Co-constructing testimonios

Publication details
Mery F. Diaz, Irma Cruz, Katherine Legarreta, Mercedes Lopez, Bethany Vazquez
Published online on: 10 Nov 2022

SECTION 4
Promoting social justice through autoethnography

Introduction

Deborah L. Mulligan

What lies at the heart of autoethnographical research? The six chapters contained in this fourth and final section in this handbook recount compelling stories of social change. The authors have reflected deeply on their educational praxis to shine a light on injustices occurring inside and outside classrooms. They do this not only to improve their own professional competence, but also to model inclusion and fairness so that others may take up the call for educational integrity and legitimacy. The authors aim to shift, or indeed to destroy, the boundaries that constrict educational equality. This is no small endeavour but, thanks to the strength of purpose of these contributors, their autoethnographic accounts of their lived experiences raise voices that are clarion calls for, and articulate demonstrations of, social justice of diverse kinds and in multiple contexts.

In Chapter 23, Mery Diaz, Irma Cruz, Katherine Legarreta, Mercedes Lopez and Bethany Vazquez craft co-constructed educational testimonios to offer a counternarrative to the dominant normative perceptions of the college experience. Their individual stories about Latinx students’ college experiences come together to provide a collective account of the importance of mentoring for this marginalised cohort. They reflect on their lived experiences of higher educational institutions and bear witness to the challenges and triumphs of surviving this world of inequality and bias. Whilst doing so, they emphasise the importance of supportive relationships.

In Chapter 24, Julie Keyantash Guertin raises the insidious issue of educational racial microaggressions that are played out between White teachers and students of colour. This story is told from the perspective of the author, who is a White teacher and recounts her reflections on her own performance of racial bias. The teacher-as-perpetrator approach is intended not to replace the voice of the victim of racial microaggressions, but rather to pledge to it and offer a different kind of requisite insider perspective on racial inequities within the classroom.

In Chapter 25, Ceceilia Parnther addresses the thorny issue of refining the use of social media for the purposes of connectedness, community and activism. She begins with a self-reflection of autoethnography situating personal experiences, supported by authors who use these practices in activism and social justice pedagogies in higher education. The chapter continues with a review of the role of storytelling in community activism and how social media provides unprecedent reach and scope. The author then discusses the challenges and
opportunities in using activist, autoethnographic techniques that incorporate social media. She concludes by advocating support for social media in ethical ways that are meaningful in autoethnography and activism in higher education.

In Chapter 26, Sharin Shajahan Naomi interrogates her experience of decolonising feminist perspectives and pedagogy to teach feminist issues in an international women’s liberal arts university, located in Bangladesh. Her writing relates the intimate relationship between a teacher’s subjectivity and her pedagogy in the classroom. This autoethnography opens up a conversation about teaching decolonial feminism in the Global South that can resonate with individuality, particularity, and the need of time and contexts to challenge patriarchy, colonialisation and religious extremism. Through classroom discussion, the author and her students realised that this self-critical practice is required for the further growth of decolonial feminism and for making it a home for diverse voices.

In Chapter 27, Skye Playsted utilises autoethnography to highlight critical issues in English language teaching (ELT), viewed through her eyes as a teacher working with refugee-background English language learners in an Australian adult migrant English program (AMEP). She begins with a discussion of recommendations made in recent literature for autoethnographic research in ELT to adopt a more critical approach. She then reflects on the incidents that prompted her to reconsider her prior assumptions about her position and privilege as a teacher. She concludes by discussing some practical applications of critical reflection, and she considers possible ways forward for teachers and researchers in AMEP seeking to engage in collective inquiry and dialogue around critical issues.

Finally, in this final section in the handbook, in Chapter 28, Georgina Tuari Stewart advocates a Kaupapa Māori approach to autoethnography. She maintains that it has untapped potential as a useful methodology for Māori researchers and communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. The author makes the case that autoethnography is one form of qualitative research to consider when the primary researcher is embedded and experienced in the context of her research question. She posits that it can be a powerful approach for investigating Māori identities and ideas, and that it combines well with other methodologies. The concept of Kaupapa Māori autoethnography recognises the potential of autoethnography to support research in education conducted by Māori researchers, with Māori involvement and for Māori in uplifting the political and personal interests of Māori students, families and communities.
CO-CONSTRUCTING
TESTIMONIOS

Critical narratives of Latinx student
college success

Mery F. Diaz, Irma Cruz, Katherine Legarreta, Mercedes Lopez and Bethany Vazquez

Introduction

On a typical pre-pandemic semester day, one could see the energetic buzzing of students, faculty, and staff at our downtown Brooklyn, New York campus. More than 17,000 students attend classes, weaving in and out of nine buildings nestled along with the city blocks that make up the college campus. Easily accessible, students come to the college from all five New York boroughs and beyond. It is the only comprehensive public college of technology and makes part of the US’s most extensive urban public university system. For almost 25 years, the college has also been designated a Hispanic-serving institution, and currently, approximately 34% of students identify as Hispanic or Latinx, reflecting changing demographics in the United States.

Across the US, Latinxs make up 18.5% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2020). Before the COVID pandemic, 21.7% of college students were Latinx representing the second-largest ethnic group enrolled at the undergraduate level (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Latinx college students primarily rely on public open-access colleges, particularly community colleges and Hispanic-serving institutions, and are underrepresented in four-year degree programs and private colleges. The college opportunity gap can be observed in the number of students with degree attainment. Approximately 51.5% of Latinx students earn a degree after six years, compared to nearly 70% of white students (Georgetown University, 2022).

Moreover, most Latinx students are the first in their families to go to college and are from low-income households (American Community Survey, 2015; Garcia, 2019; Gonen, 2013). Many have experienced years of inequitable, segregated, and under-resourced K-12 schooling, and inequities persist into their post-secondary experiences (Ravitch, 2013).

Critical scholars like Garcia (2019), who study Hispanic Serving Institutions in the US, argue that racial inequity along the educational pipeline is pervasive, vast, structural, and is particularly pronounced at the college level. Post-secondary institutions, much like K-12 schools, have been racialised in ways that reproduce societal racial and class hierarchies. This results in privileging private white institutions with more funding, selectivity, persistence, and graduation rates. It also results in disadvantaging public minority-serving institutions that are open access, non-selective, or non-competitive colleges on which racially minoritised, low-income,
and first-generation students rely. Yet academic progress and graduation outcomes, for which the most robust predictor is institutional selectivity, remain the dominant measures of college success. Given the long history of structural and racial inequities in education, critical race scholars have called for the rejection of the white normative standards used to evaluate success in higher education institutions that serve minoritised students and for the rejection of deficit frameworks that blame youth of color for their educational outcomes (Benmayor, 2008; Lopez, 2017; Morrison, 2017). Instead, they call for the critique and interrogation of the structures which perpetuate unequal access. Educational scholarship should also focus on asset-based practices that center and humanise students’ experiences, build on their cultural knowledge, and offer other measures of success.

We are five intergenerational Latinx women from working-class backgrounds, some of us immigrants, others, second-generation or from families who migrated to New York. We draw on critical race theory and feminist standpoint to reflect, analyze, and tell about our schooling histories, our positionality, exploring, in particular, the role of mentorship in our educational trajectory and thereafter, and of the solidarity that we forged along the way. Our stories seek to counter dominant narratives that often privilege private and elite white college experiences and focus on academic outcomes as the primary measures of success. Instead, we aim to redefine success through the relational self, personal connections, and sense of belonging as critical aspects of the college experience.

**Testimonios as critical method and pedagogy**

*Testimonio* — a testimony, a declaration from one who bears witness — is a type of autoethnography that is both a critical framework and a method of inquiry, deeply rooted in Latin American oral traditions and critical Latina feminist pedagogical scholarship (Blackmer Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2008; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Negron-Gonzales, 2015; Partnoy, 2006). Through the act of storytelling, the *testimonio* is intentional, political, emancipatory, and pursues social justice. It considers who holds power and privilege, and who is on the margins, excluded from power and privilege; in this way, the individual’s standpoint and lived experience, particularly those in subordinate positions, are centered and located at the intersection of race, class, gender, and geography. *Testimonios*, too, serve work to disrupt dominant narratives.

Solorzano and Yosso (2001) argue that critical frameworks in education work to challenge traditional claims that the educational system and its institutions are race-neutral, objective, merit-based, and offer equal opportunities to students. On the contrary, these institutions reflect the historical and present context of racism, segregation, and oppression. They also reflect the dominant socio-cultural assumptions about students’ innate abilities, intellectual capacities, and motivations and deem students of color inferior, thus shaping their educational and subsequent life opportunities. Part of challenging these claims involves legitimising and valuing the experiential knowledge of students of color, which can be drawn out through storytelling. Students of color often don’t see themselves reflected or valued, either in the mainstream curriculum or in the stories of American schooling experiences. Self-storying thus can be a transformative practice for racially- and class-minoritised students. The process “can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they lived and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36). Morrison (2017) also builds on this conception of transformative storytelling, contending that this tradition is a decolonised pedagogical practice that provides students of color with the opportunity to articulate their own experiences and build upon their indigenous knowledge. Moreover, self-storying works to interrupt deficit and subtractive educational concepts.
Many of us come to campus without the necessary social and information context to fully benefit from our higher education experiences. We have no family or friends who could provide background knowledge from their own experiences with higher education. Students whom I work with come with a broad spectrum of academic experiences and skills. They also come with lived experiences and cultural wealth. (Morrison, 2017, p. 182)

What emerges, then, are counterstories – the narratives of people of color, of marginalised experiences, not often told (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). These stories materialise as an authentic representation of educational lived experiences and the inequality in such experiences, but ones that also centers students’ explicit racial, cultural context, and cultural wealth. The educational testimonio can be a compelling and transformative process for both the writer and the reader. In challenging the pervasive theories, policies, and assumptions of academic failure, educational testimonios can shift dominant discourse away from maintaining that the problem is with individuals and toward uncovering systemic and institutionalised oppressive educational practices (Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona, 2012). Moreover, in crafting educational testimonios, the writers can interrogate the boundaries between marginality and privilege in higher education.

Mentoring

There are numerous definitions of mentoring. Some define mentoring as a process where someone of experience, superior rank or status and attainment, counsels, guides, and supports the development of their mentees (Cutri et al., 1998; Turner & Waterman 2019; Turner et al. 2012). Other scholars describe mentoring as a relationship in which the mentor shares knowledge, provides support, and serves as a role model or enables or broadens networks (Jacobi, 1991). Mentoring is also considered a tool for promoting student agency (O’Meara, 2013). Ultimately, mentorship builds on trust and can result in lifelong relationships that provide dual benefits for both the mentor and the mentee.

Moreover, peer mentoring for college students has been noted to support the college transition process (Shotton et al., 2007), helping to build social and cultural capital and career development. While engaging students during their first year is key to academic success, persistence, and sense of belonging, peer-mentoring can be a valuable tool in helping first-generation Latinx college students stay the course (Phinney, Campos, Kallmeyen, & Kim, 2011; Plaskett, Bali, Nakula, & Harris, 2018). Finally, Bernstein, Jacobson, and Russo (2010, p. 58) suggest, “The goal of mentoring is not simply to teach the system, but also to change the system so that it becomes more flexible and responsive to the needs and pathways of its members.”

In their educational testimonios, Burciaga and Cruz Navarro (2015, p. 44) interrogate their educational experiences, their allyship engendered as Latinas in higher education, and what they call critical pedagogy mentorship.

We view educational testimonio as an intergenerational process that challenges traditional models of mentorship. Despite the pressure to work in solitude in higher education, testimonio as critical pedagogy encouraged a co-construction of knowledge and closer working relationship between student and teacher. There is a significant amount of self-disclosure – uncommon in higher education classrooms – that comes with teaching and learning how to write an educational testimonio. It was not only the instructor who pushed students to learn, but also the student who created a teaching tool with the presentation of her educational testimonio.

(Burciaga & Cruz Navarro, 2015)
Why co-construct?

As more Latinx students, more women, first-generation, working-class, from immigrant backgrounds attend college, our stories are crucial to shaping and reframing how higher education supports and engages students (Garcia, 2019). In 2015, our college partnered with a large non-profit organisation to fund a peer-mentorship program supporting first-year Latinx students through community building. The program structure involves hiring students as peer mentors to help first-year students by linking them to various on- and off-campus career-building opportunities. This is how we came to our work together. Irma, Mercedes, Kathrine, and Bethany were human services students who had been students in Mery's classes. Mery is the faculty liaison for the program and brought everyone on as peer mentors. We worked together between 2016 and 2019 during the Trump administration, a time of right-wing fundamentalist politics, anti-immigrant discourse, and the emergence of the #MeToo movement and increased Black Lives Matter mobilisation.

As we met to discuss our mentoring work, we also talked about our personal and academic experiences. Often, we would talk a lot about the socio-cultural-political context of our lives. Mery brought up the possibility of writing together about our work as a process for finding value and making meaning from our experiences. To write about ourselves, rather than to be written about. To share what we had learned. We decided to embark on this research and reflexivity project. In crafting our testimonio over three years, we interrogated, reflected, revisited, examined, and shared our schooling experiences and positionality throughout, the role of mentorship in our journey, and how we make sense of our educational trajectory. Like Benmayor (2008), we aim to elevate these experiences from counter-stories to primary stories.

Irma's testimonio

I can now say I proudly identify as Mexican and Hispanic. I was born in Mexico and came to the US at a very young age. Now, part of me also identifies as American. I have learned English; I have been in American schools from kindergarten until college, and I am currently working here. I feel connected to both my Mexican roots as well as feeling American. However, it took me some time to embrace a part of both cultures. At some point in my life, I felt shame and was scared to say with freedom that I was from Mexico. People have so many misconceptions about Mexican people, and we feel stigmatised because of it. It wasn't until college that I felt more connected to my culture because I was able to appreciate the courage it took for My parents to leave it all behind and give their children and families a chance. I cannot be prouder to know that I am part of my parents' legacy.

Neither of my parents pursued a college education. My dad only went to elementary school since he had to work to help support his family from a young age. My mom graduated from high school and completed a certification program. My dad has primarily worked in construction, and my mom worked as a housekeeper.

I always felt that I was behind my classmates academically and learning a second language in school. My parents could not help me because they did not understand the language and focused on work. I was on my own. I had to rely on my teachers, but there were too many students even then to get the support I needed. I noticed that we were divided based on academic and language proficiency in middle school. Each floor was in a different color. Green was for ESL (English as a Second Language) students, orange for students who only spoke English, and yellow for bilingual students. I now realise how segregated my school was, which made
me feel very isolated at the time. None of my schooling before college was culturally diverse. Yet I always struggled with feeling like I belonged in this country, especially high school, the time I mostly felt out of place.

When I was applying to college, I realised how different I was. At the time, I was undocumented, not given the same options as my peers, and was treated differently. I also felt isolated and targeted by the US government. One of my biggest worries was not being able to afford school. At the time, I did not have the documentation needed to work. I also did not have someone to guide me throughout the process. My college advisor in high school told me to just apply to community colleges and gave me a list of scholarships. She would have more sessions with other students and give them more options. I later felt that she could have explained more. Being undocumented didn’t mean that I couldn’t go to college. I am shocked that I could get into college by simply submitting my application and waiting to see if I would get accepted. As I reflect, there were so many times where I could have given up honestly. Many people, even teachers, told me to give up and that my status would keep me from succeeding.

Despite this experience, I always enjoyed going to school and being around my classmates. It was always present that I had to get good grades to make my parents proud. I always knew that I would be the first in my family to graduate from high school and get into college one day. My parents motivated me to go to college but did not know much about the process.

I struggled to pay for my tuition in college since I was not eligible to receive any state or federal financial aid. I also struggled to choose a major. I started as an architecture major and later changed to a human services major. I felt isolated from my classmates during my first years in college. At the time, I was undocumented, and finding work that would allow me to go to college was difficult. My counselors did not share resources that they shared with other students. I was not eligible for opportunity programs that provide ongoing support for documented students. I realised that perhaps it wasn’t that the counselors did not want to help, but that there are not many programs available to meet the needs of undocumented students. Due to that experience and the lack of support, I quickly learned to advocate for myself.

Throughout my first two years in college, I struggled academically. I had to balance my job with an extraordinarily intense major that required significant time for each assigned project. There were times I felt stressed and anxious about my future and continuing with college. I doubted myself and my ability to graduate because of financial pressure and an unsupportive system. I realised that it would be an ongoing fight for my education. I was also worried about what would happen when I finally graduated and began to look for a job. “Would I still be treated differently and feel like an outcast?” I wish someone could have helped me look for and take advantage of different resources inside and outside of campus.

During my junior and senior years in college, I was finally introduced to different programs, such as peer mentorship. This provided ongoing support to undocumented and documented students, and the relationships I made as a peer mentor have impacted me tremendously. The process of both receiving advice from my professor and advising mentees made me more empathetic. I received advice about graduate school, my first job out of college, scholarships, and many resources from my professors’. They were even able to advocate for me when I had any issues in school. I stay in touch with some professors who mentor me after graduating. Furthermore, I was hired to my current position because my experiences as a peer mentor made me a good fit.

Before becoming a mentor, I did not see much importance in it. If anything, it would have been challenging for me to trust someone my age. Perhaps I would have reached out to someone older because I thought they had more experience. As I continue to learn and grow as a mentor, I have realised how important it is for everyone to have a support system...
throughout college. Students need advisors, professors, and peer coaches. There could also be a seminar class for new students to learn about resources and services, including support for undocumented students. Being able to encourage students when they feel vulnerable and need help is what I liked most about my role. In crucial moments of uncertainty, support is essential. I learned to be more empathetic to mentees and their different situations and find different approaches to reach out to them, communicate, and build relationships.

**Mercedes’ testimonio**

I am a Pacific Islander and Hispanic; my mother is from the Philippines, and my father is from Puerto Rico. Although I was raised with my Puerto Rican side of the family, I don’t forget my Filipino side, and I have a strong relationship with my older siblings and often enjoy the food. My grandmother was my caretaker growing up. Her highest level of education was the 6th grade. She was the homemaker while my grandfather worked outside the home. My aunt, who also helped take care of me, started college for nursing but could not complete her courses.

After reflecting on my educational experience, I feel proud of myself. I was able to accomplish school considering the situations I have been in most of my life. Not only was I raised by my grandmother, who is deaf and does not speak English, but when my father attempted to be in my life, he’d pick me up on weekends so that I could stay at other people’s houses. Sometimes I was able to do homework, and sometimes I couldn’t.

Education is super-important; I believe it is one thing that no one can take from you. This is a lesson that I learned from my grandmother, who always encouraged me to study and graduate. I wanted to go as far as possible, mainly because no one else in my family did it. I wanted to prove that I would be the first to graduate, no matter how challenging circumstances are. I also valued learning. Even after you graduate, you are constantly learning whether you are passionate about buying a home, car, or starting a business.

School had its ups and downs for me. I was bullied about how my hair and skin looked in elementary school, and eventually, I turned into the bully and got into fights almost every day. Somehow, I still had good grades and graduated salutatorian from elementary school. Middle school was challenging academically. If I did not understand my homework, I had to wait for the next day, so my teachers could explain. Eventually, I joined an after-school program and received homework help. However, I couldn’t join too many after-school activities because I had to be with my grandmother, and she was very overprotective. Things got much better in high school. I made friends, but it was still mandatory to go straight home. Otherwise, my grandmother would pick me up. I graduated with honors from high school.

However, I was pretty much on my own in college, and overall, my college experience was like a rollercoaster ride. My close friends went to different colleges, and the advisers weren’t very helpful. I worried about how I would pay for college. I learned about financial aid but filling out the papers was a hassle because they required personal information that I knew would be a mission since I was not close to either of my parents. I was dismissed from college during my freshman year because I failed algebra twice. At that point, I did not want to return to school. However, I pushed myself to take that semester off, complete that algebra class elsewhere, and return to school the following semester. Financial aid did not always cover my tuition, and I had to work extra and save money to cover the costs. I would juggle work and school at the same time. Because no one I knew went to college, I started to doubt myself and whether I could make it. I had no one who understood. “Who was going to keep me on track?” No one in my family made it through college, so no one understood my stress and challenges at home.
Being successful in college means setting goals for yourself and achieving them. It means that when you doubt yourself, you prove yourself wrong. If you thought you would fail a class, but you passed, that’s a success. If you thought you were not going to make it past your first year of college, but you’re in your third, that is a success. If your goal is to make the Dean’s list and do everything to maintain that GPA, that’s a success.

A sense of belonging is an issue in college. In high school, there are guidance counselors who are always on top of the students. College is nothing like that. Students miss out on opportunities at a commuter school because they don’t spend time on campus exploring and making connections. To feel supported, you must develop relationships, but it is challenging if students don’t spend time on campus. I eventually became a mentee in a peer-mentoring program, and soon after that, I mentored others. It was not until my 3rd year in college that I developed relationships with professors, made new friends, and became more open.

I took many great things away from the peer-mentoring program. First, I have improved my public speaking, creating activities, and time management. When I was a mentee, I enjoyed the times that I met with my mentor. I wanted to be the helping hand I needed when I didn’t have one. There are many sources on campus that students do not know about, and I wanted to educate them. Mentoring is more than just giving suggestions or advice. It also involves just listening at times. It’s about building relationships. Eventually, those relationships turn out to be lifelong friendships. After the peer-mentoring program, I have kept relationships with the other mentors. The other mentors and I are still in touch and support each other up to date with our personal lives, as well as with our liaison. I am still in contact with some mentees, and social media plays a role in the little communication. After graduating college, I got a job in my field and have applied a lot of the skills I developed.

Katherine’s testimonio

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, but my family is from Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans are a mix of native Taino, African enslaved people and colonising Spaniards. I use native words like ‘Wawa’ instead of the bus and eat ‘arroz con gandules,’ rice and beans, and if we had not been colonised, this dish would be known as Jollof Rice. My family does BOMBA on New Year’s Day, music, and dance created by slaves on the sugar plantations over 400 years ago. Racially I always end up putting down White on the census. I am, to a certain extent, a white Latina. I would be lying if I said that White Latinos didn’t have a certain kind of privilege over non-white Latinos. I have seen how I get treated compared to my partner, who is Afro-Latino.

My parent’s education was different from mine. My father had tetanus at a young age and had to relearn everything from walking to eating. He finished the 8th grade and then entered a Job Corp program but did not complete it. He loves to say that he has a degree from Life University. He moved to NYC and learned English on the way, and worked many service-sector jobs. One day he had an accident where multiple doors fell on his leg. My mother was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. She also had an accident at a young age, which caused amnesia, and she needed to relearn and regain her memory over time. She made it to high school but was a few credits away from graduating. She was a stay-at-home mom for a while, then worked in cleaning services on weekends. Now she works for Meals on Wheels delivering food to those in need. I grew up in ‘the projects’ where there were shootouts daily. I have been less than 5 ft away from a shooter, needing to run away with my little brother as he turned and pointed the gun at us. As a kid, you don’t see how harmful that is. Those who grow up in violence become desensitised to it.
Elementary school was more difficult than it should have been. I attended a highly rated school in the district, with the best teachers, extracurriculars, and resources. My mother always tried her best to teach me everything she knew. She even created at-home summer schoolwork for me, even though I always had honors. Academically, elementary school came relatively easy for me, thanks to my mom, but the bullies made things hard. I went to a highly rated Junior high school, but at that point, the work was much more complex, and my mom could no longer help me. I’d cry every night, attempting to do my math homework. I was also bullied in 6th grade about how I looked, and I started to go academically downhill in 7th grade. Teachers took days off, and when they were there, they didn’t teach. One teacher left halfway through the school year for maternity leave, and substitute teachers handed out crosswords for the rest of the year, and yet we were expected to perform well on the state exams. My most challenging experience came in high school. I went to a high school deemed a priority school on the verge of closing. The city almost closed the school three times while I attended. Some teachers would talk down to students. We were not assigned homework, but we were expected to pass state regents exams.

The college always seemed like a dream. I knew I had to go but didn’t know how to get there. We had a college counselor who took us on trips to colleges out of our reach. She took her time helping the select few she knew would get into the best schools. I wasn’t one of those students. My grades weren’t terrible but weren’t good enough for a scholarship. She’d say I wouldn’t graduate because I had a boyfriend and felt that the college I chose was an extension of high school. But I wasn’t ready to take out loans to Long Island University, the only school she approved. I planned to be debt-free for my undergraduate education and take loans for graduate school, but to others, this didn’t seem realistic; there was no point in thinking about graduate school loans.

I am the first in my family to attend college. I couldn’t ask my family for help because they didn’t know the process. Getting into college was confusing for me, but once I was in, it was much worse. Enrolling in classes, classwork, and writing papers was hard to get adjusted to. I had no one to ask for guidance and was even advised to take the wrong class, which cost my family money we didn’t have. I was afraid that my dream of college would stay a dream and that I wouldn’t be able to get through it. I also had a traumatic experience during my first year, and I almost failed all my classes.

I was almost kidnapped, or so that’s what I thought. I was locked out of my apartment, and when I went to knock on my mom’s, three men in a black car chased me inside the building. I was yelling for help and began fighting off this large man. Neighbors came out and yelled at the man, and my mom ran and took him off me. It turns out they were POLICE OFFICERS; can you believe that? From that day on, I would sit on my bed ready for class but unable to leave my home due to fear. I was afraid to walk outside anytime. It even looked like it was getting dark, even if that meant being home at 5 p.m. There were a few instances where I had to take a very late class because that was all that was available, and the anxiety and fear I had every time in those classes was immeasurable. I am still trying to push myself to do things such as go to a store alone or go for a drive when it’s getting dark, but change takes time. I have come a long way since that traumatic experience, but I still have many daily obstacles. We are products of our environment, and, no matter how persistent and motivated we are, it’s hard to grow when everything is against you and your success.

I became a mentee in my second year of college. My mentor was a significant influence on me. She helped guide me through the classes I needed to take, looked over my papers, and helped me network with other peers whom I hadn’t met before. I am still in contact with her, and she influenced me to become a mentor. Being a mentee allowed me to connect with
students and professors with whom I wouldn’t have had an opportunity to connect. Later, as a peer mentor, I gained skills and became comfortable in leadership. I was constantly putting myself out there recruiting students who just wanted to go about their day. During this time, I also became president of the Human Services Club.

We often think college life will be like the movies you see on television, but it’s harder to create a sense of community in a commuter school when students have other priorities outside of school. The connection and friendships aren’t made. I wanted my mentees to develop friendships and get out of the commuter slump we easily fall into. My favorite part of being a mentor was guiding and supporting others the way I wish I had been in my freshman year. I could network with people who work in large corporations and organisations through the program. I also developed friendships with people from different majors, and, to this day, I have friends who are architects and soon-to-be airline pilots. It allowed me to broaden my network outside of my major. I am still connected with many of my old mentees and fellow mentors. I feel like we created friendships that will last a lifetime. We checked in on each other before the pandemic and shared resources. We also remain connected with our professor and liaison, who checks in and shares valuable information. This program should be implemented in all community colleges and commuter schools. I would help other students who might have found it hard to create those friendships or had difficulty navigating through college.

**Bethany’s testimonio**

I identify as an Afro-Latina. Ethnically and culturally, I have been raised by Puerto Ricans and feel that represents the culture I know best. Racially, I am Black and present as a Black woman. I recently took an ancestry test, and the results showed I was 38% African. Although I am aware of the colonisation of the Caribbean and the slave trade, it was comforting to have confirmation of my ancestry and where I come from.

My mom could not complete high school, but she obtained a GED. This is a high school equivalency diploma. That is the extent of her educational background. She currently works as a dental assistant at a hospital in the Bronx. I have no information about my father. As a child, I excelled in school. I was not especially great at the arts or sports, but I was great at reading. I went to the New York State spelling bee twice, and I presented at a children’s math expo; I was essentially the perfect student. People regarded me in high esteem from a young age, and I constantly had to work hard not to disappoint them. As I grew older, it was harder to meet that expectation. In middle school, my health started to decline, and I was bullied for my height and weight. I’m unsure if I was as sick as often as I said I was or if I had so much anxiety about school that I made myself sick. The bullying was never physical, and I wasn’t tormented, but the taunting took its toll. I began to internalise everything the kids were saying. I thought I was nothing special, and because I was in an honors program and everyone around me was brilliant, I didn’t even think my intelligence was worth anything. I missed an incredible amount of school, which resulted in low grades, but nobody worried about me because of my high test scores.

I began to flourish in high school. I loved high school so much, and, once again, I was in an honors program surrounded by like-minded individuals who genuinely wanted to be my friends. Unfortunately, I went to a large and infamous high school in the Bronx and quickly discovered how easy it was to cut class. So that’s what happened; all through my freshman year, I missed classes. It ultimately reflected on my grades, and my mother found out. I had to turn my grades around. By junior year, my grades were fine; although I discovered my complete disdain for science, my health issues popped up again. I had several stomach conditions
and an ulcer and once again missed a lot of schools, but I had supportive teachers who were understanding of my circumstance. When senior year came around, my GPA (grade point average) was too low to go to any of my dream schools (I didn’t even try to apply). I settled for the public college that was a safe bet in acceptance. I now know it was a great choice, but I was ashamed of myself and what my college years would be like in my senior year. I lost the excitement for college and didn’t think I could be successful if I barely excelled in high school.

Looking back, high school and college were the most defining periods for me. Although being a working student gave me pride, it was the main reason I struggled. Late nights, lack of sleep, work/life balance provided many all-nighters, and 3 a.m. cry sessions. Although working was never forced on me, my mom stopped providing for my extra expenses when I turned 18 (phone bill, MetroCard, clothes, makeup, etc.). There was an unspoken agreement that I needed to work to live my life. Being a working student is mentally draining above everything else. I was constantly thinking about meeting goals at work and passing classes. I had at least one breakdown every semester. During the last year, I had two jobs, and part-time internship, and five writing-intensive courses, yet I excelled. Receiving straight A’s two semesters in a row (even in a math class) was probably my most significant character growth. I discovered what I was capable of, which ultimately happens when you overcome your barriers. I was tired ALL the time, yet I made time to do everything. I reflect with fond memories of those years, which helps me feel stressed in my current role.

Success in college is a subjective opinion; it means many things to various people. For me, success is a culmination of things. First, to be successful, you must’ve found a major that you have a passion for; that doesn’t mean you know exactly how you want to apply it into the job market, but it does tell you that you found something you love and don’t mind continuously learning and growing. Secondly, I view my student journey as successful: I worked, interned, studied, and did well in my courses. I never gave myself credit for being a working student until I noticed friends around me quitting their job or dropping out of school because they couldn’t handle the stress. That is fine for them. Everyone’s journey is different. However, I am immensely proud that I could handle so much as a student.

Initially, I thought mentoring was simply checking in on someone occasionally, having a conversation, and making sure they were okay. Mentoring required so much more effort and time than I initially thought. I had to send out emails, create events, create flyers, manage social media, collaborate with a team, and initiate and create meaningful relationships with mentees. It also helped guide me in my career. I had direct access to a population I wanted to work with and exposure to many networks to further flourish the relationship. I also had many networking opportunities that allowed for growth in my network. I gained so many friends and experiences. My mentees became my friends, many of whom I still text and talk to today. I also understood what it means to have professional expectations put upon me.

I currently work with a legal defense and education agency as a human resources assistant. The high-stress, fast-paced environment, the peer-mentoring program, and loaded college schedule helped prepare me for this role. I name-drop the organisation that funded our peer-mentorship program A LOT. I didn’t make many professional relationships through the program, but the organisation and program created a foundation of what I should expect in a work environment. I took away great friendships with my mentees and fellow peer-mentors in my personal life. It’s great to have people in your life who are going through similar experiences and who share the same anxieties OR can provide a reality check when you have irrational fears. My relationship with my liaison is wonderful. I feel as though I have gained a mentor of my own through this experience. As previously mentioned, in my professional life, the program created a foundation of understanding on how to jumpstart my professional career.
Co-constructing testimonios

Mery’s testimonio

I am a second-generation immigrant. My parents met in New York City in the early 1970s. They were working-class immigrants from Ecuador and the Dominican Republic, who left their home countries to work in the city’s once-vibrant garment industry and factories. They met in the city, married, but separated when I was very young. My mother raised my brother and me on her own in Washington Heights—a community then struggling with high rates of poverty, crime, and unemployment like many other areas of the city.

My American educational experience began in the 1980s in my neighborhood’s overcrowded, under-resourced, segregated, ability-tracking schools. Throughout my schooling experience, I encountered systemic challenges and was fortunate to have adults who supported me. I was placed in bilingual track classrooms for most of my elementary school years, separated from the English-dominant students. Socially, many of us were mocked for speaking mainly Spanish. Most kids would stay in bilingual tracks indefinitely, although it was designed to be a transitional program. My mother advocated having me placed in a mainstream English language classroom, and I eventually tracked to the high-performing classes for the remainder of elementary school. I was zoned for a middle school that was viewed as problematic, but a neighborhood advocate helped me secure a placement in a high-performing middle school just outside of my zone district ten blocks away. This school was in the white middle-class section of the neighborhood, starkly different and more well-resourced than the primarily brown and black Latino, poor, and working-class elementary school I had attended. I did well academically and went on to a specialised high school. I am aware of my privilege. Most children have the potential to excel in school. Yet, in an unequal system that fosters scarcity and competition, few are in supportive conditions or have advocates. I was lucky. While I excelled in school, I also knew people who were invested in my success.

I went to college at an elite private and primarily white institution in downtown New York City during the mid to late 1990s. These were the waning days of independent music and art venues, shoe storefronts on 8th street before the massive takeover of chain coffee shops, stores, and banks. Being accepted to a large private college was a proud moment for my family and me. We envisioned a “sky’s the limit” future. Having always been a solid student, I didn’t think much about the new skills I needed to succeed in college. I didn’t realise the culture shock I would experience or the resources and connections I needed to make for opportunities after college. No one had talked to me about it, and I didn’t know what I did not know. My main concerns were covering the cost of tuition that my financial aid and student loans did not cover and having a fun social life, of course. I ultimately attended because some of my tuition was covered through an opportunity program designed to mentor and financially assist first-generation college students from low-income and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Black and Latinx working-class students were the primary support recipients in this program.

I soon realised I had other things to worry about. Quickly, I felt pressure to figure things out on my own. After all, America and its bootstraps. I had many unanswered questions that I wasn’t sharing with anyone. How do I set up an email account? Why is psychology 101 so intense? Was I studying the right way? Was I studying enough? Professors advised us to study two hours for every hour spent in class, and at first, this seemed excessive. I was a good student, after all. That is until I received my first set of midterm grades. I wondered about the type of interaction I should have with professors. I was nervous about going to office hours, not knowing what I would talk to my professors about, or that, in doing so, they might realise I didn’t understand and therefore didn’t belong there. The professors didn’t look like me. They seemed so alien,
different, and intimidating. I didn’t have the framework to make sense of the racial, class, and cultural differences at the time. Ultimately, I didn’t seek help when I needed it during my first year. I struggled alone.

Attending a primarily white elite private college also meant negotiating cultural, class, and gender expectations. I was a commuter student. Unlike my peers, who relished in their newfound independence, I did not live in the dorms. I had to negotiate why I needed to spend so much time on campus after classes were over. While my mother valued education, the practice of being a college student was somehow always up for negotiation. The city was dangerous for young women, and ‘good kids’ were ‘inside kids.’

Furthermore, I carried the mental and emotional weight of the ‘immigrant bargain’: the immigrant parent’s sacrifice on behalf of their children must be met with educational and career success. I strove to balance between the American value of independence and freedom and the importance of familism, pressures to exhibit gender norms, and social class tensions. Even if I could have freedom, I couldn’t afford it.

Affirmative action debates on whether Black and Brown kids were being given preferential treatment that they didn’t deserve in college admissions at the expense of their white peers were constant throughout my time in college. The year before I entered college, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) published The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life. This heavily contested book argued that even while environmental factors play some role, human intelligence is inherited, and IQ is the best predictor of personal outcomes. Essentially, their argument was grounded in eugenics and stated that those who were inherently bright will be the ones to succeed. Here I was, a brown daughter of immigrants, a low-income student, and a member of an opportunity program reading this book in a sociology class at an elite white college. A book that did not contextualise the systematic barriers that get in the way of students like me but instead blamed us for our failures. We read Bowen and Bok’s (1998) The Shape of The River in junior year. They argued for race-sensitive admissions to college based on evidence that such policies improved the lives of minoritised Black and Latinx and first-generation students. It was hard not to feel like I didn’t belong when academia debated the intelligence of everyone who looked like me.

However, being part of a college opportunity program was life-altering. First, I would not have been able to afford and attend the university had it not been for the financial support provided by the program. I also had a mentor who was invested in my success. I saw her a few times a semester, and she checked my progress. This was especially important during the challenging first year and later when I was exploring and applying to graduate school. I also met students who became friends, some lifelong. We ventured together into activities and other aspects of college life. We shared the cultural, racial, gender, and class struggles we were experiencing. I felt less alone over time in that large and intimidating environment where I was in the apparent minority. I was part of a community of students from similar backgrounds, navigating similar issues.

So, in 2015, when my department chair asked if I would oversee the implementation of a peer-mentor program for first-year Latinx students, I took it on. I initially struggled with the decision, however. As a then tenure-track professor, it would mean an incredible amount of time devoted to service instead of scholarship, which is weighted more heavily. But at our college, only 8% (29 out of 498) of faculty identify as Hispanic or Latinx in an institution where 34% of students identify as such. Given my schooling experiences and how inextricably linked these were to my place as a Latina from a working-class immigrant household, I felt the importance of representation. I also wanted to engage in a project that supported students outside the classroom and allowed me to know them more holistically. To see them in ways
I wished I had been seen by faculty when I was in their shoes. It has been a challenging labor of love to develop the program at the college while balancing other aspects of my academic work, along with family life. However, the opportunity to work with incredible students has been invaluable. I have been invited to share in their personal and professional journeys. We have debated and discussed current affairs, celebrated graduate school admissions, new jobs, weddings, the birth of a child, a move into a new home, and out of state, and it all has been the most meaningful part of my teaching career.

Conclusion

The longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. It was the longing for release that compelled the writing, but concurrently it was the joy of reunion that enabled me to see that the act of writing one’s autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one’s life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. (hooks, 2015, p. 33)

In crafting our co-constructed educational testimonios, we offer a counter-narrative to the dominant normative perceptions of the college experience. We began the process of co-constructing our educational testimonios, writing individually and about the self. Each of us explored our past schooling experiences, reflecting and making sense of how they come to form part of who we are. But it was in the act of collectively bearing witness, reading one another’s testimonios, that we come to a new understanding and closer to a whole. Threaded throughout each one of our stories are commonalities that situate our individual experiences within a broader social context of education in the USA. We uncovered stigmas, inequality, marginalisation, strengths, perseverance, connections, celebrations, and successes. We also highlighted the essential role of mentorship and building supportive relationships in the Latinx student experience.

Latinx are the second-largest ethnic group in the USA, and before the pandemic, Latinx students were the largest minoritized group to enroll in college. The number of Hispanic-Serving designate Institutions has grown by 94% in the past ten years (Burke, 2021). Nevertheless, Latinx college students experienced significant challenges. They are often the first in their families to attend college, are from working college or low-income and immigrant households, are language minoritized, and primarily attend public higher education institutions. Latinx college students’ stories are crucial to shaping and reframing the higher education landscapes and institutions. Because the COVID pandemic has contributed to sharp declines in Latinx student enrollment, understanding their college experiences is increasingly relevant to institutional responsiveness and highlights the importance of mentoring.

References


Co-constructing testimonios


