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# ¿Pertenezco a esta Universidad? The Mediating Role of Belonging for Collective Self-Esteem and Mattering for Latin@ Undergraduates

Mary Dueñas    Alberta M. Gloria

*We examined differences in and relationship of psychological (collective self-esteem), social (cohesion and university belonging), and cultural (cultural congruity) dimensions of university mattering for 141 Latin@ undergraduates. Collectively the dimensions accounted for 50% of the variance, with the psychological dimension having the largest prediction of mattering, followed by the social dimension. Belonging mediated the relationships of cohesion and congruity with mattering, respectively, and college generation moderated the relationship of cohesion and mattering. College generation also moderated the relationship of cohesion and belonging, evidencing a moderated mediation.*

Latin@s\* represent the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, yet their representation at 4-year institutions remains low (Fry & Taylor, 2013). Despite the increase in college enrollment, they are less likely to enroll in a 4-year institution, enroll as a full-time student, or complete a bachelor's degree in comparison to White students (Fry & Taylor, 2013). Latin@ first-generation college students (FGCS) encounter a myriad of systemic oppressions and institutional barriers in higher education (Kohli, Johnson, & Pérez Huber, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), and in turn are considered at risk for nonpersistence and lower degree attainment than continuing-generation college peers (Reyes & Nora, 2012; Saenz,

Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). As a result of such barriers, Latin@ students have less access to college preparatory classes (e.g., Advanced Placement English or Math), are less frequently aware of financial aid opportunities (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010), and encounter unwelcoming environments (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996) that serve to hinder their sense of fit, belonging, or mattering within the university setting—an onerous process of being “guests in someone else’s house” (Turner, 1994, p. 355).

Although resilient and determined to succeed in higher education, Latin@ students often lack role models and experience feelings of alienation, isolation, and culture clash as part of their daily experiences in higher education (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). As Latin@ students understand the value and importance of obtaining a college degree, the gap between the number of students who enroll and those who graduate from a university serves to negatively influence their potential for future employment and career advancement (Fry & Taylor, 2013). As many college campuses often do not reflect Latin@ cultural values (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002) and are perceived as unwelcoming (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Hurtado et al., 1996), having a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), a perception of mentorship (Huerta

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\* We use Latin@ rather than Latina/o to reflect gender and cultural inclusivity. *¿Pertenezco a esta universidad?* translates to “Do I belong to this university?”

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& Fishman, 2014), and a cultural identity (Barajas & Pierce, 2001) or even a sense that they matter to the university setting can be difficult (France & Finney, 2010).

Mattering plays an important role in developing one's sense of belonging (France & Finney, 2009; Schlossberg, 1990) as it relates to social connection (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004), social support (Rayle & Chung, 2007–2008), and persistence in higher education. *Mattering* is the belief that one makes a difference in the lives of others and that one is significant to the world around them (Elliott et al., 2004; Schlossberg, 1990). There is however a paucity of research addressing Latin@ students' sense of mattering at 4-year universities. In the university context, feeling that one matters is an important aspect to college life and may be related to important academic and affective variables (France & Finney, 2010). For example, Huerta and Fishman (2014) explored marginality and mattering for 10 Latino males, finding that the role of motivation to attend college, relevance of the college environment, influence of mentorship, and feelings of mattering as informed by relationships with campus peers and professional staff were important to their educational experience and success.

A sense of mattering for Latin@ FGCS is of particular relevance as they have different college experiences, knowledge, and understanding of higher educational processes than their continuing-generation counterparts (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). In particular, Latin@ FGCS are more likely to work while attending college to assist financially their parents and families, come from lower socioeconomic homes, and remain closer to home for school (Reyes & Nora, 2012; Saenz et al., 2007). Understandably, it is often difficult to balance school and family life (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Sy & Romero, 2008),

with students frequently feeling conflicted or guilty for moving beyond the family to go to college (Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2015) as they adhere to strength-based values of collectivism and family (Castillo, Cano, Chen, Blucker, & Olds, 2008; Sy & Romero, 2008). Quite often, FGCS more closely adhere to and struggle to manage family expectations and academic responsibilities as compared to their second-generation college peers (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015). For example, Latin@ FGCS indicated that family is a more integral aspect of their life than students who lived away from home as they sought a space of connection (Delgado-Guerrero, Cherniack, & Gloria, 2014). Understanding the experiences of Latin@ undergraduates and those elements that influence their perception of mattering to their higher education setting is therefore necessary.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Taking a holistic approach to understand Latin@ students' educational experiences, Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) developed a psychosociocultural (PSC) theoretical framework which emphasizes psychological (i.e., self-belief and perceptions), social (i.e., connections and relationships), and cultural (i.e., values and beliefs) dimensions within the university context. The three dimensions uniquely and mutually inform students' educational experiences and academic persistence processes (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). The PSC framework has been previously implemented with students of color (Lin, Her, & Gloria, 2015), Latino males (Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009), Latina females (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005), and Latin@s (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015).

## Psychological Dimension: Collective Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is operationalized in multiple domains and is explained by one's positive or negative attitudes toward oneself (Rosenberg, 1965). It reflects an individual's overall subjective emotional evaluation of the individual's own worth. In contrast, collective self-esteem addresses a person's level of social identity based on interactions with members of the individual's group (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). In a study of 66 Latino and 85 Black undergraduates, Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, and Caldwell (2002) reported that increased collective self-esteem was related to higher levels of cultural congruity. Likewise, with 100 Latino male undergraduates, collective self-esteem was positively related to and predictive of psychological well-being (Gloria et al., 2009). The close relationship of ethnic identity and self-esteem for Latin@ adolescents (Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002) and Latin@ undergraduates (Phinney & Alopuria, 1990) points to the importance of a having a positive group identity for a sense of educational wellness. Despite this previous research, scholars have yet to address collective self-esteem within the context of Latin@ student's sense of mattering.

## Social Dimension: Belonging and Perceived Cohesion

As Latin@s attend predominately White institutions, findings suggest that they have a lower sense of belonging as compared to their White peers (Johnson et al., 2007) and in turn often seek a home away from home (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014, p. 45) or some collective to counteract the stressful experience of the university environment (Nuñez, 2011; Turner, 1994; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). *Belonging* is defined as a person's sense that they are part of or belong to a particular setting or

group of individuals (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007), such as a university. Related to this, *perceived cohesion* is defined as one's sense of connection to a group and feelings of morale related to the group (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990), allowing for a sense of belonging among Latin@ students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As Latin@s have reported a lower sense of belonging than White students (Strayhorn, 2008), familial support is a critical source of encouragement that influences their college aspirations (Ceja, 2004) and academic persistence processes (Castellanos, Gloria, Herrera, Kanagui-Muñoz, & Flores, 2013). Furthermore, an increased sense of social support is linked to a higher sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In particular, increased interactions with diverse (Strayhorn, 2008) and culturally similar peers (Sulé, 2016) as well as increased involvement in academic support programs or *counterspaces* (Nuñez, 2011, p. 639) were related to a higher sense of belonging.

## Cultural Dimension: Cultural Congruity

Authors of the educational literature on Latin@ undergraduates' experiences have consistently addressed the clash of person and environment values (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castillo et al., 2008; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). As university settings maintain and apply White attitudes, beliefs, and styles of interaction (Castillo et al., 2004), Latin@ students are often constrained to these values and in turn experience concern and distress (Castillo et al., 2008). The degree to which Latin@ students' cultural values are mirrored or part of the educational setting is known as *cultural congruity* (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). The process of congruity plays a substantial role in Latin@ students' educational experiences as the fit of values influences their self-beliefs, cultural

connections, and subsequent persistence decisions. For example, Black and Latina undergraduate women reported higher levels of congruity as compared to their male counterparts, and in turn, collective self-esteem and social support were predictive of cultural congruity (Constantine et al., 2002). Increased cultural congruity is also related to more positive perceptions of the environment and increased persistence decisions for Latino undergraduates (Gloria et al., 2009). Finally, Latin@ FGCS reported lower cultural congruity than continuing-college generation in a study of academic persistence decisions (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015).

### Purpose, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

To examine Latin@ students' sense of mattering at their university, we quantitatively assessed the differences between and relationship for esteem (psychological), cohesion and belonging (social), and congruity (cultural), including how the PSC dimensions individually and collectively accounted for mattering. We also examined the mediating effects of belonging for esteem, cohesion, and congruity with mattering and the moderating effects of college generation on Latin@ undergraduates' mattering, respectively.

*What are the group mean differences by class standing and college generation for the study's variables?* To gain an understanding of the differences of esteem, cohesion, belonging, congruity, and mattering, group mean differences by class standing (lower vs. upper division) and college generation (first vs. continuing) were examined. In line with findings from previous studies with Latin@ undergraduates (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, et al., 2005; Gloria et al., 2009), we hypothesized FGCS and lower-division Latin@ students would have lower levels of esteem, cohesion, belonging, congruity, and mattering

than their continuing-generation college and upper-division peers, respectively.

*Do the PSC dimensions individually and collectively account for mattering?* Implementing a PSC approach (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000), we examined the degree to which the study variables, as they reflect the three dimensions, individually and collectively account for mattering for Latin@ undergraduates. Based on previous findings for Latin@ undergraduates' (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013), we hypothesized that each dimension (psychological, social, and cultural) would uniquely and collectively predict mattering.

*Does belonging mediate the relationship of esteem, cohesion, and congruity with mattering, respectively?* Given the importance of belonging within Latin@ undergraduates' educational experiences (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), we assessed whether belonging mediated the variable relationships. Specifically, we hypothesized that belonging would mediate the relationships of esteem, cohesion, and congruity with mattering, respectively.

*Does college generation moderate the relationship of esteem, cohesion, and congruity with mattering, respectively?* Given that Latin@ FGCS have more challenging educational experiences than their continuing-generation counterparts (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Reyes & Nora, 2012), we anticipated that college generation would moderate the relationship of the three dimensions (psychological, social, and cultural) with mattering, respectively.

## METHOD

### Procedures and Setting

Participants were recruited from a large predominantly White Midwestern 4-year university at which Latin@ students were the second largest domestic minority undergraduate group on campus at just less than 5.0% of the student

population. Latin@ student cohorts who entered between 2005 and 2009 had a 6-year graduation rate between 70.5% and 80.1%. The university has implemented diversity initiatives; however, given state budget cuts, reductions in programming and Ethnic Studies consolidation discussions were prevalent at the time of the study.

Participants completed a 20-minute web-based survey and had a chance to enter a raffle to win one of ten \$10 gift certificates to a local restaurant. Students were recruited via e-mail and through flyers posted at Latin@-specific and other culturally based ethnic organizations and programs.

### Latin@ Undergraduate Participants

A total of 153 undergraduates agreed to participate in the study; however, only 141 entered the online survey system, all of whom met the study criteria (i.e., self-identified Latin@ undergraduates 18 years of age or older). There were 97 (69%) females, 43 (31%) males, and 1 (1%) who identified as other gender. Students identified as Mexican American ( $n = 90$ , 69%), Central American ( $n = 6$ , 4%), South American ( $n = 21$ , 15%), or of some Latin@ heritage ( $n = 17$ , 12%). Six students (4%) did not respond to the question. More than half ( $n = 76$ ; 56%) of the sample identified as the first in their family to attend college. When asked if they were born in the United States, almost half of the students ( $n = 67$ , 48%) indicated that they were first-generation. Five students did not answer the college generation and US-born questions.

By class standing, there were 27 first-year students (19%), 32 sophomores (23%), 45 juniors (32%), 25 seniors (18%), and 12 fifth-year seniors (9%). Only 20 (14%) students reported having transferred from a different institution. Four students (3%) did not answer this question. Students' self-reported grade point averages (GPAs) ranged from

0.00 to 4.31 ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ), and the majority ( $n = 133$ , 97%) indicated having been continuously enrolled in higher education. Over half of the students indicated that they were earning an academic certificate ( $n = 80$ , 57%), with the most frequent being a Latina/o studies certificate ( $n = 19$ , 24%), followed by global health ( $n = 9$ , 11%) and environmental studies ( $n = 6$ , 7%).

### Survey Instruments

Students completed a demographic form, which was placed first, followed by five standardized scales. The scales included esteem (psychological), cohesion and university belonging (social), and congruity (cultural). University mattering was the criterion variable.

*Demographic Form.* A total of 19 items, the demographic form asked 11 personal and 8 educational-focused questions. The personal information included items such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, siblings, generation to the United States, and parental education level. Educational-focused questions asked about GPA, class standing, housing, transfer status, first-generation college status, and affiliation with student organizations.

*Esteem.* The Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) measures one's social identity or self-esteem relative to a group. Composed of four subscales, the scale includes Private (positive evaluation of an individual's group), Membership (how one sees oneself in a group), Public (how the group the individual belongs to is evaluated by others), and Importance (how important one's group is to self-concept) as core to collective identity. The 16-item scale is based on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores reflect increased esteem to individual social membership. For this study, the word *group* was modified to *university* (e.g., "In general, I'm glad to be a member of my university").

TABLE 1.  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

	$\alpha$	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Esteem	.84	5.47	0.72	—	.58***	.53***	.54***	.61***
2. Cohesion	.95	8.05	2.36		—	.78***	.60***	.49***
3. Belonging	.80	3.29	0.79			—	.59***	.62***
4. Congruity	.86	4.87	1.01				—	.36***
5. Mattering	.94	3.38	0.64					—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Cronbach's alphas for the subscales ranged from .55 to .83 (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Used as a total scale score in the prediction of Latino undergraduates' well-being, an internal consistency coefficient of .80 was reported (Gloria et al., 2009).

*Belonging.* The University Belonging Scale (Freeman et al., 2007) assessed students' sense of belonging to the university. Consisting of eight items, each is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*). A sample item includes "I feel like a real part of this university," where higher scores reflect a greater sense of belonging. Four of the items are reverse coded. Used with 238 first-year students (162 females), the scale yielded an adequate Cronbach's alpha (.79) in a study of classroom belonging, academic motivation, and faculty characteristics with university belonging (Freeman et al., 2007).

*Cohesion.* A 6-item scale, the Perceived Cohesion Scale (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) assessed one's sense of connection and feelings of morale to a particular organization or group. The scale consists of two 3-item subscales (Sense of Belonging and Feelings of Morale). Scoring is based on an 11-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores reflect increased perceived cohesion and morale.

For this study, only the Sense of Belonging subscale, which assessed a sense of connection to the university, was used, with modifications to replace the word *university* with *community* (e.g., "I see myself as part of the university"). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) reported high reliability and validity with two random samples (i.e., 102 undergraduates from a small northeastern college and 110 residents from a midsize city). A Cronbach's alpha of .82 for the belonging subscale was found in a study of Latina undergraduates' academic persistence decisions (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013).

*Congruity.* A 13-item scale, the Cultural Congruity Scale (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996) was developed to assess racial/ethnic minority students' sense of cultural fit with the university's culture values. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores reflected higher cultural congruity or fit with the university's values. A sample item includes "I can talk to my friends at school about my family and culture." Eight items were reverse scored. Internal consistency coefficients ranged from .81 to .89 for the pilot and validation studies (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). Similar Cronbach's alphas were reported with Latin@ undergraduates ( $\alpha = .81$ , Delgado-Guerrero

& Gloria, 2013;  $\alpha = .85$ , Gloria et al., 2009;  $\alpha = .89$ , Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015).

**Mattering.** Modified from a General Mattering scale (Elliott et al., 2004), the University Mattering scale (France & Finney, 2010) measures three perceived components of mattering with others at a university (awareness, importance, and reliance). The 24-item scale was based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*); higher scores reflect greater feelings of mattering at the university. A sample item includes "My successes are a source of pride to the people at my university." In a validation study with 295 upper-division undergraduates, the scale was positively related to academic motivation and yielded adequate internal consistency coefficients (France & Finney, 2010).

## RESULTS

Internal consistencies for the study's scales ranged from .80 to .95. Descriptive information and correlations for the study's variables are presented in Table 1.

### Group Mean Differences

Results of a 2 (class standing)  $\times$  2 (college generation) MANOVA revealed a significant omnibus equation, with college generation the only significant main effect,  $\lambda = .83$ ,  $F(5, 87) = 3.50$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\eta^2 = .17$ . The interaction variable was not significant. For college generation, univariate differences emerged for esteem,  $F(1, 94) = 6.54$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ ; belonging,  $F(1, 94) = 4.08$ ,  $p = .046$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ; cohesion,  $F(1, 94) = 14.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .14$ ; and congruity,  $F(1, 94) = 8.40$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . Specifically, FGCS reported lower esteem ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), belonging ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), cohesion ( $M = 7.15$ ,  $SD = 2.45$ ), and congruity ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than continuing-

generation students ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ;  $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ;  $M = 8.89$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ;  $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ , respectively).

### Prediction of University Mattering

A three-step hierarchical regression assessed the degree to which the variables individually and collectively accounted for Latin@ undergraduates' mattering. The omnibus equation was significant,  $F(4, 94) = 22.39$ ,  $p < .001$ , accounting for 50% of the variance. In Step 1 (psychological), esteem was a positive predictor,  $\beta = .61$ ,  $t = 7.47$ ,  $p < .001$ , accounting for 38% of the variance,  $F(1, 93) = 55.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . In Step 2 (social), 11% of the variance,  $F(2, 91) = 10.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , was accounted for, with belonging the only positive predictor,  $\beta = .49$ ,  $t = 4.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . The cultural dimension (Step 3) was not significant ( $p > .05$ ).

### Mediation Analyses

Three sets of analyses were conducted to determine if belonging mediated the relationships of mattering with esteem, cohesion, and congruity using Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step approach (see Table 2). First, a significant relationship must emerge between the independent (esteem, cohesion, and congruity) and mediating variable (belonging). Next, a significant relationship is needed between the independent and dependent variable (mattering). Finally, when the dependent variable is regressed onto the independent and mediating variable concurrently, only the mediating variable must emerge significant for a mediation to occur.

Esteem positively and significantly predicted belonging ( $\beta = .53$ ) and mattering ( $\beta = .61$ ), respectively. When mattering was regressed onto esteem and belonging concurrently, belonging predicted mattering ( $\beta = .40$ ), indicating that belonging partially mediated the relationship of esteem to mattering.

Cohesion predicted belonging ( $\beta = .78$ ).

TABLE 2.  
Hierarchical Regression of University Mattering on Esteem, Cohesion, and  
Congruity With Belonging as a Mediator Variable

Variable	B	$\beta$	95% CI
<i>Mediator Model 1</i>			
Esteem	0.327***	0.377***	[0.188, 0.565]
Belonging	0.327***	0.401***	[0.211, 0.589]
<i>Mediator Model 2</i>			
Cohesion	0.009	0.033	[-0.218, 0.284]
Belonging	0.487***	0.595***	[0.329, 0.859]
<i>Mediator Model 3</i>			
Congruity	-0.012	-0.020	[-0.219, 0.18]
Belonging	0.517***	0.632***	[0.411, 0.85]

Note. Model 1:  $R^2 = .478$  and  $F = 45.586$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Model 2:  $R^2 = .386$  and  $F = 28.871$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Model 3:  $R^2 = .385$  and  $F = 28.847$ ,  $p < .001$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

When mattering was regressed onto cohesion, the relationship was significant ( $\beta = .49$ ). When mattering was regressed onto cohesion and belonging simultaneously, belonging predicted mattering ( $\beta = .60$ ). The direct relationship (cohesion to mattering) was not significant such that belonging fully mediated the relationship.

Finally, congruity positively and significantly predicted belonging ( $\beta = .59$ ) and mattering ( $\beta = .36$ ), respectively. When mattering was regressed onto congruity and belonging simultaneously, belonging predicted mattering ( $\beta = .63$ ) and the direct relationship between congruity and mattering was no longer significant. These findings indicate that belonging fully mediated the relationship between congruity and mattering.

### Moderation Analyses

A series of analyses were conducted to determine if college generation would moderate the relationship between the three dimensions (i.e., esteem, cohesion, and congruity, respec-

tively) and university mattering. To test the moderator analyses, an interaction variable was created for college generation (dummy coded as 1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). The predictors, which were centered (i.e., mean set to zero), and an interaction variable (college generation  $\times$  esteem, belonging, or congruity) were simultaneously added to the regression, respectively (see Table 3).

Of the three moderator analyses, only the cohesion regression analysis was significant. Specifically, the regression tested whether the association between cohesion and mattering was dependent on college generation. The coefficient for the interaction term was significant ( $\beta = -.33$ ), evidencing a difference in the strength of the relationship between cohesion and mattering for FGCS and continuing-generation students (see Figure 1).

### Follow-Up Analysis

In that belonging fully mediated the relationship of cohesion and mattering and college generation moderated the cohesion and

TABLE 3.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis of University Mattering on Esteem, Cohesion, and Congruity With College Generation as a Moderator Variable

Variable	$\beta$	SE (B)	95% CI
<i>Moderator Model 1</i>			
Esteem	0.597***	0.118	[0.363, 0.832]
College Generation	0.066	0.110	[-0.153, 0.284]
Esteem $\times$ College Generation	-0.069	0.110	[-0.287, 0.148]
<i>Moderator Model 2</i>			
Cohesion	0.240***	0.049***	[0.144, 0.337]
College Generation	0.134	0.124	[-0.112, 0.379]
Cohesion $\times$ College Generation	-0.329**	0.136*	[-0.599, -0.059]
<i>Moderator Model 3</i>			
Congruity	0.289*	0.120	[0.050, 0.528]
College Generation	-0.011	0.133	[-0.276, 0.254]
Congruity $\times$ College Generation	-0.096	0.144	[-0.382, 0.191]

Note. Model 1:  $R^2 = .376$  and  $F = 18.476$ ,  $p < .000$ ; Model 2:  $R^2 = .291$  and  $F = 12.426$ ,  $p < .000$ ; Model 3:  $R^2 = .133$  and  $F = 4.6536$ ,  $p = .005$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

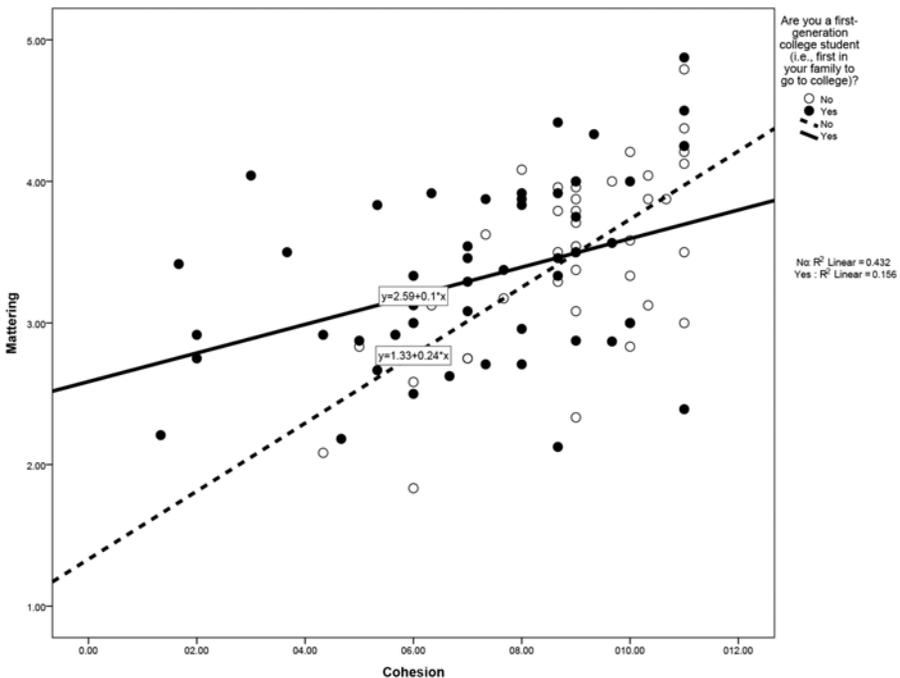


FIGURE 1. Being First-Generation College Versus Continuing-Generation College Moderates the Relationship Between Cohesion and University Mattering

matter relationship, we conducted follow-up analyses to determine which path of the model that college generation moderated (i.e., moderated mediation). When an interaction variable (i.e., college generation and belonging) and college generation were simultaneously added to the equation, results indicated that college generation moderated the relationship of cohesion and belonging only,  $B = -0.130$ , 95% CI  $[-0.219, -0.040]$ .

## DISCUSSION

Examining the differences and relationships of esteem, belonging, cohesion, and cultural congruity for 141 Latin@ undergraduates, we used a psychosociocultural approach to understand their sense of university mattering. The study sample was primarily female and of Mexican ancestry, and had a slightly higher representation of upper-division versus lower-division students. Most of the students were continuously enrolled since beginning their undergraduate degree, and more than half were first in their family to attend college (i.e., first-generation college students), a finding consistent for many Latin@ undergraduates (Reyes & Nora, 2012; Saenz et al., 2007). Overall, our hypotheses were supported and findings provide insight into how student affairs professionals can serve as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) to best assist Latin@ undergraduates' sense of mattering and ultimately their academic success.

Consistent with our hypotheses, FGCS reported lower self-esteem, cohesion, belonging, and congruity than their continuing-generation peers. They may not have had the same understanding of the presumed college processes or knowledge of the expectations of them as students and in turn informed their decreased perception of connection, sense of belonging, feelings of self-worth, and match of values within the university setting. Indeed, it

is well-documented that predominantly White universities often pose challenges and obstacles for first-generation Latin@ students' to engage their cultural practices and values (Castillo et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2002), which in turn influences a sense of incongruity or decreased connection (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). In contrast, continuing-generation Latin@ students may have more academic information and support from their parents and families about how to navigate the setting and facilitate their feelings of connection with the university. This interpretation is consistent with reviews of Latin@ FGCS, indicating that they lack the same social capital, self-efficacy, or framework of connection to determine how and where they fit within the university context (Reyes & Nora, 2012; Saenz et al., 2007; Saunders & Serna, 2004). To navigate the university setting and seek access to the academic expectations and implicit norms of a 4-year institution, many Latin@ students seek cultural enclaves or *academic families* where they feel they belong (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; Sulé, 2016). Similarly, it is incumbent upon student affairs professionals to serve as institutional agents who provide Latin@ students needed information and access to connections so that they can persist within the educational setting (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

In predicting mattering, our hypotheses were partially supported. In combination, the dimensions accounted for 50% of the variance of mattering, yet the psychological dimension was the largest positive predictor. Specifically, students' sense of collective self-esteem was most tied to whether they felt they mattered to others. That is, students who felt an increased membership or sense of affinity to the university were most predictive of feeling that they mattered to other individuals within the setting. Likewise, the relationship of esteem and mattering was partially mediated by belonging. The role of collective self-esteem

and belonging needs to be addressed in tandem with how students feel they matter to others at school. As new findings within the Latin@ undergraduate literature, the role of collective self-esteem is aligned with the extant research in predicting cultural congruity (Constantine et al., 2002) and well-being (Gloria et al., 2009). Given the salient role of membership affiliation for Latin@ undergraduates' sense of support (Delgado-Romero & Hernandez, 2012; Nuñez, 2011) and persistence decisions (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013), further study is needed to support these findings.

Students' sense of belonging also mediated the relationships of cohesion and congruity with mattering, respectively. That is, to understand how students feel that they matter to others within the university as it relates to feeling connected and culturally congruent, their sense of belonging needs to be considered. Clearly, belonging plays a significant role for students to feel that they have importance or meaning as an undergraduate. For example, in a seminal study of Latin@ students' sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter (1997) argued that connection and social membership are core elements of how students' felt they belonged to the university community. Research also suggests that Latin@ students who broaden their association with diverse peers through interactions or spending time studying together increases their sense of belonging to the university (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). Similarly, Latin@ students who lived on campus reported a greater sense of belonging than those who lived off campus (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). As Latin@ students balance multiple identities (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004) and experience microaggressions within their educational setting (Yosso et al., 2009), addressing the environmental context and subsequent factors that influence their positive sense of belonging is warranted.

Results for exploring the role of college

generation for the sample revealed that it moderated the relationship of cohesion and mattering. Specifically, being a FGCS revealed a lower sense of mattering (albeit not significantly), which is in contrast to perceived cohesion (i.e., an increased sense of cohesion indicated an increased sense of mattering). That is, the interaction of college generation and sense of cohesion significantly predicted the mattering for Latin@ students. Furthermore, when follow-up analyses were conducted to determine if college generation moderated a path within the mediation analyses of cohesion and mattering, results indicated that it moderated the relationship of cohesion and belonging. The interaction of college generation and sense of cohesion predicted the belonging of the Latin@ undergraduates more fully for FGCS than their continuing-generation peers. That is, the FGCS has a lower sense of connection than their peers, yet their cohesion was more predictive of belonging.

Possible explanations for college generation moderating the two relationships (i.e., cohesion with belonging and mattering, respectively) are supported by FGCS literature indicating that they often worked more hours off campus and had more personal experiences with discrimination (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pasarella, & Nora, 1996). The findings also align with the experiences of Latin@ FGCS who enter college with less awareness of social resources (Saenz et al., 2007), who experience a greater sense of disconnection and isolation within the educational setting (Gloria & Castellanos, 2010), who encounter more institutional barriers (Kohli et al., 2006), and who have a greater range of factors influencing their persistence processes than their continuing-generation college peers (Reyes & Nora, 2012). In one of the only studies that explored how college generation served as a moderator of esteem, locus of control, and adjustment

for a predominantly White sample (85%) of 322 college students, Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, and Pierce (2012) reported that FGCS with lower esteem indicated decreased levels of personal and emotional adjustment compared to their continuing-generation peers. It is important to ensure that Latin@ students—in particular those who are FGCS—have access to and advocacy and empowerment from institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and opportunity for communities of support (Nuñez, 2011; Sulé, 2016) influences their sense of belonging, and in turn their belief of mattering to others within the university setting.

### Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations that merit consideration. First, there were a number of students who began but did not complete the survey. It is unclear as to the reasons that they entered the online system but did not complete the survey. It is possible that they may have felt frustrated or challenged to address their campus connections. At the time of the study, the context and budgetary milieu of the university setting was filled with financial reductions and consolidation conversations of the different Ethnic Studies programs despite student protests and actions of concern. As a number of the study's students were earning a Latin@ Studies certificate, the climate may have negatively influenced their sense of belonging or feeling that university personnel believed that they mattered on campus. These explanations are offered as cohesion and mattering yielded the two lowest mean scale scores for the overall survey. It is clear that students' narratives are needed to inform these findings. In particular, interviews with Latin@ undergraduates are needed to assess those spaces or places that they feel most connected, what facilitates their processes of belonging, and factors that contribute to their

feelings of mattering at the university. Asking Latin@ undergraduates about their informal peer cohorts to which they feel most connected or belong would extend the literature beyond student organizations (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; Delgado-Romero & Hernandez, 2002) and access students who are unaffiliated to formalized student programs and resources.

Despite the cohesion scale's significance within the study, the construct may have been too broadly situated (i.e., to the university) as the Latin@ students may have felt more connected with a smaller group of individuals, such as an *academic family* (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007) or enclaves (Sulé, 2016) found within different contexts (e.g., Latin@ Studies, Latin@-specific student organizations; Nuñez, 2011). Unfortunately, the survey did not ask students to what group or unit they were referencing relative to feeling connected. To understand Latin@ undergraduates' sense of belonging relative to mattering most accurately, pairing a measure of ethnic identity as part of the connection and affiliation process could delineate the importance of ethnic-specific processes within the educational experiences (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Castillo et al., 2006).

Finally, as universities seek to create climates that are inclusive of diversity (Museus, 2014) and provide access to institutional agents who can assist students in gaining the needed information and resource (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stebleton & Alexio, 2015), assessing over time the degree to which student mattering influences their academic persistence or pursuit of a graduate or professional degree is needed. Given that Latina FGCS are less likely to continue onto graduate school (Leyva, 2011) coupled with our findings that Latin@ FGCS reported a lower sense of cohesion, belonging, and mattering than their continuing-generation counterparts, such studies are relevant. Determining the differential role of mattering for Latin@ FGCS

and continuing-generation students could assist academic advisors, faculty, and other university personnel to gauge and intervene with Latin@ students' educational satisfaction, motivation to persist, and decision to pursue advanced graduate training.

### Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

In combination, our findings alert researchers, counseling personnel, and staff administrators to emphasize the importance of Latin@ undergraduates' sense of belonging and mattering at a 4-year institution, in particular for those who are first-generation college students. First, academic advisors should consider how they can create connections and address concerns for FGCS by engaging more intensive advising (Hicks, 2002) and extend the scope of counseling (College Board, n.d.). Assisting students to make sense of and navigate the university and educational setting as well as relaying the critical role of establishing relationships with academic staff are suggested (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). These connections are relevant given the importance of social and mentoring networks to positive perceptions of the university environment (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005; Museus, 2014) and feeling of mattering as a result of relationships with university personnel (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). In particular, drawing on a core Latin@ value of *familismo* can assist students to create or find an "academic family" with whom they connect and feel that they belong as part of increasing their sense of mattering (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Huerta & Fishman, 2014).

To facilitate and bolster Latin@ students' sense of mattering, it is clear that universities must find venues and provide resources for them to increase their personal, social, and cultural connections, in that collective self-esteem and belonging are critical processes to their

educational success. As Latin@ students find connections to other peers (e.g., residence hall roommates/suitemates), groups (e.g., research team, sorority, or fraternity), programs/units (e.g., student organizations), or enclaves (e.g., hip-hop communities), there become spaces or perceived places to which they can belong (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013; Museus, 2014; Nuñez, 2011; Sulé, 2016) and matter as members of the university (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). In addition to universities supporting culture-specific student organizations and cohort-focused diversity programs (Delgado-Romero & Hernandez, 2002), it is equally important for all university student affairs professionals (i.e., administrators, staff, faculty) to listen fully to students' narratives and take action to incorporate these diverse experiences into the learning setting or curriculum structure to provide more welcoming and inclusive contexts. The initial step of actively listening can validate their experiences—a simple yet poignant process that can have substantial influence. Such listening can occur within the context of personal counseling; however, faculty and academic staff can provide informal educational support and guidance that can be of equal utility and importance (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012).

It is unrealistic that university staff can instantaneously fix or find immediate remedy to the structural challenges and systemic oppressions that undergird Latin@ students' educational challenges (Kohli et al., 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015); however, acknowledging the experiences and using language and advising approaches or questioning that differentiates the processes of cohesion, belonging, and mattering for students within the educational context is needed. For example, student affairs professionals can first assess if students have *connections* at the university (e.g., student groups, programs) and then consider the degree to which they feel that they *belong* to

their connections. A next delineating step would be to address whether students feel they *matter* to others within their groups, programs, organizations or larger university. Differentiating these three closely-related but different concepts—connecting, belonging, mattering—can ensure that the interplay and nuanced processes of students' educational experiences are addressed. Such distinctions can assist students to know that someone believes they are valuable members of the

university. Doing so may offer Latin@ students some assurance about their experiences and bolster their *ganas* (motivation) to persist knowing that student affairs professionals care and are working to create holistic academic and social learning environments where their experiences of mattering is imperative to their overall educational success.

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