“A Space for Beginning”: Teaching Mexican American Studies in Texas Community Colleges

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to highlight Mexican American Studies programs in community colleges, a sector where Ethnic Studies has largely gone unstudied. Drawing on interviews from thirteen faculty members across Texas, this study describes these instructors' approach to teaching and the impact they feel this type of curriculum has on students' academic journeys. The findings suggest that MAS curriculum has a positive impact on Latina/o/x students' cultural pride and helps them connect their racial and cultural background to their education.

Keywords: community colleges, Ethnic Studies, Latina/o/x students

In the last five years, the inclusion of Ethnic Studies in the K-12 curriculum has been argued over in various states, including California, Texas, and Oregon (Cabrera 2019; Kwon and de Los Ríos 2019; Valenzuela 2019). While the focus on these efforts are squarely on the K-12 sector, these conversations and the ongoing struggle for racial and ethnic justice in the United States have prompted news articles asking if Ethnic Studies should be expanded in higher education as well (McKenzie 2020; Watson 2020). A recent study at San Francisco State University found a strong correlation between successfully passing an Ethnic Studies course and students' academic performance (Sueyoshi and Sujitparapitaya 2020). More recently, California's Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law AB 1460 which mandates that all undergraduate students attending a California State University (CSU) take an approved Ethnic Studies program as part of their graduation requirements (Smith 2020). It is worth noting that the CSU system, comprising of 23 institutions, is one of the largest four-year university systems in the United States. Following suit, the California Community Colleges System, which enrolls over two million students over 116 campuses (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Key Facts, n.d.), will also require its students to complete an Ethnic Studies requirement beginning in either 2022 or 2023 (Weissman 2021).

Despite this major victory for supporters of Ethnic Studies in postsecondary education, community colleges have by and large been left out of the research on Ethnic Studies in higher education, which fails to acknowledge a critical part of the educational pipeline. To start, community colleges enrolled approximately 35% of the total undergraduate student population or 5.7 million students in the United States in Fall 2018 (Hussar et al. 2020). Community colleges are also more likely to serve higher proportions of students from minoritized backgrounds, older students, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation college students. These student populations could potentially benefit greatly from the documented benefits of an Ethnic Studies curriculum including increased academic literacy development (de Los Ríos 2017; de Los Rios, López, and Morrell 2015); improved academic outcomes, including retention and graduation (Cabrera et al. 2015; Sueyoshi and Sujitparapitaya 2020); and a growing awareness of social and political challenges and opportunities in students' communities (Hurtado 2005; Kwon and de Los Ríos 2019; Marrun 2018).

The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of Mexican American Studies[1] faculty in community colleges in Texas. Combining both LatCrit and transformational resistance (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001) as the frameworks for this study, the following questions guided this project:

1. How do MAS programs in community colleges disrupt mainstream P-20 curricula?
2. What positive impacts do community college faculty perceive that MAS courses have on their students?

Literature Review

Ethnic Studies courses are often considered part of the diversity requirements that undergraduate students complete as part of their institution's core curriculum along with women and gender studies and social justice courses (Bowman 2009). Hu-DeHart (1993) differentiated Ethnic Studies from "area studies" like African and Asian Studies that were created as a mechanism for studying and upholding American imperialism throughout the world (p. 51).

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[1] A note on terminology: Most colleges, universities, and programs in Texas utilize the title "Mexican American Studies," and Mexican-American Studies is the official name given to the field of study by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. El Paso Community College's program is called Chicana/o Studies, and the University of Texas at Austin's program is called the Latino Studies program, housed in the Department of Mexican American and Latino Studies. While using "Mexican American Studies" or MAS in this paper, the author acknowledges the multiple names of these programs and the political and cultural values of them but chose to use the official name of the field of study given by the state. In the literature review, however, I use the term used by the authors of the respective works in reference to MAS.

Instead, Ethnic Studies refer to the courses that came out of the grassroots activism of the 1960s and 1970s that "challenge the prevailing academic power structure and the Eurocentric curricula of our colleges and universities" (Hu-DeHart 1993, 51-52). Overall, research is mixed on whether or not general diversity courses provide benefits in areas like cognition (Bowman 2009) or attitudes toward racially minoritized groups (e.g., Chang 2002). However, the existence of Ethnic Studies on college campuses also represent a hard fought-for struggle among racially minoritized students who wanted their institution's curriculum to reflect their background (Hu-DeHart 1993).

As Sleeter and Zavala (2020) noted, "Ethnic studies is not a unitary movement, but rather draws strength from the differential spaces of struggle, with convergence and common ground around the fight against colonial logics of racial otherness and epistemic genocide" (p. 4). As such, "ethnic studies" is an umbrella term encompassing an array of subfields, including African American Studies, MAS, American Indian Studies, and Asian American Studies, among others. Each of these reflect both the histories of struggle and oppression of specific racial/ethnic groups in the United States combined with the study of the cultural wealth and assets of these groups (Sleeter 2011). The first college of Ethnic Studies was created at San Francisco State University in 1969 (San Francisco State University, n.d.), and these programs tend to be concentrated in public colleges and universities in the western United States (Hu-DeHart 1993). However, Ethnic Studies has been a staple of the community college curriculum since the 1990s; yet these classes along with many other diversity classes have been treated as electives, not required courses, in community colleges (Coats and King 2021).

The Civil Rights Movement and Mexican American Studies

The birth of MAS as a field of study in postsecondary education is largely attributed to a 1969 conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara hosted by the Chicano Coordinating Committee on Higher Education (CCHE; García 1996; Muñoz 2007). Out of this meeting came a document called *El Plán de Santa Barbara*, a Chicano/a/x student-developed master plan for higher education. In it, the CCHE argued that, "Chicano Studies represent the total conceptualization of the Chicano community's aspirations that involve higher education (CCHE 1969, p. 10). The plan demanded greater representation and support of Chicanas/os/xs in six key areas: greater recruitment of faculty, staff, administrators, and students; curriculum and academic majors that centered the Chicana/o/x experience; academic support; research programs; publications; and cultural centers (CCHE 1969). The *Plán* made specific recommendations for a Chicana/o/x Studies academic major that was interdisciplinary, drawing on a variety of fields including history, literature, Spanish, politics, and community development (CCHE 1969).

The marginalization of and discrimination against Latina/o/x students in Texas's educational system has been documented throughout the state's history (San Miguel 2001; Valenzuela 1997). As San Miguel (2001) documented, the quest for Latina/o/x educational equity dates back to 1848, when Texas was formally adopted as a state to the United States. Throughout the 20th century, Latina/o/x Texans challenged various forms of oppression in education, including practices such as the forbidding of Spanish in schools, segregation, discriminatory tracking, and unequal school funding (San Miguel 2001; Soltero 2006). These examples have also been well-documented in Latina/o/x educational histories outside of Texas (e.g., Colón-Muñiz and Lavadenz 2016; Donato 1997; Gonzalez 2013; Moreno, 2016; San Miguel, 2013). The activists and students who participated in the Civil Rights Movement directly took on these forms of oppression and fought for educational curricula that reflected students' backgrounds (Banks 2009).

The Research on MAS Programs in Postsecondary Education

There is a dearth of empirical research on MAS programs in the community college sector. The recent passage of AB 1460 to require Ethnic Studies at California State University institutions may prompt the state's community college system, the largest in the country, to greatly expand its offerings in this area (Burke 2020). However, there is work that documents its successes at four-year institutions. For instance, the research literature has long noted that many Latina/o/x students encounter psychological stress in adjusting to college that may be rooted in perceptions of discrimination and/or a hostile campus climate (Crockett et al. 2007; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Nora and Cabrera 1996). As a result, students may not feel that their campus reflects their identities, which may negatively impact their academic performance and attainment. Various studies (Hurtado 2005; Marrun 2018; Muñoz, et al. 2012) found that MAS classes and programs serve as a way for students to claim their space on their college campus and to feel as if they belong. Further, Chicana/o studies and Ethnic Studies programs contribute to students' sense of community on campus (Núñez 2011; Serrano 2020). Interestingly, Serrano (2020) noted that even on the campus of a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), it was in Ethnic Studies courses where students had more meaningful interactions with faculty and students from minoritized backgrounds.

The research on MAS classes and programs has also pointed out increased skills and outcomes for students who enrolled in them. For instance, students either self-reported increased capacities in areas such as cultural competency and critical thinking (Muñoz et al. 2012; Núñez 2011; Vásquez et al. 2014). MAS also provided students with a greater sense of community engagement and activism (Hurtado 2005; Vásquez et al. 2014). Finally, though focused on Ethnic Studies broadly, an evaluation study out of San Francisco State University found that students majoring in Ethnic Studies graduated at higher rates than any other major on campus (Monteiro 2018). Further, students who took at least one Ethnic Studies course graduated at higher rates than those who did not take any Ethnic Studies courses (Monteiro 2018). This research on improved student outcomes, particularly around graduation, paralleled findings from the K-12 sector (notably Cabrera et al. 2014; Dee & Penner 2017).

Ethnic Studies and MAS Faculty

Similar to the general work on Ethnic Studies, there is a need for more work on Ethnic Studies faculty, particularly with a higher education focus. A number of works have focused on Ethnic Studies faculty in the K-12 sector including work on critical pedagogies (de Los Ríos et al. 2015; Tintiangco-Cubales et al. 2015) and on the relationship between Ethnic Studies and teacher preparation (e.g,. Curammeng 2020; Sacramento 2015; Salinas et al. 2016). For example, Curammeng's (2020) work found that Filipino American male teacher's engagement with Ethnic Studies helped prepare them for the teaching profession in ways that their teacher preparation program did not. Ethnic Studies in this study was not just about content that disrupts the majoritarian way that subjects like history are traditionally taught; Ethnic Studies also provided the participants in this study with a mindset to prepare them for the affective stresses (e.g., exhaustion) of being a teacher trying to enact positive change for their minoritized students.

The extant literature on MAS faculty in higher education is predominantly set in four-year institutions. The literature highlights various points of tension that faculty in Ethnic Studies broadly and in MAS specifically may face. Rochín and Sosa-Riddell (1992) described the ways that early Chicano Studies scholars carved out an important field of study in postsecondary institutions while also enduring racial microaggressions, the denial of tenure, and other hardships along the way. More recently, Doran (2021) examined the work of MAS program coordinators in community colleges and found that their work required substantial emotional labor to sustain their efforts to build and grow these programs on their campus. Finally, Killen (2016), an adjunct instructor with a background in Chicano/a Studies, argued that Ethnic Studies has struggled to establish itself in the community college sector. She described the ways that Ethnic Studies on her campus in California has been funded, typically with soft money like the Title V Bridges to Success programs. Killen talked about her precarious situation as an adjunct instructor within a program that was slow to grow but finished her reflection with, "Ethnic Studies has a valuable role to play to increase ethnic consciousness in order to confront issues of racism and oppression and to counter a seemingly less democratic society where neoliberal ideologies aim to take hold of our future" (p. 119). Killen made the case that Ethnic Studies has an important contribution to make to the two-year sector, yet this opportunity has largely gone unexamined.

The Texas Context to This Study

Mexican American Studies was approved as a field of study for community colleges in 2004. The field of study designation is important because, while not officially a major at the community college level, these courses may fulfill requirements for a student's major or degree plan while also fulfilling core curriculum requirements in Texas. This also guarantees that the courses within a field of study such as MAS are guaranteed to be transferred to any public institution in the state. The official curriculum from the state recommends that students complete courses listed in Table 1. Based on the websites of the institutions included in this study, students may complete anywhere from 12-18 credit hours in order to complete the MAS field of study.

<<Insert Table 1 here>>

While not directly related to the focus of this study, the MAS trial in Arizona and developments in the K-12 curriculum in Texas played roles both in the initial interest to conduct this study as well as in the lives of the faculty members who participated in it. Many participating faculty members were hired at their colleges in the two to four years after 2008, when Senate Bill 1108 was introduced in Arizona and threatened to eliminate race-based groups from operated on campuses (Romero and Ochoa O'Leary 2014). MAS was officially eliminated in Arizona in 2010, a decision that was challenged in court (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, and Marx 2015). In 2017, Judge A. Wallace Tashima found that the elimination of MAS was based on racial animus (Cabrera and Chang 2019).

In 2015, the state of Texas began its textbook adoption process for the first state-wide textbook for MAS in secondary classrooms. The state received only one submission for consideration, a text that was riddled with historical inaccuracies at best and accused of having racial stereotypes at worst (Swaby 2016). In the end, the book was unanimously rejected by the State Board of Education (Swaby 2016) but only after the submission drew much criticism, including a 54-page report that detailed the number of inaccuracies of the book (Cortez, Jr., 2016). The MAS trial in Arizona and the textbook controversy in Texas are related to this study in two important ways: both events galvanized faculty advocacy and became teachable moments in and out of the community college classroom. In the last five years, Mexican American Studies educators across the state have come together to collaboratively develop the K-12 curriculum on this topic and to advocate for the importance of these programs (Soria 2018). As these programs further develop in the K-12 sector, it is possible that the demand for MAS and Ethnic Studies more broadly may increase in postsecondary education, especially in community colleges that serve as a common access point where Latina/o/x students first enter postsecondary education.

Theoretical Framework

As its framework, this study utilizes transformational resistance (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001), a concept drawn from Critical Race Theory and Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the 1980s from the critical legal studies of Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and others (Crenshaw et al. 1996). CRT scholarship rejects objectivity and neutrality and examines ways in which race and racism are historically and social constructed (Crenshaw, et al. 1996). CRT scholarship acknowledges the existence of white supremacy and is committed to human liberation (Crenshaw, et al. 1996).

Race is socially and historically constructed and, therefore, woven through the structures of U.S. society, including educational policy and programs. CRT in educational scholarship examines how power, domination, and marginalization manifest in educational contexts (Rogers et al. 2005). Educational scholars who draw from CRT seek a deeper understanding of educational barriers for people of color, "as well as exploring how these barriers are resisted and overcome" (Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings 2009, p. 9). Therefore, CRT applied to educational contexts assumes that racism is a real and powerful force on college campuses, despite *de facto* efforts toward equity and justice in educational contexts. LatCrit (or Latina/o Critical) theory builds on CRT in how it addresses issues beyond race such as ethnicity, language, immigration, sexuality, among others, and the intersections among these various facets of identity (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). Both LatCrit and CRT frameworks utilize experiential knowledge and counterstorytelling to capture lived experiences outside the majoritarian white system (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001).

Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) introduced their concept of transformational resistance as "both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice" (p. 319). This type of resistance is “political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001, 320). The authors offered this concept as a response to other resistance theories that did not attend to the ways students of color in particular worked toward social justice. What is particularly relevant for this study is that transformational resistance exists at the intersection of critiques of social oppression while also believing in social justice and that change toward equality is possible. Though this concept was applied to resistance efforts by Students of Color, such as the Latinx students who participated in the East Los Angeles student walkouts in 1968, this concept is applicable to faculty members who work with students in MAS courses which help students develop awareness around their Latinx identity, the Latinx experience in the United States, and how they can use their education to advance social justice for their communities.

Methods

This qualitative study utilized phenomenological interviewing (Seidman 2019) to explore the lived experiences of MAS faculty across Texas community colleges and how they made meaning of their experience. In total, 13 faculty across seven colleges geographically dispersed across Texas were included. Criteria selection was used to identify participants on campuses across Texas. Faculty members, program coordinators, and administrators were identified using the college websites and directories. Using an IRB-approved recruitment email, the lead researcher contacted faculty who teach courses in the Mexican American Studies programs and/or who were listed as sponsors of student groups related to the academic programs. I also used snowball sampling techniques to connect with MAS faculty if cold emails did not yield a response.

Among the 13 participants were faculty from English and literature, history, fine arts, and the humanities. The majority (ten) were female faculty, and all the participants are full-time (some tenure-track) faculty members at their respective colleges. All but one faculty member (Inez) self-identified as Latinx, and the one non-Latinx participant identified as white. Last, five faculty members were founding MAS faculty at their respective colleges. Table 2 provides more detailed information on the participants.

<<Insert Table 2 here>>

The interviews were either done in person, over the phone, or virtually via Zoom. All interviews took place at a time and location according to each participants' preferences, and interviews ranged from approximately one to two hours. After receiving informed consent, the researcher audio-recorded the interviews and used a semi-structured interview protocol to discuss: how faculty came to teach in the Mexican American Studies program on their respective campus; how these programs are supported by the campus; and what benefits they see these courses having for students, especially Latinx students. The audio files were transcribed, and transcripts were provided to each participant in order to solicit participant feedback. The participants were able to give feedback in two ways: First, their review of transcripts gave them the opportunity to edit or amend their transcripts in any way they saw appropriate. Any requests to change or redact information in the transcripts were honored. Next, participants who indicated a willingness to review this work as it evolved through the analysis and write-up phases gave feedback on the accuracy of the findings. In order to engage in reciprocity throughout the span of this work, I have provided completed written products (e.g., conference presentations, manuscripts) participants for their own use (e.g., program development materials, college reports, grant applications). I also kept reflexive journals throughout the data collection and analysis process to start the data analysis process and to make sense of emergent themes.

Data Analysis

In the first round of coding the interview transcripts, I used In vivo coding in order to maintain the actual words used by participants as a way to honor their voices and the experiences they shared (Saldaña 2016). Chunks of participants' quotes were organized and compared together in order to visualize and consider together as part of a group, and I engaged in reflexive memoing to make sense of themes that inductively arose from the data (e.g., conflict with administrators). Next, I used code charting (Saldaña 2016) to summarize the main codes and points of each participants' interviews and to note the main In Vivo codes that emerged from the first round of coding. In the second round of coding, I used pattern coding (Saldaña 2016) in order to generate larger themes and to draw conclusions about the role of faculty in community colleges in building and sustaining MAS programs.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations to note. First, efforts were made to get faculty members from across disciplines and campuses throughout the state in order to gather a diversity of experiences and viewpoints. Despite being contacted, no faculty members who teach Mexican-American politics or Spanish volunteered to participate in this study. Further, no faculty from colleges located in Central or North Texas participated, though I did target faculty in these regions for recruitment. I speculate that this may be because the MAS programs in other regions of Texas (particularly in South Texas and at colleges near the U.S.-Mexico border) tend to be bigger with faculty who are engaged in community activism. Second, the original plan for this study was to think about Ethnic Studies more broadly and include other racial/ethnic groups such as African Americans and Asian Americans. However, only African American Studies is a recognized field of study in Texas, and I only located a handful of community colleges that offer courses in this field. Only one African American Studies faculty member who was contacted out of approximately six agreed to participate in this study. Future data collection on this topic may focus on these gaps in the data and to better understand how these programs may approach the teaching of Ethnic Studies from comparative perspectives. Though not necessarily a limitation, it is worth acknowledging that the participant pool for this study is overwhelmingly female. The willingness for individuals to participate in this study may be connected to individuals' tendency to participate in broader activist and advocacy efforts on behalf of MAS in Texas.

Findings

In her interview, English instructor Gloria described organizing her Mexican American Literature course around 4 themes: Rewriting our story, exposing and explaining oppression, rediscovering pride, and questioning with a new lens. In the analysis process and in deciding how to name the emergent themes, I choose to borrow Gloria's themes to organize this study as a way to honor and to meaningfully describe the work of the faculty who participated in this study in a way that reflects their work.

Rewriting Our Story

At its core, the simple fact that MAS courses were offered was an act of resistance and of addressing the failures of the K-12 education system to provide an educational experience that acknowledged and affirmed Latina/o/x identities and contributions in particular. In short, part of "rewriting our story" was in writing the Latina/o/x experience into disciplines and educational experiences where it has been previously erased or minimized. When asked to describe their own motivations for teaching in their respective MAS programs, nearly all the participants noted that they: a) never saw their Latinx identities reflected in their own educational experiences and b) they felt it important to provide that content to their students.

Gloria, an English instructor, said that she did not encounter Latina/o/x literature until she was an upperclassman in college: "I encountered Pat Mora's work in a creative writing class and it literally opened up an entire side of my brain that was not allowed to be in school. It was a side of my brain that was bicultural." More specifically, Gloria talked about being a student in a K-12 system where speaking Spanish could result in punishment, an example of subtractive schooling described by Valenzuela (1999). In effect, Gloria's immigrant and Latina backgrounds were effectively stamped out of her educational experience until her junior year of college. Later, literature, particularly Latina/o/x literature, taught Gloria about her culture, particularly about gender roles in Latina/o/x culture that "documented my [Gloria's] true experience." In understanding the often-visceral reactions Gloria felt toward Latinx literature, she described the motivation to teach this subject in this way:

> I see how important their work is for me opening doors to stories about our families the complexity of our families in beautiful literature, beautiful works of art, I want to bring information to my students about literary analysis, but through their own cultural context, it's just a huge advantage to them. I understood that and I took it as quickly as I was allowed to take it.

Interestingly enough, the lack of awareness of Latina/o/x history and culture was easily apparent to Inez, a white fine arts instructor. She noted a disconnect in students and the broader population in understanding and/or acknowledging their roots and connections with Mexico, especially given that her college was located less than 50 miles from the border. The way Inez described this erasure of history and culture was,

> There has been a really conscious effort on the part of some people and some families to really make a disconnect between Mexico and the United States and you know, 'Well you're in the United States now, so just behave like an American and let's forget everything from Mexico.'

Even if students were not consciously trying to sever ties with their Latina/o/x roots, their previous schooling experiences often erased Latina/o/x voices. As Saul recounted,

> For students, when they start to learn about this stuff [MAS], they start to say, "Why didn't I get taught this before?" To them, it becomes essential. "I should have been taught this? Why isn't this part of the curriculum?" That's kinda one of my favorite things to do is to give them this knowledge that is essential but that's been excluded from the curriculum.

When asked why she thought students chose to take her MAS fine arts class, Luciana responded that the political rhetoric under the Donald Trump candidacy and presidency prompted students to ask themselves racialized questions: "I think they're trying to figure out, 'Do we even have a space as Mexican Americans?'" Later in her interview, I asked Luciana what place she felt MAS courses had in a community college context in particular, to which she replied, "I think it's definitely a space for beginning." Throughout the interviews, faculty discussed students' experience in MAS courses as one of discovery or awakening, similar to Luciana.

Exposing and Explaining Oppression

A key part of beginning the process of "rewriting our story" was in exposing the various forms of oppression that faculty and students may face. Carmen spoke of her introductory MAS course, which she rooted in Latina/o/x experience within the history of education in the United States. She shared teaching her students about Latina/o/x students who were disproportionately and often deliberately placed in special education courses despite not actually requiring these services in the 1940s and 1950s (see Gonzalez, 1960, for a discussion of these practices). Carmen went on further:

> [The students] are very unsettled by this history but can suddenly make sense of their own experiences. They're writing in the reading responses of a very similar experience of being ushered into special education classes. Then they can start to grapple with that experience, connect it to a real history and then suddenly it's not like, "Oh, something's inherently wrong with me as a human being. There's something out there in the world that we can actually change.

This discussion of students' connection between the material presented in a MAS course and their own lived experience was echoed by Iris. In her Mexican American Literature course, Iris described,

> One of the things they're [students] taking is the feeling that when they're engaging with this discourse, it's not going to be without connection to their person. It doesn't feel like you're having to disconnect yourself from who you are to be part of the academic or to be part of scholarly studies or to go on your career and be engage in this. Being who you are—you bring something specific of value to the discourse, and that's important.

Having that personal connection boost students' interest in subjects in Iris's class like nationalism or Queer Studies, which Iris pointed out that students could use to internalize their new knowledge better and carry with them further in their academic pursuits.

A common lesson among MAS courses was to explore the various terms that have been applied to Latina/o/x communities (e.g., Hispanic, Chicana/o/x; see Comas-Díaz, 2001 for a fuller list) and asking students to name which term they claimed for themselves. Instructors noted that this is where students' struggle with their racial/ethnic identities became most evident. Josefina described how "some students actually referred to post-racial identity" while others "just felt so removed from having those kinds of connections [to Latina/o/x roots] that they just felt like Hispanic was a way to determine their ethnicity without dealing with having a close relationship with Latin America." Another of Josefina's students "used the word dirty to describe 'Chicano.'"

The presence of internalized racism and self-loathing in students was explicitly discussed by half the participants. Sebastian explained self-loathing and its presence in the Latina/o/x community in the city where his college was located. Sebastian described this type of self-loathing as a rooted in classism:

> I would say people's describe to ascend and to move vertically, not just laterally, I think influences this phenomena of self-hatred. This whiting out, if you will, of one's Brownness. It is ever present here. I see it in my own colleagues, I see it emerging in a lot of my students, and it's one of my things that we of course try to counter in this building, in affirming identity.

While Sebastian spoke of the broader manifestations of self-loathing, Sheila recounted how she encountered it in her classroom. Through family history projects, Sheila found that a student's grandmother instilled in her a fear of being "too brown." This fear was deep-rooted enough that the student even stopped eating chocolate for a period out of fear that the consumption would darken her skin even further. Through her class, Sheila noticed that her student eventually became less fearful and more pride of her dark skin.

In her experience teaching Mexican American Literature, Gloria found that her writing assignments provided students with an opportunity to work through their own internalized trauma: “I really became aware of the scars that they’re [students] carrying because I’ve asked them about themselves and asked them to start writing narratives…I would discover that they hated being Mexican. A lot of them did not want to be Mexican because Mexicans are associated with such negative things.” She continued on to name the ways that students rejected their backgrounds by refusing to speak Spanish or to eat Mexican food, which Gloria described as “the product of years and years and years of being shamed for being Mexican.” Through MAS courses, students could interact with texts and histories to help them undo the cycle of internalized racism and oppression.

(Re)Discovering Pride

Theme three of Gloria’s class and of these findings was (re)discovering pride. In explaining her approach to these themes and the content of her literature course, Gloria explained,

> What I do try to help them [students] see and understand is how the white culture has anglicized the consciousness of most kids who have been through American public schools by erasing their identity down to pronouncing their names, not allowing them to speak Spanish, not acknowledging this part of American history.

As Gloria described, the types of self-loathing and internalized racism described in the previous section is due to systemic and interpersonal oppression that treats Latina/o/x culture as inferior (see Hipolito-Delgado, 2010, for a discussion on the impacts of internalized racism on Chicana/o and Latina/o undergraduates). The (re) in (re)discovering here acknowledges that some students might be discovering pride in their racial/ethnic identities for the first time while others may be rediscovering it again.

Every instructor included in this study reported how MAS courses helped instill pride in their students for their identities. In reflecting on the importance of Ethnic Studies courses and MAS more specifically, Abel, who teaches humanities courses, argued:

> Where we are we also have a lot of very negative stereotypes, which makes it even worse. Again, they make us feel ashamed of who we are instead of teaching [us]. So, we need to be teach, "Be proud of your culture, proud of who you are."

Similarly, Christina reported that her students faced racist remarks and that their experience in MAS courses gave them the ability to address racism head-on: "I've had students, both who immigrated here and who were born here, where they've faced racism and bigotry and they are told to go back to Mexico. [They] have a sense of like, 'No, my people have been here since before this was even the United States or before it was Texas,' and they can give historical information when people say stuff to them." When asked what MAS students get out of their courses that they did not get out of mainstream courses, Christina said without hesitation, "A sense of pride of their people."

This pride could be leveraged to help students in their studies. Saul described the distinction between his MAS humanities course and other courses when he said,

> I don't think there's too many other classes that center the connection between their personal family history with academic knowledge. I think for me, I really focus on creating a bridge between those things and showing students how to draw from their knowledge and their family history, community history in their papers. They've told me that being able to draw on their experience and put that in their papers and learning how to kind of connect their emotion and passion into what they do in their writing, that it's helped them in other classes, that other professors appreciate it when they brought it in.

For some Latina/o/x community college students, a MAS class may be the first time they have ever been encouraged to include their home cultures and knowledges into the classroom and have them treated as rich, valid sources for academic writing.

Questioning with a New Lens

When asked what skills or knowledge students get out of MAS classes that they would not otherwise get, most faculty replied with various soft skills that are often named in the liberal arts: critical thinking and analytical skills; research and writing skills; knowledge of alternative ways of seeing history and society. Yet there was a sense of confidence and pride that was instilled in students that emerged over and over again from the data. In Luciana's words, MAS courses are "a space for beginning"—they instill a sense of pride in one's personal identity while also learning to see the world in a whole new way, even when that way differed from their upbringing. This new sense of awareness provides students with a powerful effect; as Gloria explained, "They're connected to their education and it's related to their experience. They [students] might react with anger and a bit more political awareness than they had before. The sister to the anger is the pride that suddenly they feel proud that they're connected to the history." These feelings, according to Gloria, connected to a broader social justice-oriented lens in being able to feel solidarity with other marginalized groups who have experienced similar injustices.

MAS courses also foster a sense of community activism. Abel's MAS students organized carpools from their campus to Austin to participate in the public hearings and protests regarding the racist MAS textbook proposed for Texas's K-12 curriculum. On Saul's campus, students participated in protests both around the racist textbook alongside community organizers to advocate for a Texas DREAM Act. Saul's intentional focus on teaching students about various social justice issues, including environmental justice, led students to tell him, “You depress me, [Professor.] Before I didn’t realize there were so many problems, but now I see it and I can’t turn it off.” However, this type of consciousness raising was not meant to be the type of self-defeating resistance that Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) critiqued that only reifies existing systems of oppression. Instead, MAS courses provided students tools to critique and boosted their interest in social justice.

For example, Sheila promoted a sense of community engagement on her campus in two ways: First, she organized MAS-related events on campus where the broader neighborhood community was invited to participate. Second, the speakers at these events provided content that helped MAS students see the value of cultural competency to their future professions, regardless of what those professions were. In short, “We…reassure [students] that this Mexican American history course is relevant, say they're going into social work or certain other fields where you have to work with local population, and if they're staying in South Texas, the population is overwhelmingly Mexican American.” So, when Sheila invited a licensed professional counselor to talk to her students, the speaker focused their talk on cultural values and knowledge useful to effectively serving the Mexican American population in their city.

Summary of the Findings

Using Gloria’s framework for her own classes, MAS courses impacted students’ academic journeys through helping them rewrite their story, especially in helping students stake a claim on their education; exposing oppression, including dealing with internalized racism; rediscovering pride; and questioning with a new lens. In explaining why MAS programs are crucial in community colleges in particular, Saul offered this comment:

> [Community college students] face the threat of being stuck in the machine, in the industry and becoming cogs in the wheel and not having a lot of agency or having a lot of talent and not being able to pursue it. I have a student that turned out to be an amazing poet, and I see him walking around now and he's [in] refinery gear. I'm like, "I hope you write a novel some day or something." They need it just as much, even more than the Ivy Leaguers and the state school students. Community colleges get so much pressure to be vocational schools that, even though we say we're serving their needs and giving them what they want, the future is already so predetermined the many of them don't even get to dream outside of the factor work or the certificate or the nursing assistant, all those degrees.

These courses serve as a mechanism for instructors disrupt the whiteness of the curriculum students experienced in K-12 education and what they would likely continue to encounter in mainstream core curriculum courses in college while also helping students connect their racial and cultural backgrounds to their academic experience in ways that promote pride in that background and an expanded critical consciousness.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the approaches MAS faculty took in teaching courses in this field and how their perceived how students' experiences in MAS courses impacted their educational journeys. The faculty often began with their own experiences and their own discovery of MAS both in describing their motivations for teaching these courses and in crafting their own approaches to the course content—especially in acknowledging the erasure of Latina/o/x contributions to history, literature, and fine arts. In accordance with CRT and LatCrit, these educators teach about the ways that racism and oppression, especially against

Latinas/os/xs, manifests itself in overt (e.g., disciplinary policies in schools) and covert (e.g., erasure from the curriculum) ways. The faculty members describe several positive impacts that these courses have on students, , including helping them overcome feelings of internalized forms of oppression, in providing a curriculum that reflects students' racial and cultural backgrounds, and in building their capacity in a number of skills (e.g., reading, critical thinking, and capacity for civic engagement).

Through the lens of transformative resistance (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001), the work of faculty in MAS programs serves a variety of functions. The framework of transformative resistance posits that action has four attributes: it is political, collective, conscious, and motivated by the belief that individual and social change is possible (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001, 320). Urrieta (2010) documented how Chicano/a teachers worked within whitestream K-12 schools to become activist educators in spaces where Chicana/o/x students enroll but are often not adequately supported, and the work of the community college faculty in this study closely relates this work. In this study, MAS faculty work within the college's curricular offering to provide students with tools of agency and empowerment to continue their education and to make connections between the personal and the political. This work is political in how it serves to empower students to attain their education and to resist popular rhetoric that propagates negative stereotypes about Latinas/os/xs. As Luciana discovered, students' interest in enrolling in her MAS course came from an awareness of anti-Latina/o/x rhetoric in U.S. society and a desire to make sense of that through their studies.

The collective aspect of this work was notable in instructors' awareness of how MAS courses and programs contribute to the greater good of the Latina/o/x community. The field of Ethnic Studies and of MAS were founded on the desire to provide educational opportunities to more Latina/o/x students (and People of Color, broadly) in ways that valued the priorities and cultural knowledge of that community (Acuña 2011; Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education 1969). These founding principles were evident in the descriptions of current faculty in Texas who want to build confidence in their students and prove to them that they *belong* in college.

In terms of consciousness, MAS faculty across the board built an awareness of culture, history, and the contributions of the Latina/o/x population to the development of the United States. Students leave their MAS classes in community colleges with a heightened awareness of their histories and the legacies of activism that impact their present lives. Students also leave with an awareness that there is still much work to do. Last, transformational resistance moves forward with the optimistic view that individual and societal change is possible. These faculty instill in their students with knowledge and skills to be future leaders in their communities as agitators, critical thinkers, communicators, all while having a strong foundation in the history of their community. Through this work, the faculty pass on a legacy that they were part of to the next generation with confidence that they have prepared students to continue *la lucha* [the struggle].

Implications

While this study serves as a foundational research project on Ethnic Studies programs in community colleges, it does so without the voices of the main beneficiaries of such programs: students. Future qualitative and quantitative studies should examine the short and long-term benefits of enrolling in Ethnic Studies courses for students on building self-confidence, increasing critical thinking and cultural competencies, and on promoting their transfer and graduation. More work should also be done on Ethnic Studies programs in K-12 and how exposure to this content prepares students for postsecondary education. Further research should also undertake the work of understanding how MAS programs unpack racialization and the relationship between Latinas/os/xs and other racial/ethnic groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Indigenous communities.

This study also offers some implications for policy and practice. While understanding that Ethnic Studies are unavoidably political, policy makers and administrators should do more to understand the histories and theoretical underpinnings of these programs and the positive impacts they can have for students on their campuses. Given the final conclusions of the federal judge in the Arizona MAS trial that the decision to eliminate MAS programs was a result of racial animus (Acosta, 2019), administrators who question the validity or legitimacy of such courses should evaluate their campuses, the racial and ethnic demographics of their campuses, and their own internal biases before scaling back these programs. It is important to note that in Garcia and colleagues' (2019) framework for Servingness in HSIs, culturally relevant classes and co-curricular experiences play an important role in serving Latinx students.

For the most part, the participants in this study held graduate degrees specifically in Ethnic Studies or a closely related field. This may not be the case for all community college faculty who have a desire to teach these courses but lack explicit graduate coursework in these areas. Texas in particular has an active, grassroots movement of scholar activists who advocate for MAS and provide professional development opportunities to K-12 teachers (see Saldaña 2021 for a description of these activities; there is also the Ethnic Studies Network of Texas). These professional development sessions may help fill in the gaps for community college instructors who want to learn the content and pedagogical approaches needed to successfully implement a MAS course on their campus. Further, community colleges can encourage their faculty where possible to use available tuition remission funds to take graduate courses in Ethnic Studies to receive that training.

While understanding that more money and resources are always welcome to programs, simply recommending higher allocations to these programs is not always feasible. Instead, administrators might look for creative ways to involve Ethnic Studies programs into other priorities of their campuses and see how these programs might boost the goals of the broader campus community. This type of practice was evident at Sheila's college where a talk for future social service workers also included what cultural knowledge would boost the quality of service provided. Further, the momentum of ethnic studies in the K-12 sector should be harnessed to create a strong pipeline for racially and ethnically minoritized students who may be more likely to enroll in the community college sector (Ma & Baum 2016). This pipeline could, in turn, be extended to four-year institutions in the form of strong articulation agreements specifically for students who major in ethnic studies or a closely related field.

Conclusion

To date, the literature on Ethnic Studies programs has focused on K-12 settings and in public, 4-year institutions. In Texas, the Ethnic Studies curriculum is somewhat limited to Mexican-American Studies, and yet these programs address the needs of a crucial cross-section of the postsecondary student population. The faculty in this study describe the value that these programs have in addressing the gaps in students' education and in instilling a sense of pride and community for students who enroll in these programs.

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