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### **Counter stories: Brotherhood in a Latinx fraternity**

As Krogstad (2016) reports, the “Latino population has reached fifty-seven million in the United States, with California having more than fifteen million Latinos, and New Mexico having the largest Latinx population of any state at forty-eight percent” (p. 1). Despite these large numbers, Latinx are no longer the fastest ethnic growing population in the United States. This demographic distinction now represents the Asian growth pattern. Even though Latinx are no longer the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, Latinx are still considered to have a powerful force in the United States due to their sheer numbers. According to Lopez (2014), “In 2014 Latinos... surpass[ed] whites as the largest racial ethnic group in California” (p. 1). Additionally, the U.S. Latinx population is much younger than other groups in this country. According to Saenz (2010), “there are five times as many children under 15 years old than persons 65 and older among Latinx. In contrast, there are about an equal share of children and elderly in the white population” (p. 1). According to these demographics, the Latinx population will nearly triple from an estimated 49.7 million in 2010 to 132.8 million in 2050 and about two-thirds of the U.S. population growth during this 40-year period will be due to the growth in the Latinx population. By 2050, Latinx could represent three of every ten persons in the United States.

As should be expected, as the overall Latinx population continues to grow, so does the number of Latinx attending and graduating from college. With the college student demographics becoming more diverse, it is crucial that educators examine both the college graduation and attrition rates of Latinx students. From research that does just this task, researchers (Brown, 2011; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Mina et al., 2004) have found that Latinx who join organizations

in college are likely to increase their college completion rates by gaining access to social networks and many other resources.

To learn more about social network groups and their effects on Latinx college students, I conducted a qualitative research study on Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity—a Latinx-interest academic fraternity—that maintains a 90% graduation rate. Specifically, since Gamma Zeta Alpha is an academic fraternity, I sought to examine how the push for literacy within the fraternity has led to a high graduation success rate. Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated is a Latinx-interest organization founded December 7, 1987, at California State University, Chico (CSUC), with the purpose “of uniting and directing all persons interested in the promotion of the Latinx culture and ethnic origins via community interaction and the educational system” (“Gamma Zeta Alpha web page”). An organization such as this was desperately needed at California State University, Chico because the few Latinx men (about 2 percent) enrolled at the university at that time had minimal academic and peer support. Although there were some professional offices, such as the Educational Opportunity Program and the Student Learning Center, which offered support to Latinx students, there was no organization on campus that provided Latinx opportunities to interact with peers of their same ethnic group. With the goal of providing peer support to Latinx students, Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity was founded by fifteen students, one of who was White European American (WEA) who will forever be remembered at CSU, Chico for starting one of the first Latinx-interest fraternities in the western United States.

The purpose of this article is to critically challenge the stock stories commonly produced within ‘mainstream’ culture by demonstrating how Latinx are reaching academic success. As such, this article provides a counter story to the stock story that constructs poor Latinx students as ill prepared for college and thus destined to fail academically in college. This article

contradicts these deficit-oriented stock stories by showing that academic success can be reached by Latinx students as long as they are provided the support system that so many desperately need. This article has great significance to the *Open words* (OW) audience because its focus is on class and race, while also intersecting the education experiences of “nonmainstream” students, which fits the primary interest of their intended audience.

Following is a short explanation on how this data was collected, as well as a compacted literature review. The article then focuses on two case studies (Quetzalo and Mayo), while providing specifics about their academic success. Lastly, the article provides a critical discussion about the data, while focusing on their counter stories.

### **Methodology**

As a way to collect data on the literacy practices used within the context of Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity, I used multiple qualitative research methods, including oral narratives, interviewing, and participant observations to collect data on literacy practices produced by the organization and the community members. Since I am associated with Gamma Zeta Alpha and thus was viewed as an “insider,” I was allowed to collect data in almost any circumstance I desired.

The data for this study draws from thirty-years of being actively involved with Gamma Zeta Alpha. These data demonstrate that the fraternity offers its brothers both the opportunity to learn about and serve the Latinx community as well as achieve academic excellence. The data specifically focus on how the fraternity commonly provides its brothers a space where they can practice and polish their literacy skills. The data additionally show that the fraternity brothers

utilize the literacy practices produced within the confines of fraternity activities to be successful in academic and professional settings.

### Oral Life-Narratives

The primary method for collecting data for this study is oral life-narratives. I use this method because it gives me the best opportunity to collect the “unmediated” stories concerning my fraternity brothers’ experiences within the fraternity. Oral narratives are effective in many ways, but primarily because participants simply love to share their stories. Researchers like Riessmann (1993) support this approach by explaining that storytelling is a fun activity that most individuals enjoy. In my case, the participants in this study loved to talk about their experiences within the fraternity.

### Interviews

Although data was collected on 20 Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity brothers, I conducted a more detailed data collection, including interviews, with six brothers. Conducting these interviews, which included both unstructured and structured interviews, allowed me to gain access to data that supplemented the data I collected during my participant observations. For this particular article, I focus on the research data of two brothers: Quetzalo and Mayo. Below, I define the three primary methodological tools I utilized in this study: unstructured interviews, structured interviews, and participant observations.

### Unstructured Interviews

Additionally, I collected data using unstructured interviews, which gave me, the researcher, an opportunity to engage in conversations with my participants about their literacy

experiences within the fraternity. Much different from structured interviews wherein I sought responses to specific questions, the unstructured interview gave me the freedom to have a much more open conversation with my participants. Although unstructured interviews give me the freedom to engage in various topics of conversation, the truth is that the interviews were structured to some degree because there were specific points I wanted the participants to address.

### Structured Interviews

Structured interviews are another way I collected data which allowed me to seek specific information that was not collected during my unstructured interviews. When I conducted structured interviews, I asked my participants specific questions about the fraternity as it relates to my study. For instance, I asked questions like a) What are your thoughts about the fraternity? b) What are your academic goals?, and c) What role does the fraternity play in helping you reach these goals?

### Participant Observations

One of the primary ways I identified some of the specific literacy practices of Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity was by spending large amounts of time interacting with the various fraternity brothers. During this time, I was a participant observer, which is commonly defined as a researcher who participates in the social setting of the research site yet maintains his or her capacity as a researcher (Spradley, 1980; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Participant observations provide the most effective way of embedding myself in the research context and interacting with the fraternity brothers. As a participant-observer in the fraternity (among other settings that included general body meetings, specific group meetings, social activities) I was

moved in and out of spaces where I occupied the role of both participant and observer. This role proved to be an effective way for me to collect an abundance of critical data because I held the position as an insider as well as a researcher.

### Counter Stories

Counter stories are a direct challenge to dominant ideology that are often guided by White European American (WEA) perspectives. In other words, counter stories are an analytical framework that helps fight against master narratives that continue the oppression of marginalized people. Considering the constant rhetorical oppression that Mexicans face daily in United States as a result of these "stock stories," it is critical for researchers to acknowledge the "counter stories" that exist within many Mexican communities, including those at a university. By giving value to these counter stories, researchers can show that there are many positive aspects about a specific culture, in my case Mexican, that are at best ignored in the larger society. This chapter is an attempt to challenge these master narratives that often frame not only fraternities, but also Mexican college students. As it will be shown in this chapter, there are many positive things that are happening with both fraternities and Latinx college students.

As mentioned before, a major goal I have in this research project is to provide counter stories to the majoritarian negative rhetoric that commonly surrounds Mexican Nationals, Mexicans, and/or Mexican Americans. Counter-story telling comes from Critical Race Theory (CRT) that was founded in the law field in the 1970s. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 26). Counter stories can be used to challenge any negative stock stories that are often rooted against "othered people." At the same time, counter-stories do not need to be a

response to a certain discourse, but can simply be used as an opportunity to share narratives that are often ignored or belittled.

As mentioned before, Mexican Nationals, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans are often subjected to a negative discourse that is deeply rooted in racist ideologies in the United States (Pimentel, 2015). This negative discourse appears in many different venues in the United States, but as Gates (2014) writes, they are especially present in Hollywood where Latinx, and other cultures, are commonly stereotyped. Gates elaborates, "In a recent study about the effects of the public attitudes toward immigrants on U.S. immigration, University of Cincinnati researchers found that Latin America stereotypes have the biggest [negative] impact [on society]..." (p. 2). Other articles like "21 Stereotypes about Latinx men that Latinx men want to dispel" address the abundance of stereotypes that exist against Latinx men that are simply not true. Some of the stereotypes include: Latinx men are bad or absent dads, Latinx men are yellers, Latinx men are uneducated, Latinx men are lazy, among seventeen other examples (Singh, 2015). Lastly, Gamboa's (2017) work magnifies the racist immigration practices of the United States, which further fuels racist discourse against Latinx. Gamboa writes:

There's no doubt Mexican-Americans have made great strides in Texas, where Latinx make up 40 percent of the state population and are overwhelmingly of Mexican descent. But historians and civil rights activists see a thread of historical racism and discrimination running through the implementation of SB4 (p. 3).

Additionally Blakemore's (2017) work also provides a detailed history of the racism against Latinx, and specifically the violent acts against them: "Even [Mexican] children became the victims of this violence" (p. 2). As can be seen through these previous examples, and many more, Mexicans/Chicanos face intense racist discourses in various aspects of their lives that

unfortunately often hinder their academic success. As a way to challenge this discourse, I provide data from my participants that counter the stock narratives that are commonly produced in the media and other social wells about Mexicans; my participants have positive stories that need to be heard, such as: Mexicans are resilient people who often experience success despite the various obstacles they commonly face. Plain and simple, my data shows that most Mexicans are successful and should be considered positive role models.

There are various prominent scholars who echo this important message and who have used counter-stories in a similar fashion as I do in this study. In *Historias de éxito within mexican communities: Silenced voices*, Pimentel (2015) writes about Quetzin and Joaquin's notions of success that did not follow the stock definition of success and were thus labeled as unsuccessful by many WEAs. Through case studies, Pimentel shows how both Quetzin and Joaquin are considered successful within their own communities, thus providing a counter story to the stock narrative. Similarly, in "Undocumented (Im)migrant Educational Pipeline: The Influence of Citizenship Status on Educational Attainment for People of Mexican Origin," Covarrubias and Lara (2014) address the various trends that impact the educational experiences of undocumented Mexican students, which challenge the homogenizing narratives against Chicanos/Chicanas. For example, it is commonly professed, subsequently helping create the majoritarian narrative, that all students have an equal chance of succeeding in their education path. This article counters this narrative by featuring counter stories that claim that being a US citizen gives students a huge advantage in reaching their academic goals. Covarrubias and Lara (2014) write: "As one moves progressively along the citizenship continuum, there is an increase in educational attainment for POMOs (people of Mexican origin) at all educational levels" (p. 96). It is through data like these that a counter narrative to the "unsuccessful Latinx student"

begins to emerge.

Other scholars like Levin, Walker, Harberler, and Johnson-Boothby (2013) also address counter stories in “The Divided Self: The Double Consciousness of Faculty of Color in Community Colleges.” Using a critical theory and social identity lens, this work discusses the social identity conflicts that these faculty encounter on a daily basis. Through their work, the authors conclude that these professional and social identities are not compatible and thus faculty of color are often pushed to use what the authors call a “divided self.” According to Levin et al. (2013), institutional narratives are guided through a WEA perspective. They write, “From the perspective of faculty of color, the narratives suggest a dominant and monolithic organizational or corporate culture, wherein rules, norms, values, and resultant behaviors are guided by the majority White faculty and administrative population” (p. 318). In their text, the authors continue to claim that this practice has a tremendous effect on the institutions’ hiring practices, which continues to favor WEAs. For instance, a participant named Ruben offers the following counter narrative:

[W]hat this district needs to change in order to increase the number of diverse faculty is the composition of those hiring committees. There has to be some clear guidelines as to the diversity, not only diversity in language, but ethnicity; socioeconomic just obviously doesn’t affect us because most of us are the same socioeconomic level now (p. 319).

By offering this counter narrative, Ruben suggests that to have a significant change on an institution’s hiring practices, the importance of diversity needs to be continually declared to a point where it becomes normalized and thus institutions increase the diversity of their faculty out of common sense. Levin et al. conclude by stating that this continual investment is not currently practiced, as faculty of color are often forced to negotiate their professional and social identity. These findings are all relevant to my work because they amplify the various complex problems

that Latinx face daily, thus forcing Latinx to strive to succeed in two different worlds, which is something that these fraternity brothers commonly face.

## **Data**

### **Brotherhood**

Latinx students, who are strong-minded, hard-working individuals, who hold an intense desire to graduate from college as well as a strong interest in Latinx culture, can define the bonding within this fraternity. Although this fraternity is an academic fraternity, the grade point averages and the class levels vary tremendously within the brotherhood. The fraternity brothers range from distinguished graduate students to freshmen on academic probation. Additionally, the fraternity is very diverse. Although the majority of the brothers are Latinx (with Mexicans holding the highest ethnicity numbers), there are brothers who are white, black, and Asian. What all these diverse fraternity members have in common is that they have been marginalized by society, thus desperately need a support system while in college. Also important to note that despite a brothers' ethnicity, the brotherhood between these brothers is very strong. The fraternity's success, however, is documented by the fact that this fraternity has a 90% graduation rate. Without a doubt, this is an impressive graduation rate, considering that nationwide, "two-thirds of Latinx never complete their college degree" (Farr, 2005, p. 10).

Within this brotherhood, each fraternity brother defines academic excellence differently. For example, a fraternity brother who maintains a 2.0 GPA throughout most of his academic life may consider a 2.5 college GPA a great achievement. In contrast, a fraternity brother who is hoping to attend law school, medical school, or graduate school, may think that receiving less than a 3.5 GPA is an academic failure. Every semester there are usually about twenty active brothers (defined as paying semester fees, attending meetings, and participating in

extracurricular activities associated with the fraternity), who participate in academic and social communities. Usually each member chairs a committee for at least one project. This fraternity has affiliations with both traditional campus-based fraternity councils, whose membership is traditionally white, and with multicultural campus based councils, whose members are traditionally students of color. This fraternity is the only fraternity or sorority at CSU, Chico that has affiliations in both councils because they want to show their ability to participate in both predominately WEA events, as well as multicultural events. The other fraternities do not have a cross-affiliation with the different councils because they believe that both the multicultural council or Intra Fraternal council, and not a coalition, meets their needs. Gamma Zeta Alpha holds its weekly 90-minute meeting in the university student union conference room, which is centrally located within the university and more importantly, within a two-minute walk from the university library. Many of the fraternity's brothers feel that having the meeting close to the library is an advantage; since most meetings are held at night, they can schedule the meeting during study breaks. As a way to further collect data on the fraternity and to theorize about my findings, I conducted two case studies on Quetzalo and Mayo that provide thick descriptions about these two students, the fraternity, and the different activities the fraternity is involved in, which in theory also provides data to understand the making of their counter story.

### **Case Studies**

#### Quetzalo

Quetzalo, 23 years old, was born in East Los Angeles. His father emigrated from Ensenada, Mexico, through the Bracero Program in 1960, and his mother followed soon after. Quetzalo has one brother and sister who were born in Mexico, and he is the first in his family to

be born in the US. In 1975, his family moved from East Los Angeles to a small town in northern California because they wanted to leave all the big city problems behind. In northern California, his parents quickly found jobs. His father washed cars for a car company, while earning \$13.00 an hour. His mother holds different minimum wage jobs throughout the year.

In the first interviews that focus on historical and academic issues, Quetzalo shared that he enjoys writing and shared that the fraternity helped him develop a positive attitude towards writing by providing an environment where a constructive attitude towards writing is produced. There are various ways the fraternity emphasizes writing, especially within the internal activities of the fraternity, such as writing reports, and memos, which in both cases require research to support the claims. Since the fraternity is involved in many different activities, it is important for the fraternity brothers to have accurate notes, so they can refer to them at a later date when he is writing a report or memo. By providing Quetzalo with a supporting environment where he is mentored on writing effective notes shows how the fraternity has shown him a valuable skill. By engaging in many of the fraternity activities Quetzalo developed a skill that allowed him to produce effective notes that then transferred over to his academics.

In one interview, after speaking to Quetzalo for about twenty minutes, I learned he does not use a specific note-taking strategy and instead attempts to write everything down. In his preliminary notes, Quetzalo primarily focuses on information that is relevant to the content of the discussion. For example, on one occasion, he took notes on each of his fraternity brother's specific duties for an activity. After the meeting, Quetzalo then rewrites his notes to make them more focused and clear.

The writing stages of Quetzalo's notes are similar to the writing stages Flower and Hayes (1981) identify when they address the common steps in writing. These authors write, "Pre-

writing' is the stage before words emerge on paper; 'Writing' is the stage in which a product is being produced: and 'Re-writing' is a final working of the product" (p. 275). In Quetzalo's case, he realizes that if he rewrites his notes, the notes will become much clearer for him, therefore making it easier for him to follow the sequence of thought within his notes and therefore likely producing a stronger report to the fraternitys' officers. It is fair to assume that Quetzalo views his original notes much like Flower and Hayes (1981) envision writing and rewriting. As Flower and Hayes (1981) might suggest, Quetzalo looks at his original notes as a work in progress that eventually, after rewriting them, become a final product.

In Nancy Sommers (1980) article, "Revision of student writers and experienced adults writers," she further addresses the issue of revision. Sommers points out that those students may not have the academic jargon to conceptualize what they are doing; however, as she says, "Students understand the revision process as a rewording activity. They do so because they perceive words as the units of written discourse" (p. 46). When I asked Quetzalo why he rewrote his notes, he said that his initial writing of notes is unclear and messy. When he rewrites his notes they are much clearer, and as a result, he is able to write down specific information about the fraternity's events. It is apparent Quetzalo is participating in is what Sommers refers to as cleaning up speech: "The aim of revision according to the students' own description is therefore to clean up speech" (p. 47). In this case, Quetzalo follows the ideas laid out by Sommers in that he often rereads his notes many times until they reach clarity to him. Other researchers, such as Collins and Parkhurst (2006), also address the way writing is now commonly viewed: "Writing is viewed as an act of constructing meaning, and students are encouraged to use it as a tool for learning" (p. 2). For Quetzalo, the notes he takes describe the activities the fraternity is involved in and thus inform him of important information, and therefore, the meaning he is constructing.

In the process of learning the various steps Quetzalo goes through in rewriting his notes in the fraternity context, I asked Quetzalo if this activity influenced his note-taking practices in the context of his academic classes. He responded by saying that by many times participating in this activity he has learned the value of rewriting class notes as well. He explains that much like the notes from the fraternity, the first time he writes his notes in class, they are often messy and disorganized. After he rewrites them, he says, they are much more clearer and focused. Quetzalo adds that rewriting his notes are valuable in all his classes this was especially important in his small group communication class because the teacher's lectures often disorganized and complicated.

In our interview Quetzalo mentioned that he approaches literacy as a tool. Expanding on this, it is apparent that Quetzalo, as well as the fraternity body in general (because of the high demand of literacy required of its brotherhood), view literacy as a tool for academic advancement. In Quetzalo's mind, the better an individual writes, speaks, and presents, the more opportunities that individual will have academically and professionally. Quetzalo's perspective speaks nicely to Minzhan-Lu's (1994) "From silence to words: Writing as struggle," where she writes about her own literacy experience as she was growing up: "for both home and school presented the existent conventions of the discourse each taught me as absolute laws for my action. They turned verbal action into a tool, a set of conventions produced and shaped prior to and outside of my own verbal acts. Because I saw language as a tool, I separated the process of producing the tool from the process of using it" (p. 173).

Mayo

Mayo is 26 years old and was born in Monterey, Mexico and has one younger brother and two younger sisters. His family immigrated to central California in 1985. In Mexico, his family owned a farm where they grew and sold different crops. Unfortunately, this business was not profitable so they commonly lacked basic living essentials. Hoping to overcome their economic hardships, the family moved to central California. Once they arrived in central California, the family was given the opportunity to live on a farm, with the condition that they would harvest and maintain the farm. The family agreed and has been living there ever since. After Mayo graduated from high school, he worked for a couple of years. While working, he realized he wanted to pursue a college degree, so he applied and was accepted to CSU, Chico. Mayo has attended Chico State for five years and expects to graduate next spring. He says it has taken him six years to graduate because he switched majors four times. Mayo is currently a Spanish major. He pledged Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity four years ago.

Unlike my other participants, Mayo works outside the university as a Drug Prevention Workshop Specialist for a county office. In this position, Mayo conducts workshops for various age groups on various prevention topics, ranging from pregnancy to drug use. Although these workshops are presented throughout the county, Mayo prefers to hold workshops in areas where there is a high percentage of Latinx. During one interview, Mayo mentioned that he really enjoyed his job because he educates many Latinx about different social problems.

When interviewing him, I learned that Mayo's first language is Spanish and that he attended school in Mexico until he was nine years old. Mayo's fluency and understanding of Spanish led to his interest in learning the grammatical construction of the Spanish language and in reading Latinx literature. Holding these two interests made Spanish an ideal major for him

because he wants to continue working on his advocacy work with a community he deeply cares about.

Although Mayo prefers speaking Spanish, he is fluent in English and therefore can read and write in both languages. More impressive is that Mayo "code meshes" Spanish and English with ease (Young & Martinez, 2012). As an example, Mayo states, "La fraternity has always had my esquina. Por ejemplo, cuando estaba buscando trabajo, the fraternity guys were the first ones to help me. Está suave...that was cool." The fraternity embraces the idea of the Chicano identity because it pushes the brotherhood to be proud of their Latinx heritage. Similarly, the fraternity also encourages its brothers to excel in spaces like academia, which may require them to embrace non-traditional Latinx roles (like only speaking English in certain spaces and participating in situations which may not be sensitive to Latinx culture).

In this fraternity, the brothers are asked to be active participants in various projects that the fraternity is involved in. Often, these projects require the brother to present information to the community or to various organizations within the university. The brothers of the fraternity are then required to give weekly, detailed reports of their work in the general meeting. In preparation for these presentations, the brotherhood provides ample guidance to the brother who is preparing a "talk." This advice is provided throughout the entire process in order to develop ideas until the final discussion. For, Mayo, his big brother ("Jose") helped him prepare a proposal for a *tamale* fundraiser. As Mayo explains, "Without my big brother's help, my presentation would have been terrible."

Van de Bergha, et al. (2006) write in "State College Rates Show Increase" on the difficulty of writing clearly. Their work discusses how Peer Assessment (PA) is commonly used in higher education to improve students' writing. More specifically, it is common to use peer

review activities within college classes to teach students how to become more effective writers: "[One] reason for working with PA is that assessing and providing feedback among peers resembles professional practices" (p. 135). More specifically, when the students write that often the person in charge (teacher or boss) does not have the time to individually help everyone, so therefore the PA helps out a lot in these situations. My observation of Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity shows that they encourage PA among their brotherhood. In Mayo's case, his PA was a more experienced fraternity member who helped him complete the many tasks he was involved in.

According to Mayo, another literacy practice the fraternity has helped him polish is his oral presentations. During an interview, he told me that this literacy practice has been especially helpful/useful at his job. He said, "I commonly present many different things in front of the fraternity, so when I had to get up in front of other groups, it was easy." He then added that it was his big brother Jose who originally taught him how to present. He says, "Jose taught me how to present. He taught me the different parts of a presentation. He also taught me how to relax and to learn that it was really no big deal when talking to a big group. That was so helpful for me to learn. Now at work, I am the only one who does not get nervous when I present."

When I asked Mayo if the fraternity has helped him develop the literacy skills he uses in his classes or at work, he responded by saying that the fraternity has taught him almost *all* of them. He tells me: "The fraternity has taught me to write and present better, and simply be a much more confident individual." When I asked him to explain this, he said the following: "When I first joined the fraternity, I had many different ideas that I wanted the fraternity to be involved in. What I learned was that the process of how the fraternity chooses to be involved in different activities was complicated and required a strong commitment from the brotherhood."

One of the most fascinating aspects about Mayo's case is the way he talks about literacy. Unlike Quetzalo, Mayo describes literacy with a broader meaning, which includes numbers and graphics. For example, he commonly told me how the fraternity taught him to write proposals (with a detailed budget playing a key role) and about presentations, which often used graphics.

Mayo also mentions that the fraternity taught him to be extremely proud of his Mexican cultural ways of being, and in particular, with speaking Spanish. The fraternity supports his identity by either speaking Spanish during fraternity events or by actually pushing the fraternity brothers to enroll in Spanish classes. In cases where Spanish or other portions of Latinx culture are not part of a brother's experience, the fraternity actively pushes Latinx culture to its brotherhood. I have observed this process on various occasions. For example, some fraternity brothers did not speak Spanish before entering the fraternity, but now they do.

Mayo also experiences what Pratt (1991) has identified as a "contact zone." As Bizzell (1994) writes, "A contact zone' is defined primarily in terms of historical circumstances. It is circumscribed in time and space, but with elastic boundaries. Focusing on a contact zone as a way of organizing literacy study would mean attempting to include all material relevant to the struggles going on there" (p. 166). In Mayo's case, the contact zone I am referring to is the positive justification of his Mexican cultural ways of being and language that the fraternity produces. What the fraternity has done is to make an obvious connection to a "contact zone" that pushes their brotherhood to engage in literacy practices, while in many cases using their native Spanish language. This engagement is crucial to the fraternity brothers because they recognize the value in their Mexican cultural ways of being. Without a doubt, the fraternity has influenced the importance of a college degree to Mayo, and thus he claims that he will graduate at all costs. Mayo has been enrolled in the university for five years and remains enthusiastic about school. In

fact, in our conversations, Mayo shared his frustration with Latinx youth. He mentions that, in today's society, the Latinx youth are not academically focused enough.

When questioning Mayo about his motivation to succeed in school, I learned that he believes that the fraternity made him realize the importance of an education. He shared that when he first enrolled at the university he felt out of place. Once Mayo joined Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity, his engagement with successful academic brothers reassures him that it is important to retain his Latinx culture and language while pursuing a higher education. As can be seen, Mayo has made a strong connection to an ideology that allows him to develop an identity as a strong Chicano academic. With this in mind, he is learning how to be academically successful as he maintains his security within his Mexican cultural ways of being.

## **Discussion**

### Achieving Academic Excellence

Quetzalo and Mayo faced many of the same obstacles that many other Mexican American students face at the university. For Quetzalo and Mayo, they joined a Latinx-centric organization that supported them and taught them literacy practices that helped them refine their existing literacy practices. Additionally, the fraternity provided them the support and community that these college students desperately needed. For example, Gamma Zeta Alpha taught their brotherhood the importance of certain Mexican holidays like *el día de la independencia* (September 16) and *el día de los muertos* (November 2), which influenced the fraternity brothers to be proud of their Mexican culture.

The development and eventual transformation of the fraternity brothers' literacy practices represent a slow and complicated process. The fraternity brother must first become confident

with using the literacy practice within the context of the fraternity. After this initial time period with the fraternity, he must recognize that the same literacy practice can be applied to his academics. Recognizing this, the fraternity brother must then transfer these literacy practices to his academics. The fraternity brother can then use the literacy practices with confidence in academic settings.

It is important to discuss the similarities between the literacy practices used in the context of the fraternity and those in the context of academics. As in the context of the fraternity, within many university classes, students are asked to turn in drafts of their work with the expectation of having to rewrite their work after it has been commented on by a tutor, teaching assistant, peer, or professor. There are many ways in which the fraternity's literacy practices mirrored those in academic settings, but perhaps the important lesson the fraternity brothers learn is that writing is a process. In learning this process, the fraternity brothers become aware that there are various steps to writing and that it is a long and complicated process. This message is clearly received by my participants, Quetzalo and Mayo. In their cases, each of my participants are asked to have their project (notes, proposal, or presentation) commented on by one of the fraternity officers (more experienced members). After these participants received these comments, they are expected to implement them into their projects, which they all did.

Once my participants learned these skills within the fraternity context, they then transferred them over to their academics. This transfer was especially apparent in Quetzalo's case where he quickly transferred literacy practices from his academics by asking for help with literacy assignments, at different times, as he was going through the writing process (draft to final stage). For example, Quetzalo showed proof of these literacy practices transferring by

taking the initiative and asking to meet with his teaching assistant and professor to review his paper thoroughly at the various writing stages.

Another literary practice the fraternity emphasizes to their brotherhood is the importance of public speaking. As shown in the data, and specifically shown by Mayo, there are various activities that put the fraternity brother in a position where he must speak publicly. This activity once again reflects the accomplishments that are often present within academic contexts. The fraternity providing their brotherhood the opportunity to polish these presentation skills within a friendly, non-grading environment gives the fraternity brothers a clear advantage over other students because they are learning how to become better public speakers by getting advice on their posture, clarity, and interaction with the audience. This preparation often helps the fraternity brothers develop good public speaking skills, hence improving their academics. Mayo especially excelled in the transformation of this literacy practice into his position as a county workshop leader. In his case, after learning the benefits of receiving advice, he always asked his supervisor for advice on his workshop presentations, which he always took into consideration.

Introducing the fraternity brothers to these literacy expectations makes the fraternity brother aware of these skills, which in many cases pushes the fraternity brother to seek academic advice from experienced brothers (varying for each project) that can help him excel in these literacy skills. Being guided on how to improve their literacy practices had a major influence in many of the fraternity brothers' lives because these individuals learned to become academically and professionally successful in a country that presents various obstacles to people of color. Through either teaching them about Latinx culture or by teaching them important literacy practices, the fraternity has helped many fraternity brothers become academically and professionally successful. Without this fraternity, many of the brothers who are successful in life

would have had a much more difficult time reaching their goals, academically and professionally.

### Meaning/Implications

As it is well documented, fraternities and sororities do not have the best reputation. In many cases this reputation is earned because the fraternity and/or sorority has engaged in questionable activities that often involve a lot of drinking. Luckily, Gamma Zeta Alpha is an exception to this image, be it reality or perception. Although they do participate in an active social life, the brothers in Gamma Zeta Alpha also participate in other activities that make them unique. For instance, as mentioned before, Gamma Zeta Alpha is a fraternity that deeply cares about their fraternity brothers' grades, so they provide them different avenues to continue their academic success.

Universities must recognize that not all fraternities are bad. Importantly, fraternities like Gamma Zeta Alpha actively promote the counter stories that their fraternity brothers produce. Perhaps fraternities like Gamma Zeta Alpha ought to put together a symposium every semester to talk about their individual success stories that would counter the master narratives at their university. Ideally, if fraternities and sororities shared their own academic success stories, then students from around the campus could benefit from hearing these stories.

Along with fraternities and sororities recognizing the importance of their counter stories, it is perhaps more important for college educators to be aware of these stories. For example, it is critical for all teachers to recognize that students of color most often come with exceptional experiences and stories that completely demystify the master narratives. For example, it is common for marginalized students to outwork their counterparts because it is frequently

ingrained in their culture to outwork everyone. That said, it is important for teachers to create a curriculum, and more importantly, assignments that center on these counter narratives. These assignments often work best when teachers think outside the box and consider what students are actively participating in. For example, asking the students to produce a video of their positive experiences at a university can give them the opportunity to focus on a positive perspective of a university.

Many times universities look at fraternities as social groups that participate in various social functions, and thus student organizations often do not have the best reputation at universities. Despite these concerns, universities should also recognize that some fraternities and sororities impact members' academic achievement in positive ways. Consequently, it might be valuable for universities to work more closely with fraternities and sororities for the greater good of the students.

Studies such as this one show, for example, that fraternities, and in extension sororities, often require their brotherhood/sisterhood to engage in various literacy practices within the context of their organization that are also required within members' academics as well. In most cases, the fraternities/sororities do not see these connections because the participants of these organizations often see them as two completely different entities. Perhaps if universities offered workshops like "The Connection between Student Organizations and Classroom Practices," they might push the participants of these organizations to recognize these similarities. Once these similarities are recognized, and with perhaps further training, organizations can enhance their strategies to refine their members' literacy practices, and then be able to reproduce them with better results within the brotherhood/sisterhood classroom space. By the same token, the leadership of these organizations should also recognize these connections and thus work with

various academic centers like “The Writing Centers” and/or the “Tutoring Center” and invite them to conduct workshops for their organizations.

By meshing these two distinctively different environments, and recognizing their similarities, students’ academic achievement is likely to increase. Although practicing this in all cases is important, it is especially important to do this within organizations that have a high Latinx student population because Latinx students especially have a high dropout rate. By doing this, a “new” narrative— showing the success stories of Latinx students—can emerge. These counter stories will challenge the stock stories that commonly emphasize the academic failures of Latinx students. In helping create this new discourse, I am optimistic that perhaps some of the negative rhetoric against Latinx students will be minimized, and thus begin to “chip-away” from the racism Latinx students face.

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