, we use the term Latinx to refer to student groups traditionally included in the terms Latino, Latina, and Latina/o. (p. 77)

Similarly, Doran and Singh (2018) defined the term on the first page stating, “The term “Latinx” is a relatively new term and is used here instead of Latina/o or Hispanic in order to acknowledge gender diversity within this population (Molina, 2016)” (p. 478). Whitehead’s (2019) justification of the term Latinx appears as a note located after the text of the article and just before the footnotes. In it, the author explained:

Queer communities have used the term “Latinx” to refer to Latin American communities in ways that resist the masculine-centricity embedded in “Latino” and binary assumptions about gender embedded in “Latino/a” and Latin@ (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). I use Latina/o/x to promote gender inclusivity. (p. 740)

Compared to *CCJRP*, only two articles from *CCR* and one book review used the term Latinx, and both appeared in 2017. At the time of this writing, no articles from 2019 appeared online first in *CCR* that used this term. Interestingly, both articles that do use Latinx had Dimpal Jain as a co-author. Of these two articles, only one defined the term Latinx (Jain, Lucero, Bernal, Herrera, & Solórzano, 2017) and this article cited Castro and Cortez’s (2017) definition as the basis for their usage of the term.

It is worth considering that *CCJRP* publishes 12 issues per year compared with *CCR*’s 4 issues, respectively, so it is naturally more likely that the former would have more references to Latinx than the latter. We also consulted other community college-focused journals to gauge their usage of the term. At the time of this writing, only one article in *New Directions for Community Colleges* has used Latinx (Hallett, Freas, & Mo, 2018). Within the text of the article,

the authors noted, “Latinx is used in lieu of Latino to avoid privileging males or creating a gender binary (Latino/a)” (p. 43). No articles using Latinx have appeared in the *Community College Enterprise* and *The Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*.

The use of Latinx in doctoral dissertations. We also used the database ProQuest to search for dissertations which focused on Latinxs and community colleges. Since 2016, there have only been seven dissertations in which the focus was on Latinx students at community colleges. The topics of these studies ranged from the transfer experience, STEM Latinx students, to instructional experiences in developmental math. Five of the dissertations were completed in 2018, one in 2017, and the other completed in 2016.

Notably, each of these dissertations used the term differently. Three of the dissertations did not give clear definitions of Latinx. Instead, they used their own wording to describe the term without attributing or justifying the use of the term with citations. For example, Covarrubias (2018) stated “Latinx is a person of Latin American origin or descent (used as a gender-neutral or non-binary alternative to Latino or Latina)” (p. 14). Cawley (2018) provided an explanation similar to that provided by Castro and Cortez (2017) in their *CCJRP* article:

The term Latinx is a newer term in educational research. Spanish is a paternalistic language that groups people under the masculine form of adjectives (e.g., Latinos when there is a mix of men and women, but Latinas when there is only women). The phrase Latina/o or Latin@ breaks that masculine-centric term, but does not include those who identify outside of the gender binary. Therefore, I use the term Latinx to encompass Latin@ identities beyond a gender binary. In this study, whenever a student self-identifies, I will use the term Latina or Latino as they have identified themselves. See Salinas & Lozano (2017) for more information. (pp. 1-2)

While there is not a universal definition of the term, it is significant that doctoral students were using the term Latinx without citing other academic sources that have used the term as well. What we posit is that the spread of the term via social media and popular media outlets and blogs have done more to increase the use of the term than academia, though the use of the term in academic is steadily increasing (Salinas & Lozano, 2019).

The Use of Latinx by Community Colleges

Finally, we did a general Google Search to document instances where community colleges themselves have used the term Latinx in announcements, press releases, events, or programming. We find that the use of Latinx by community colleges themselves remains fairly limited and that community colleges have adopted this term without explanation. For example, Contra Costa College in California described itself as, “A proud Hispanic Serving Institution, serving predominantly Latinx, African American and Asian students” (n.d., para. 1). As previously noted, “Hispanic-Serving Institution” is a federal designation, but Contra Costa specifically referred to its students as Latinx.

Three community colleges’ websites publicized student groups specifically for Latinx students: Community College of Aurora (Colorado), Klamath Community College (Oregon), and Everett Community College (Washington). Salt Lake Community College (Utah) hosted a 2018 Hispanic/Latino & Latinx Meet and Greet to help connect students with their peers and advisors. On the website for the Latinx Student Alliance at the Community College of Aurora (CCA), the

group described one of its purposes as to “Facilitate a safe and open community for the diverse Latinx and other self-[identified] categories in CCA in [an] effort to connect the community” (CCA, n.d., para. 1). In 2019, the Community College of Denver held its 15th Latinx Leadership Summit which included a session called “What is Latinx/Chicano(a)/Hispanic,” indicating an opportunity to expose and educate community college students to the nuances of Latinx identities.

While we found examples of Latinx usage in Minnesota (Anoka-Ramsey Community College), Maryland (Howard Community College), the Community College of Philadelphia, and City Colleges of Chicago, we found that the number of community colleges using the term Latinx appeared to be more common in the western United States, particularly in California and Oregon. Unlike Contra Costa College, most colleges’ use of the term Latinx also tended to be focused on events and descriptions of programming rather than appearing in college-level “About the College” or mission statements on websites. This indicates that the use of Latinx may be directed by students or college faculty and staff who work directly with student groups rather than college leadership.

Discussion

In this document analysis, we traced community colleges’ usage of the term Latinx by looking at research focused in journals focused on the community college sector, at recent dissertation works, and on how community colleges adapted the language used in events and programming to reflect this new term. Observationally, we know from other spaces within academia (e.g., NASPA, the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), the American College Personnel Association, and the special interest group Latina/o/x Research Issues within the American Educational Research Association (AERA)) use the term Latinx with more frequency. We did not observe the same level of utilization of Latinx in community college sector sources as we do in other spaces in academia. While we do not advocate one way or another on whether community colleges should adopt the term, we do have recommendations for community colleges who are thinking about how they label Latinx students or programming directed for their benefit.

First, we acknowledge that for some, the term Latinx/a/o may be utilized mostly by researchers in academia, therefore making it a privileged term whose usage will remain mostly confined to research journals and conferences. However, we also find that language matters (Castro & Cortez, 2017), and it is clear that Latinx and its variations is increasingly being used in a variety of ways that influences one’s understanding of Latinx/a/o culture, power, and privilege (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). Perhaps the most important point in Castro and Cortez’s (2017) explanation of their use of Latinx is “The politics of identity and identity labels are always in flux” (p. 77). Even 50 years after its founding, the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* has signaled a desire to remove Chicano from its name indicating that even long-term identity labels may be negotiated with each passing generation. Therefore, we recommend that for colleges who want to be reflective of the Latinx/a/o students they serve that they may consider how flexible they can be with the language they use in practice. For example, the usage of the term Latin@ appears to be relatively short-lived and ultimately replaced by the term Latinx within about a decade. It is entirely possible that the term Latinx will also become a short-lived phenomenon, so

community colleges might think about ways they can be adaptable with their labels, promotional materials, and documents that outline strategic plans for specific student populations.

Considering the verbiage of the Community College of Aurora whose Latinx Student Alliance specifically mentioned the inclusion of other self-identified categories, we may also think of ways to let Latinx/a/o students identify themselves—rather than the college labeling the students. While demographic questions on some forms must align with certain federal reporting guidelines, we recommend that colleges allow for titles of events, class names, and student organizations be reflective of the students in them. Workshops like the Community College of Denver that covers topics like “What is Latinx/Chicano(a)/Hispanic” provides culturally relevant programming for students that allows them to explore elements of their identity and hopefully decide for themselves how they want to describe their respective ethnicity/ethnicities. For community college faculty who are teaching in subjects like Ethnic Studies, History, Sociology, and other related fields, we see the evolution of labels for the Latinx/a/o population as a contemporary example of how notions of race, ethnicity, gender, and gender identity change over time and speak to trends in broader society. In effect, this term is not just about labeling programs and students outside the classroom—it also may be a teaching tool within it too.

In summarizing the use of the term Latinx, we found that the most common explanation for using the term was a desire to challenge the Spanish gender binary in the labels’ Latina/o or Latin@. Community colleges might take this desire to challenge this binary as a desire to be more gender inclusive in all areas of practice—including language. In tracing the usage of pan-ethnic terms throughout the past century and in more closely examining the term “Latinx,” we hope that this prompts a wider discussion about the intersections of power, language, and identity and how community colleges can positively impact students’ identities that better reflect their lived experiences.

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