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The Effect of Chicana Studies in High School Graduation Rates

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Author's Note

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Abstract

Chicana students have a relatively lower high school graduation rate in the United States than other ethnic groups. This study assesses Arizona's civic curriculum to determine the inclusivity of Latina social movements that have influenced high school graduation rates. Additionally, Arizona has had ethnic studies within the Tucson school district for various years, since the 1990s. The study will compare graduation rates among Latina student, through resources provided by ethnic studies. The Latina Critical Race Theory is used to explain the findings and the works of ethnic studies on the Latina population. The method of analysis for this study includes peer reviewed journal articles and scholarly sources to assess the extent of civic curriculum that is inclusive of Latina/Latina history and explores the influences on graduation rates and its impact on Latina communities in California versus Arizona.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Theory, High School Graduation

Historically, the Latinx community have fought for bilingual studies to help fight against forced assimilation caused by institutional racist policy. For example, of those policies was the work by “Texans who joined organizations like GI Forum or LULAC, and they became the ones in the forefront of questioning laws and court practices through legal challenges of such things as educational segregation or the poll tax” (Lewis, 2001). In the Latinx community, generations suffered prejudice practices within the United States, they were hit with poll taxes and attacked by their language. This study concentrates on the graduation rate of Latinx students in the United States. Latinx students have a low graduation rate compared to their black and white counterparts. Ethnic studies, in particular to Latinx communities, teach the expansive history of Latinx within the United States. In Arizona, ethnic studies have been taught since the 1990s. The studies were encouraged in attempts to lessen the gap of Latinx students who do not graduate. The Latinx graduation rate will be explained using Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). In this study, Latinx and Chicana will be used interchangeably due to the lack of focus in statistics to the Chicana community. Latinx is studied more extensively and used as a pan-ethnic term.

The Critical Race Theory is criticizing liberal education. In a study written by Zamudio, the expert states “Liberalism refuses to examine the structural causes of inequality (such as capitalism, racism, and patriarchy) that CRT scholars highlight” (2010, p.16). The Latinx community within the education system did not learn about the segregation practices that were imposed more blatantly on older generations. Many students do not know about the cases that Latinx communities had great legal victories. One of those victories was won when they challenged the segregation that occurred in the South Texas School System (Aleman, 2013). In the documentary, *Stolen Education*, Dr. Aleman studied the *Hernandez v. Driscoll CISD* case of 1948 and the lack of examination it has in new generations. Law classes do not mention the case,

although the case changed the Texas education system to end segregation based on language.

The lack of acknowledgement of one's own history influences the view and the placement these students have in society. "LatCrit and CRT complement identity development theories in student affairs because they look at the critical role of social status of different identity groups in the construction of identities" (Núñez & García, 2017, p.2). What students learn in school translate to how they feel about their self within the school system. The lack of self-belonging in a society that views minorities negatively really affect the perceptions and confidence students have within the education system. The study strongly correlates how identity within schools are affected by liberal education and institution enforcement of prejudices values based on skin color and culture. The CRT argues that social issues have been incorporated through institutional means, and not naturally as liberal education assumes. "Liberal education ignores institutionalized policy that created inequality" (Zamudio et al., 2010).

Historically, Latinx communities have had a long past with discrimination in the United States. As previously stated Latinx communities has had literacy test and poll taxes done to limit and draw the Latinx community from voting. "Physical punishment was also inflicted upon those who made imperfect attempts to use their developing English skills or those who attempted to assert their rights to speak Spanish" (MacGregor-Mendoza, 2000, p. 359). Corporal punishment was used as a tool to assimilate Latinx students forcibly, especially in their early education according the study done by MacGregor. In history lessons, representation of ethnic figures in the United States were misrepresented and demonized. Many can recall the story of the bandit Joaquin Murrieta and the heroic acts by white vigilantes, in reality:

"Siendo hombres honestos y dedicados a su trabajo, son atacados — con el propósito de ahuyentarles de las tierras que ocupaban— por estadounidenses que maltratan a Joaquín

y, ante sus ojos, matan a su hermano y abusan sexualmente de su esposa, quien también perece” (Barrios, 2012, p.80)

This briefly explains that Joaquin was not the bandit he was described to be. Historically, this theme repeats as stereotype take over to describe the Latinx community. The CRT main point becomes that the lack of examination and thorough research on ethnic groups, in this case within the United States, has created social issues that now become grave to certain ethnic groups including the Latinx students.

For example, to help the low graduation rate, Arizona’s Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) developed the ethnic studies model boosting its graduation rates in its high schools. Nationally, this is an issue too. In 2000, the high school graduation rate for Latinx students within Arizona was 58.8%, white students were graduating at a rate of 78.2% (Drake and Forester, 2003, p.6). In 1998, “Only 44% of Mexican-American students graduate high school nationally” (Lundholm, 2011, p.1047). The education attainment of white student nationally was well above eighty percent at the same time (Educational Attainment, 1998). Students were graduating lower than any ethnic group alongside their Native American counterparts. TUSD created a committee to study the issue and create a solution to help the Latinx graduation rate. The establishment of La Raza Studies was created, and it showed promising results. “In 1998, Tucson Unified School District established the La Raza Studies Department “[O]f the Mexican-American participants who take the courses, 97.5% graduate” (Lundholm, 2011, p.1046). The question now is why has the program not picked up nationally and what institutional barriers are present?

In 2010, Arizona was passing some of its most controversial bill, senate bill 1070 and senate bill 2281. Senate bill 2281 was written to outlaw Latinx studies in the K-12 education

system. The bill was written by Senator Huppenthal and State Superintendent Horne and signed into law by Governor Jan Brewer (Planas, 2017). The bill was written to address that La Raza studies in particular, and how it will be a huge detriment to American society as it was believed to teach un-American ideals. Specifically, Tucson High has had ethnic studies within its school system for decades and has shown great promise within the Latinx graduation rate. As previously quoted, it raised graduation rates significantly. Ethnic studies, like CRT draws out, forms strong identity development through inclusive education. The ban set by SB 2281, in CRT terms, is institutionalize policy internalizes oppression to create an unfavorable learning environment for Latinx students.

The question now is, why continue the ban in Arizona against ethnic studies curriculum?

According to Horne and Huppenthal, ethnic studies were banned to protect American ideals. The language of the law was passed because the ethnic studies in Arizona "promote resentment toward a race or class of people" and the target of senate bill 2281 was proposed to "advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals" (Lundholm, 2011, p.1055). Much of that language was struck out. In one study, private inspections were done on the curriculum of La Raza Studies Department to analyze the promotion of resentment the curriculum presented. "The results of the audit were documented in a 120-page finding that concluded no La Raza Studies course violated any subsection of section 15-112" (Lundholm, 2011, p.1041) The audit poses a threat to senate bill 2281 legitimacy, and found that there was no violations to support that La Raza studies had un-American ideals. The language of the bill specifically targets groups as CRT would conclude when public policy is created to favor one group over minority groups. SB 2281 was set many barriers. The solidarity it aimed to create, created instead a gap that again favors white students in the high school over the Latinx student.

The law specifically targets Mexican-American groups; the language of the bill was struck where it would specifically target ethnic groups. Its policy became contradictory in that manner as well. “Courses or classes for Native American pupils that are required to comply with federal law”, under SB 2281 (Lundholm, 2011, p.1046). Cultural and historical studies were taught for some groups within the United States. The language and the cause of SB 2281 would be misrepresenting the history taught in classes. The law created divisiveness towards the importance of some minority groups over others. Social studies curriculum is very exclusive, hence the need of these course to fix the social issue which is low graduation rates.

Critical Race Theory argues that Arizona’s ethnic studies ban is a barrier to a stronger society. SB 2281 has been going through an ongoing lawsuit since it was signed into law, its basis for the lawsuit is the unconstitutional traits it carries which violate student rights and was written on racist tendencies. Targeting contradicting features could be found throughout the bill. The National Public Radio (NPR) has been following the case. Most recently, Judge Wallace revised the law and “a portion of the law, prohibiting classes designed for students of certain ethnic groups, has been struck down” (Federal Judge Finds Racism, 2017). Traditionally, liberal education has failed to fully acknowledge the inequality that has occurred due to institutionalized policy that favors certain groups. In liberal education, it is agreed, that inequality is a naturally occurring thing in society if there is a leveled playing field. Its flaw is the ignorance that societies like the United States did not start with all people having the same rights. The United States has found itself having issues of gender equality, ethnic tolerance, and LGBTQ rights. This directly relates to how many school’s failures to include ethnic studies in high school, according to CRT, it also has failed to provide equitable or leveled field for students to succeed. Arizona has seen its graduation rates fluctuate since the removal of ethnic studies. Arizona’s Tucson United School

District Latinx population is 60.11% of the student population. Its Hispanic graduation rate is at 82.1% in 2015, but it dropped to 74.5% Latinx graduation in 2016 (TUSD Enrollment by USP Ethnicity by Schools, 2017). TUSD white student's graduation was 86.8% in 2015 and 82.8% in 2016 (TUSD Enrollment by USP Ethnicity by Schools, 2017).

Other states have seen another aspect of the importance of the inclusion of ethnic studies. Because in Arizona the curriculum was proven to raise graduation rates many states have gone ahead to pass their own bills to implement ethnic studies. Sadly, ethnic studies program in Arizona has ended, but other states have worked to either implementing local programs or programs that would be required by the state itself. San Francisco added their ethnic studies two years before the ethnic studies in California was passed (All SFUSD, 2014). In 2016, California made it a requirement for the school systems to require ethnic studies curriculum. California passed AB 2016, in 2016 to implement ethnic studies in social studies curriculum. (Alejo et al., 2016)Texas's Houston Independent School District and Massachusetts's Boston Public School District have implemented local curriculum in hope to have the same affects as it did in the TUSD. Washington State has college in the high school programs. Eastern Washington University works "[C]urrently ... with four high schools:

1. Mabton High School (Chicana/o History)
2. Brewster High School (Introduction to Chicana/o Culture)
3. Warden High School (Chicana/o History & Chicano Culture)
4. Washtucna High School (Food and Identity, Chicana/o Literature, Chicanas and Latinas in the US)" (Martinez, 2018)

Finally, we await to see the result from the courses to be taught in California, parts of Texas, Massachusetts and Washington. Although graduation rates improved in Arizona, CRT criticized policies have drawn that success away. The next study will be to observe the changes in graduation rates in California and the way the state implements the curriculum. CRT has been used explain the examples of institutional barriers created to favor white students and create barriers to receive an education for Latinx students. The graduation differences are noted to be greater when an exclusive history it taught. Nonetheless SB 2281 is a prime example of institutional racism, the graduation rates of Latinx students indicate that the ethnic studies were key to their scholarly success.

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