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Siendo Latinx en el Nuevo South: Defining Identity, Social Justice, and Equity

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Abstract
A growing body of research examines the experiences of the Latinx population in the Nuevo South in the U.S., however, Higher Education scholarship on the experiences of the Latinx student population that grew up and attend college in this region is scarce. Situated within the context of the Nuevo South, this study examined Latinx college students' perspectives on how much their state values their presence in relation to how they ethnically identify and explored their definitions of social justice and equity. Results revealed Latinx students do not feel that their state values the presence of the Latinx community. Further, study participants demonstrated limited understandings of the meaning of equity and social justice and showed minimal variability across institutions and Latinx ethnic groups. Results also suggest the sociopolitical context of the Nuevo South influences participants' understandings of these terms, which manifest in positive, disparaging, and mixed sentiments. Implications for research and practice are provided.

Keywords Nuevo South · Latinx college students · higher education · social justice and equity · identity

When I left [Arkansas], I was sure I would not return; I was exhausted. I was tired of seeing the social distance I felt reflected and reinforced through the absence of the Latina/o history—in life we were unwanted, in books we were invisible.—Perla M. Guerrero

In 2018, the Latinx population in Southern states reached 22.7 million, a 33% increase from 2008-2018, the fastest growth of any other U.S. region (Flores et al., 2019). The large influx of Latinx people into Southern states has transformed this region into the *Nuevo South* (NS) (Winders, 2011). The states that

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make up the NS are: Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. Here, Latinx migration spans more than 30 years (DeGuzmán, 2011; Hernández-León & Zúñiga, 2000), yet Latinxs still pursue establishing collective representation and equal access to education. Due to the NS historically operating under a Black-White paradigm, a racialized binary of in/exclusion frames the experiences of Latinx people in the region.

Stringent laws and policies limiting access to quality education, housing, and health care are evidence of hostility to NS Latinxs (Carrillo, 2016; Planas, 2017; Thompson, 2013). Although the Latinx community possesses significant cultural assets and agency to navigate and resist inequality, Latinxs are often negatively represented as culprits hurting schools and depleting social services (Thompson, 2013). Furthermore, negative views exist about the lifestyles and intellectual capacity of the Latinx community (Carrillo, 2016; Thompson, 2013). Latinxs are often aware that these views position them and the various ethnic groups in their communities as deficient (Carrillo, 2016; Wiley et al., 2012).

The inequities that the NS Latinx population face become apparent in national degree attainment trends by state. While 47.1% of White adults (25- 64 years of age) have earned some type of college degree, only about 22% of Latinx adults have earned the same (Schak & Nichols, 2017). Furthermore, trends reveal that many NS states have attainment rates below the national average for Latinx adults, leaving only Louisiana and Virginia with degree attainment percentages that are on par or higher than the national average for Latinx adults (Schak & Nichols, 2017). Degree attainment trends are important as these illustrate the inequities that communities of color face. As our society becomes more knowledge-based and higher percentages of leadership positions require higher education degrees it becomes imperative to make the connection between such trends and the role universities and colleges play in achieving social justice and equity.

While limited, higher education research reveals that Latinx college students do not feel represented in the curriculum and report a lack of engagement in social justice and equity discussions on issues impacting their communities (Ramos et al., 2021). In the NS, the status quo is largely comprised of unexamined White supremacy resulting in Latinx cultural erasure and little evidence of Latino nationalist movements (e.g., Chicano Movement). Consequently, there is urgency in developing this area of research to better understand the unique role that NS higher education institutions can play in equipping Latinx students to disrupt their communities' current inequitable conditions. Latinx student inclusion and representation within higher education constitutes a crucial equity and social justice issue. Our work stems from the assumption that due to the history of higher education and the values of exclusion on which it was built (Wilder, 2014), higher education has the responsibility to serve Latinx students beyond access, but through educational content and opportunities that are rooted in their identities. In this manner we see higher education as a space for transforming the existing sociopolitical context of the NS to one of inclusion.

Purpose

Existing research on Latinx college students in the NS has focused on the demographic shifts and the educational challenges that have resulted (Ballinas, 2017; Bennett et al., 2020; Carrillo, 2016; Gándara & Mordechay, 2017; Muñoz et al., 2014). Nonetheless, to date, research exploring how Latinx college students define social justice and equity in the NS remains minimally explored. One exception is the recently published work of Ramos and colleagues (2021) on the effects of co-curricular and curricular experiences, the NS sociopolitical context, and ethnicity on ethnic identification of Latinx college students. Therefore, the present study extends this work by examining the discriminatory dynamics endemic to the NS region that impact Latinx college students' experiences and beliefs as they pursue higher education in the region. Especially, this inquiry is significant to deepen our understanding of ethnic identification in relation to how Latinx college students come to define social justice and equity as they may relate to these terms differently based on their ethnicity and how they experience the NS sociopolitical context. For example, extant research (Carrillo, 2016) demonstrates NS sociopolitical dynamics strengthen Latinxs' ethnic identification (Jones, 2019), yet Latinxs also resist *Southerner* as a label (Carrillo, 2016) because their values eschewed White supremacy, xenophobia, and nativism associated with this Southern region. The research questions addressed are: 1) How do Latinx college students perceive the sociopolitical context of the NS based on ethnicity? 2) How does the sociopolitical context of the NS shape students' definitions of social justice and equity across different ethnic groups? Addressing these questions offers insights on how Latinx college students' lived experiences in NS states and higher education institutions are evocative of the nefarious dynamics in the region, which also function to mold their conceptions of equity and social justice to advocate for their communities.

Literature Review

The Sociopolitical Context of the NS

The NS's history renders it as unique from the rest of the country, often summarized as "the South." The region's history and cultural origins include "…brutal images of slavery, racism, sexism, homophobia, and stereotypical fear of the *Other*" (Whitaker et al., 2018). Furthermore, its unique history with slavery and the Civil Rights Movement resulted in a dichotomizing Black-White racial binary. This binary produced a business-friendly environment in the post-Reconstruction South and reinforced the regions' binarized socioeconomic and political systems (Guerrero, 2017). The post-Reconstruction South framework directly informs the NS, wherein patrons and businesses catering to communities of color articulate that these communities have more positive conditions, yet this reality relies on

the exploitation of the communities they claim to serve (Guerrero, 2017). Consequently, Whiteness, White supremacy, and the Black-White binary construct modern NS ideologies, specifically, hostility, exploitation, and violence against immigrants and communities of color, including Latinx people (Guerrero, 2017; Wilhoit, 1973).

When exploring higher education issues of access for communities of color, context and the histories within geographic regions must be considered (Núñez, 2017). In a study based on Latinx migrant college students, Nuñez (2017), reminds researchers that this population is comprised by diverse social identities that live in many social contexts. College access for Latinx migrant students varies due to the different state government policies (Nuñez, 2017). With this in mind, we center the NS sociopolitical context in our study.

Latinxs' Ethnic Identities within the NS

Considering foundational theories of ethnic identity (Devereux, 1980), our study uses the dimension of ethnic identification, an individual's self-identification and affinity with an ethnic group (Phinney, 1989) to investigate students' views of the NS sociopolitical context and their definitions of social justice and equity in relation to how they ethnically identify. Existing research revealed that first-year Latinx students establish their ethnic identity in college by considering where they grew up, their immigrant/generational status in the U.S., and the social perceptions of Latinx people (Torres et al., 2019). Therefore, in our study we investigate the perspectives of Latinx students within the context of the NS states where they grew up. To these ends, in what follows we discuss literature that addresses factors that shape the ethnic identification of Latinx people.

Previous studies examined experiences of racialization among Latinxs in Atlanta (Browne & Odem, 2012; Yarbrough, 2010). Scholars found that racialization of ethnicity of Central Americans happened in the process of them adopting the term "Hispanic" based on how native born Atlantans viewed them (Yarbrough, 2010). Native-born residents held racial assumptions about Central American immigrants, categorizing them as "Spanish-speaking, brown-skinned individuals into a monolithic 'Mexican' category" (Yarbrough, 2010, p. 258). Central Americans must negotiate the Hispanic racialized label pervaded by native-born residents' assumptions of the Mexican ethnicity (Yarbrough, 2010). Similarly, Browne and Odem (2012) found the label "Latino" was racialized in its use as a new category in the existing Black-White racial binary. More specifically, they concluded that Dominicans and Guatemalans were labeled Latino, a label racialized through state laws and policies in Atlanta with assumptions of having a certain type of body that appeared "Mexican," speaking English with an accent, and being undocumented (Browne & Odem, 2012). Due to "Hispanic" and "Latino" being equated with "Mexican," participants preferred to specify their ethnicity based on their home country.

Latinx immigrants' identity preferences for their home country is not surprising, especially amid the heterogeneity within the pan-ethnic labels Latino and Hispanic. For example, Browne and Odem (2012) highlighted differences

between Guatemalans and Dominicans. Such differences were based on histories that cut across colonialism, slave trade, governments, language, colorism, religious beliefs, and migration and settlement differences, all of which informed identity and race in their home countries and the U.S. In some instances, within the U.S. context, some Guatemalans can be categorized as Mexican by non-Latinxs, while most Dominicans are not. Yet, some Dominicans are categorized as Black which can intensify racialized experiences or enhance affinity with the Black community in Atlanta (Browne & Odem, 2012; González, 2006). Guatemalans who are categorized as Mexican are ascribed stereotypical traits and may decide to distance themselves from that group and assert a racial/ethnic identity based on not being Mexican (Browne & Odem, 2012). Given the documented and varied racialization Latinx immigrants experience in this region, we wanted to avoid treating this group as monolithic. Thus, we decided to disaggregate the pan-ethnic labels of Latino, Hispanic, and Latinx by ethnicity in our study to better examine how Latinx college students feel valued within their states and how they define social justice and equity.

The Intersection of Latinx College Students' Ethnic Identity and Community Uplift

Given extant research on the racialization and inequity that Latinx communities experience, we approach our work from the stance that NS Latinx college students play a crucial role in advocating for their communities' social justice and equity. Current research has demonstrated the importance that family and community play in the success of Latinx college students (Pérez Huber et al., 2018; Pérez II & Sáenz, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2019). In this manner scholars pursue their work from an asset-based perspective in which Latinx students possess various forms of community cultural wealth that are fundamental to their success. Reciprocally, Latinx students view their success to be dependent on social ties to their families and communities. For example, in Pérez II and Sáenz' (2017) research, Latino male students enrolled at highly selective Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) equated success with their ability to serve their families and communities. Additional research (Garcia, 2019; Nuñez, 2017) has focused on positioning Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) as places with expertise and knowledge for serving Latinx college students. HSIs are viewed from an asset-based angle, highlighting the characteristics that connect higher education to Latinx identities by creating organizational identities that center Latinx culture (Garcia, 2019; Nuñez, 2017).

However, little to no research exists on Latinx college students' identities in relation to communities of color and institutions of higher education in NS states. The scarce research that exists focuses on the effects that the "browning" of the South has from a Latinx identity politics and cross-racial relations lens (Jones, 2019). In this research, education is minimally discussed at the high school level, where interactions between Latinx high school students and their teachers are minutely addressed (Jones, 2019).

Latinx College Students and Social Justice and Equity in the NS

Higher education institutions strive to fulfill missions to serve communities and promote civic engagement among students (Coley & Sum, 2012). Latinx college students' participation in social justice and equity issues is often discussed in higher education literature in terms of civic engagement, including political involvement, community service, and volunteerism (Alcantar, 2014; Garcia & Cuellar, 2018). Levels of civic engagement vary based on demographics. Whereas Asians and Latinxs engage in lower levels of civic engagement than Whites, Blacks civically engage at similar levels as Whites (Garcia & Cuellar, 2018). People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and with lower levels of educational attainment are less likely to civically engage (Garcia & Cuellar, 2018). U.S.-born individuals are more likely to civically engage than those who are foreign-born.

Furthermore, existing literature demonstrates that college students develop critical awareness and the ability to engage and participate in issues of social justice when institutions of higher education include academic and co-curricular opportunities that allow them to engage with society and its power structures. Pak (2018) found that Spanish language service-learning supports Spanish language heritage students' belonging at PWIs, a context where Latinx students customarily are subject to interpersonal and institutional racism. Attributes of language and first generation inform to what extent Latinx college students feel connected to the community. Opportunities for Latinx Spanish-speaking college students to engage in Spanish language service-learning experiences within their own communities can improve their sense of belonging and transform their social and civic inclusion.

Additionally, college students develop stronger social justice attitudes when they participate in service programs that are time-sensitive, include reflection, and have a social justice focus (Littenberg-Tobias, 2014). Three components comprise social justice attitudes: a focus on how structural causes create inequality, attention to issues related to diversity, and understanding of social issues (Littenberg-Tobias, 2014, p. 220). Social justice focuses on solving issues of inequality and how social structures contribute to issues of inequality, discrimination, and poverty.

Lewis et al. (2012) have also examined the impact that diversity experiences (diversity courses and activities on campus) and color-blind racial ideology have on college students' social justice attitudes. Findings revealed that African American, Latinx, and White students who participated in campus diversity activities also demonstrated critical awareness of racism, had lower scores of color-blind ideologies, and a higher interest in social justice issues (Lewis et al., 2012). White students were also more likely to support affirmative action. In this manner these findings demonstrate that participation in diversity activities encourage students to be critical of dominant beliefs about racial structures and the role of power and privilege in society.

When discussing social justice and equity in relation to the NS Latinx community, it is important to note that while Latino civil rights movements from

the 60s and 70s took place in other states of the country, these movements are nonexistent in the NS and its history. Consequently, today NS higher education institutions lack the academic and extracurricular infrastructure developed during these movements that equip Latinx students to address issues of social justice and equity in their communities. While institutions of higher education may be underserving Latinx college students across the U.S., in places where there are legacies of these movements (e.g., California), stakeholders can reference such legacies when demanding post-secondary institutions address Latinx students' needs and interests. Rodríguez et al. (2016) argued that countering ill preparation and limited educational opportunities in the P-20 system for Latinx students and communities requires building a Latino Educational Leadership with knowledge about social justice and equity issues in Latinx communities. Therefore, it becomes important to understand how NS Latinx college students relate to issues of social justice and equity in this region and how it varies by ethnicity.

Theoretical Orientation

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) orients this work as a methodology, namely in identifying taken-for-granted power/oppression dynamics; its core theoretical components ground the qualitative approach in the present study. Moreover, CDA recognizes the interdiscursive connections among language "power… [and] social inequality... expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized... by language use" (Wodak, 2009, p. 2). Guillem's (2018) CDA study revealed the function of institutional discourse in shaping race/ethnicity acceptance and exploitation and argued that they are "historically, politically, and geographically constrained" (p. 359). Extended to the present study, NS sociopolitical struggles uniquely constitute peoples' beliefs about equity and social justice. As a mechanism for tracing power, Foucauldian CDA (1995) offers the possibilities of mapping the terrain of knowledge networks distinct in the NS, evidenced through discourse, and reporting patterns of participants' connection to their ethnic identities through them.

Theoretical Framework

As an extension of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, 1989; Pérez Huber, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), LatCrit examines Latinxs' experiences related to immigration status, language, ethnicity, culture, phenotype, and sexuality (Pérez Huber, 2010; Villalpando, 2004). A LatCrit framework enables examining how race and racism impact higher educational structures, processes, and discourses that uniquely affect Latinxs (Villalpando, 2004) and considering within-group racial complexities (e.g., Afro-Latinxs). Strong connections between CRT and LatCrit demand addressing assumptions and perspectives of

both frameworks to understand how LatCrit differentiates and complements CRT when applied to the examination of Latinx college students' experiences. Specifically, our research adopts LatCrit as a lens to identify a range of participants' approaches to equity and social justice which disrupts hegemonic perceptions of Latinx college students and inequitable power structures which demean and other this population.

This study uses Villalpando's (2004) five defining elements from CRT and LatCrit frameworks. First, CRT and LatCrit acknowledge that race and racism are central constructs in society and by extension are also embedded in the structures of higher education institutions. LatCrit, however, acknowledges that while these are defining characteristics, they also interact with other aspects of Latinx identity including language, generation status, gender, sexuality, and class. Each of these dimensions elicit various forms of subordination and oppression.

Second, both frameworks challenge the dominant ideology of universities founded in claims of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Villalpando, 2004). LatCrit demands that higher education institutions acknowledge dominant ideologies in practice that serve to further advance and sustain Whiteness while further disadvantaging Latinx students (Villalpando, 2004).

Third, CRT and LatCrit are committed to working toward achieving social justice and eliminate all forms of subordination and oppression. Within higher education, this perspective is especially important as it is about achieving educational equality for all students. After all, Latinx students often attend college with a commitment to achieve social justice and equity for their communities (Villalpando, 2004).

Fourth, these frameworks recognize the need for higher education to acknowledge Latinx students' experiential knowledge as a central resource rooted in their lived experiences. This way, experiential knowledge operates as an asset and not a deficit, a type of community memory, and a source of empowerment (Villalpando, 2004). Naturally, this value requires higher education scholars and practitioners to develop culturally relevant curriculum and co-curriculum.

Fifth, CRT and LatCrit, demand that higher education policies and practices be analyzed through a historical lens to understand their effect on Latinx students. Higher education professionals must become informed about Latinxs and examine the heterogeneity of this community. Villalpando's (2004) five elements of CRT and LatCrit allow for a critical examination of Latinx college students' understanding and experiences with social justice and equity in the sociopolitical context of the NS.

Researcher Reflexivity

Productive critical scholarship distinguishes itself for its emphasis on examining researchers' positionality within their work, especially when this work engages historically marginalized communities. Thus, as researchers, we reflected on our positionality as we examined our own identities in relation to power, privilege, oppression, and histories (Pérez Huber et al., 2018). Table 1 offers reflexivity statements for each of the authors of this manuscript.

Table 1 Authors' Reflexivity Statements

First Author
I am a first-generation Ph.D. Mexican-American/Chicana. I was inspired to pursue a terminal degree in higher education after experiencing and witnessing social injustice and inequality in my hometown, Chicago. Additionally, my knowledge and observations of Latinx college students in the NS allowed me to experience different sociopolitical contexts and have informed my desire to examine how social justice and equity awareness can vary within Latinx college students.
Second Author
I am a Mexican immigrant woman of color, a first-generation graduate, and a first-generation Ph.D. My immigrant experience in the United States shapes my interest in researching how inequity impacts marginalized communities in education. These ideas are directly connected to the focus of the work presented in this piece, as a lens through which to understand the impact of sociopolitical contexts on the experience of Latinx college students.
Third Author
I am a first-generation Ph.D. candidate. As a white woman and emergent scholar, my work prioritizes educational and social acceptance and eradication of racialized, classed, and gendered barriers. I pursue dismantling systems of oppression through critical collaborations and advocating for anti-racism, including a perspective of critical whiteness that recognizes the effects of race and racialization that result in inequity towards communities of color. An awareness of my identities along a continuum of privilege guided my contributions to this work detailing the experiences of Latinx college students in the NS.

Methods

Study Sites

Data were collected from two institutions in the NS, Central University (CU) and West University (WU) (pseudonyms). These two sites were chosen due to their geographic locations and growing Latinx undergraduate student populations. CU is a public four-year university located in the South Atlantic region of the NS. During fall 2018, there were 17,000 undergraduate students enrolled at CU of which 10.3% identified as Latinx. The second site, WU is a four-year public university located in the West Central region of the NS. In fall 2018, 24,000 undergraduate students were enrolled at WU, 8.9% of which identified as Latinx. No data to disaggregate enrollment figures by Latinx ethnic group are collected by institutions in the study; thus the authors are not able to compare these data with data on Latinx ethnicity of study participants.

Data Collection

To identify study participants, the researchers contacted the institutions' research offices and requested email addresses of undergraduate students enrolled in spring 2019 who identified as Latinx. Data requests yielded a list of 3,688 emails of current students. The criteria to participate in the study included participants who: (1) identified as Latinx or Hispanic, (2) lived in one of the two NS states in the study

for at least two years or attended high school in one of these states, and (3) were enrolled as an undergraduate student at one of the study sites in Spring 2019. Data were collected using La Conciencia de Equidad en el Sur online survey. The 42-item survey addressed two areas that focused on the role of: (1) higher education institutions in the NS in developing students' awareness and understanding of equity and social justice issues impacting their community and (2) Latinx identity in developing awareness, understanding, and engagement with equity and social issues impacting their community.

Construct validity was addressed through several methods from the authors' collaboration with an expert advisory group. Advisors to the survey development were comprised of faculty and doctoral students whose work serves Latinx college students. This group provided expert review which the authors considered in conversation with scholarship on Latinx experiences of racialization and racialized identity construction in the South. This approach prioritized validity techniques that eschew normative, positivistic quantitative methodologies (Hernández-León & Zúñiga, 2000). Additionally, the survey was piloted prior to soliciting participant responses with four higher education scholar practitioners not included in the advisory group and who work with Latinx college students. Finally, the survey incorporated both multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

Variables of Interest

To answer the study research questions: 1) *How do Latinx students perceive the sociopolitical context of the NS based on ethnicity?* 2) *How does the sociopolitical context of the NS shape students' definitions of social justice and equity across different ethnic groups?* the following variables were at the center of our analysis.

Ethnicity Participants were asked to indicate their ethnic affiliation via a set of predetermined ethnicities present in the region with an open-ended option. Collectively, study participants listed a total of 20 ethnicities. In the spirit of inclusion of all Latinx ethnic groups represented in the study, especially groups with fewer participants, and for analytical purposes, researchers grouped Latinx ethnicities into geographical regions of the American continent. Table 2 shows ethnicities distributed by geographical regions.

Participants' Perception of the NS's Sociopolitical Context Participants' sentiments related to the sociopolitical context of the NS were measured with two survey items: (1) *Keeping in mind that you live in one of the Southern states, do you believe your state values the presence of the Latinx community in the state.* This item was a yes/no question coded (Yes=1, No=0). The second item was (2) *Keeping in mind that I live in one of the Southern states, I believe my state's sociopolitical climate increases available resources to disrupt the inequities impacting the Latinx community.* This item was on a 5-point Likert scale coded (Agree strongly=5, Agree=4, Undecided=3, Disagree=2, Disagree strongly=1).

Table 2 Participants' ethnicity grouped by American continent by site

Participants' Ethnicity Grouped by American Continent	Number of Participants	Enrollment by region at CU	Enrollment by region at WU
Ethnicity	*n*		
North American		167	137
Mexican/Chicano	315		
Native American	2		
Central American		45	34
Guatemalan	6		
Honduran	16		
Salvadoran	39		
Costa Rican	5		
Nicaraguan	5		
Panamanian	17		
South American		27	29
Argentine	3		
Bolivian	13		
Brazilian	4		
Chilean	5		
Colombian	14		
Ecuadorian	7		
Peruvian	10		
Uruguayan	1		
Venezuelan	4		
Caribbean		55	4
Puerto Rican	36		
Cuban	12		
Dominican	14		
Ethnicity not provided	16		
Total	544	325	219

Total enrollment for sites may not add up to total number of participants because due to missing responses.

Participants' Definition of Equity To measure the breadth of participants' understanding of the definitions for *equity,* participants were asked to respond to: *The next set of statements use the term "equity." What comes to mind when you read this word?* Survey respondents were offered three definitions for *equity* and they were asked to select all the responses that applied. The provided definitions included: *(a) equal opportunity to resources, (b) overcoming unfairness caused by unequal access to economic resources and power, and (c) equal opportunity to improve one's social class.* Respondents also had an open-ended option, "*not listed, please specify,*" to provide their own definition for the term. This item was coded to demonstrate the extent of participants' understanding of the definition of *equity* by determining the number of applicable responses each respondent selected, ranging from 1-3

definitions. Open-ended definitions were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Participants' Definition of Social Justice To measure the breadth of participants' understanding of the definitions for *social justice,* participants were asked to respond to: *The next set of statements use the term "social justice." What comes to mind when you read this term? "social justice."* Survey respondents were offered three definitions for *social justice* and they were asked to select all the responses that applied. The definitions provided to them include: *(a) greater equality of access to goods and services, (b) overcoming unfairness caused by unequal access to economic resources and power, and (c) expanded opportunities for real participation in the decisions which govern our lives.* Respondents also had an open-ended option, "*not listed, please specify,*" to provide their own definition for the term. This item was coded to demonstrate the extent of participants' understanding of the definition of *social justice* by determining the number of applicable responses each respondent selected, ranging from 1-3 definitions. Open-ended definitions were analyzed using CDA.

Analytical Approach

Initial Descriptive Analysis Our data were analyzed descriptively using the SPSS crosstabs function to explore variation across each of the research sites and to observe the spread across ethnic groups represented in the study. Therefore, the results of the different analyses we conducted are presented in cross-tabulated tables. No inferential analyses were conducted for this study due to the unbalanced structure of our data and in an effort to include all participants in spite of lower representation in our sample.

Open Response Analysis via CDA The regional context of this study situates the participants and researchers in the NS and requires methodological techniques appropriate to identify functions and effects of power present in the qualitative data. Thus, we employed Foucauldian CDA (Wodak, 2009) to enable us to analyze power discourses and resistances specific to the NS sociopolitical context, both how discourses construct Latinx students' definitions of social justice and equity and how participants contest othering. Methodologically, Foucauldian CDA (Wodak, 2009) combines examining the effects of power in society as manifest in language and the presence of knowledge networks (Jäger, 2009). Methods of Foucauldian CDA reveal how discourse functions to reproduce power, name the effects of those reproductions, and disrupt the faulty binary of powerful and oppressed. Relative to the present study, this method of analyzing discourse enables identifying the effects of power in Latinx college students' definitions of equity and social justice relative to their ethnic identification. CDA in the present study focuses on how students' equity and social justice definitions represent the ideological circulation of ideas within a web of ideas from oppression to empowerment. As such, the CDA approach required the researchers to reflectively consider participants' responses contextualized within NS discourses of racialization and movements for racial equity. Therefore,

we analyzed qualitative open responses (n=37) to identify the presence and function of power and its ideological effects on students' definitions of equity and social justice. These orientations enabled critical questioning of the power dynamics that informed Latinx participants' understandings and framings of equity as opposed to social justice. Conceptual saturation in relation to the research questions and framing literature was achieved with a flexible, inductive coding process and analytic memos adapted from the evolution of grounded theory (Deterding & Waters, 2018). To apply tenets of CDA, first we read through all open responses, considered them in relation to theory, and organized participants' own definitions of equity and social justice with two codes: affirming (definitions with positive dispositions, e.g. "impartial to society") or disparaging (those with negative dispositions, e.g. "a political narrative"); however, we realized some open responses did not fit within this binary and thus added a code for mixed responses (neutral or ambivalent, e.g. "I've encountered bigoted or problematic people who have endorsed social justice"). Responses with subject matter-specific definitions were omitted, (e.g. "return on shares") as a definition of equity. Then, initial coding for each open response to defining equity was contrasted with the same participant's definition for social justice and evaluated for consistency or difference. The NS as a place of contestation for Latinx identity and belonging was a central theoretical concept in discerning and organizing participant responses. Analytic memos enabled reflexive engagement with participants' words in relation to the quantitative findings, extant scholarship, and considering alternative possibilities in codes and CDA findings. Lastly, this CDA approach delineated by a Foucauldian lens attended to power in the form of discourse, both in participants' words and how their words affirm or contest ideologies of equity and social justice. Conceptual synthesis was achieved by iteratively coding and questioning the coding process, particularly how participant discourses relate to broader society and where their words trouble or reinforce inequity.

Sample Profile

A total of 544 undergraduate students enrolled in Spring 2019, 325 enrolled at Central University (CU) and 219 enrolled at West University (WU) completed the survey. Table 2 shows ethnicities distributed by regions of the American continent. In terms of gender, women represented the majority of our sample (72.2%) followed by men (23.5%), transgender (<1%), gender non-conforming (1.3%), transgender (<1%), and less than 1% of participants did not provide gender information. Additionally, most of our participants were pursuing degrees in the Humanities (43%), Sciences (34.6%), and Business (18%), and 4.4% of participants did not list a major.

Results

The ethnic identification of study participants is at the center of the results we report in this manuscript as we want to show the distribution of participants' responses across a variety of perspectives related to the sociopolitical context of the NS and

their understanding of the concepts of *equity* and *social justice*. Our results are presented by research site to make comparisons and to contrast participants' perspectives. First, we present enrollment figures at each of the two research sites. We then present participants' sentiments related to the sociopolitical context of the NS framed by two survey items: (1) *Keeping in mind that you live in one of the Southern states, do you believe your state values the presence of the Latinx community in the state* and (2) *Keeping in mind that I live in one of the Southern states, I believe my state's sociopolitical climate increases available resources to disrupt the inequities impacting the Latinx community.* Then we focus on how participants define the concepts of *equity* and *social justice.* After presenting the set of results outlined above, we transition to findings from participants' open-ended responses to defining the terms *equity* and *social justice* using CDA.

Enrollment & Ethnicity at Each Research Site

Survey respondents (*n*=544) were undergraduate students enrolled at the two research sites. Table 2 shows enrollment distribution by participant ethnicity at each site.

Participants' Perceptions of the Sociopolitical Context of the NS

Results indicate that when asked *Keeping in mind that you live in one of the Southern states, do you believe your state values the presence of the Latinx community in the state?,* of the 242 participants enrolled at Central University who responded to this question, 69% (n=168) of them responded *No* while only about 31% (n=74) responded *Yes*, asserting that their state valued the presence of the Latinx community in the state. In comparison, responses from participants enrolled at West University reflected similar sentiments. From the 170 participants enrolled at WU who responded to this question, more than half, 62% (n=106) responded *No* while 38% (n=64) responded *Yes*. When taking a closer look at responses by ethnicity, more than half of respondents across all ethnic groups at both sites asserted that their state did not value the presence of the Latinx community in the state. Table 3 shows participant responses to this question.

Additionally, when asked *Keeping in mind that I live in one of the Southern states, I believe my state's sociopolitical climate increases available resources to disrupt the inequities impacting the Latinx community* only 21% (n=50) of participants enrolled at CU who responded to this question, Agree or Agree strongly with the statement while 37% (n=90) were undecided, and 42% (n=102) Disagreed or Disagreed Strongly with the statement. In contrast, from the 170 participants enrolled at WU who responded to this question, 22% (n=37) Agree or Agree Strongly, 36% (n=62) were undecided while 42% (n=71) Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed with the statement, which shows that most respondents were either Undecided or Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed. This was also the case for each ethnic group individually at each research site.

Table 3 Distribution of participant responses: My state values the presence of the Latinx community

Institution	Do you believe your state values the presence of the Latinx community in the state?	Caribbean	Central American	North American	South American	Total
CU	Yes	15 (38%)	11(28%)	38 (27%)	10 (45%)	74 (31%)
	No	24 (62%)	28 (72%)	104 (73%)	12 (55%)	168 (69%)
	Total	39 (100%)	39 (100%)	142 (100%)	22 (100%)	242 (100%)
WU	Yes	1 (25%)	15 (48%)	42 (37%)	6 (27%)	64 (38%)
	No	3 (75%)	16 (52%)	71 (63%)	16 (73%)	106 (62%)
	Total	4 (100%)	31 (100%)	113 (100%)	22 (100%)	170 (100%)
Missing	132					

Table 4 Participant responses by ethnicity

Institution	I believe my state's sociopolitical climate increases available resources to disrupt the inequities impacting the Latinx community.	Caribbean	Central American	North American	South American	Total
CU	AS	5 (13%)	2 (5%)	5 (4%)	1 (5%)	13 (5%)
	A	3 (8%)	11 (28%)	21 (15%)	2 (9%)	37 (15%)
	U	14 (36%)	10 (26%)	56 (39%)	10 (45%)	90 (37%)
	D	11 (28%)	11 (28%)	36 (25%)	3 (14%)	61 (25%)
	DS	6 (15%)	5 (13%)	24 (17%)	6 (27%)	41 (17%)
	Total	39 (100%)	39 (100%)	142 (100%)	22 (100%)	242 (100%)
WU	AS	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	9 (8%)	0 (0%)	10 (6%)
	A	0 (0%)	9 (29%)	18 (16%)	0 (0%)	27 (16%)
	U	0 (0%)	14 (45%)	39 (34%)	9 (41%)	62 (36%)
	D	2 (50%)	4 (13%)	35 (31%)	9 (41%)	50 (29%)
	DS	1 (25%)	4 (13%)	12 (11%)	4 (18%)	21 (12%)
	Total	4 (100%)	31(100%)	113 (100%)	22 (100%)	170 (100%)
Missing	132					

Table 4 shows distribution of responses on this item across institution and ethnicity.

Participants' Definitions of Equity

Results suggest that of the 242 survey respondents enrolled at CU who responded to the question, a larger proportion of them selected only one definition for the term equity (58%, n=141), 17% (n=41) selected two definitions, and 25% (n=60) selected three definitions. This pattern was also evident when examining each ethnic group. That is, most respondents in each ethnic group selected one definition. Furthermore, 8 participants provided open responses (participants identified as Caribbean and North American).

Similarly, at WU, of the 162 respondents enrolled at this institution, 76% (n=123) selected only one definition for the term equity, 12% (n=20) selected two responses, and 12% (n=19) selected three responses. The same response pattern is observed when examining each ethnic group. Moreover, five participants provided open responses (participants identified as Caribbean, North American, and South American). Responses to this statement are presented in Table 5.

Participants' Definitions of Social Justice

Results suggest that of the 241 survey respondents enrolled at CU who responded to the question, a larger proportion of them selected only one definition for the term *social justice* (62%, n=150), 17% (n=40) selected two definitions, and 21% (n=51) selected three definitions. This pattern was also evident when examining each ethnic group. That is, most respondents in each ethnic group selected one definition. Furthermore, 11 participants provided open responses (participants identified as Caribbean, North American, and South American).

Similarly, at WU, of the 157 respondents enrolled at this institution, most, 70% (n=110) selected only one definition for the term social justice, 15% (n=24) selected two responses, and 15% (n=23) selected three responses. The same response pattern is observed when examining each ethnic group. Moreover, 11 participants provided open responses (participants identified as Caribbean, Central American, North American, and South American). Responses to this statement are presented in Table 6.

Findings from CDA

Aligned with core tenets of critical discourse analysis (CDA) we analyzed qualitative responses (*n*=37) and addressed social justice (Wodak, 2009) as acknowledging racism. Relatedly, the NS also hosts ongoing collective struggles to promote equity and social justice. Qualitative results are organized by affirming equity and social justice definitions, then definitions that are disparaging of both, and finally mixed messages between equity and social justice.

Table 5 Definitions of equity by ethnicity

Institution	What comes to mind when you read this word? "Equity"	Caribbean	Central American	North American	South American	Total
CU	Selected 1 definition	28 (74%)	18 (46%)	82 (58%)	13 (57%)	141 (58%)
	Selected 2 definitions	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	29 (20%)	4 (17%)	41 (17%)
	Selected 3 definitions	6 (16%)	17 (44%)	31 (22%)	6 (26%)	60 (25%)
	Total	38 (100%)	39 (100%)	142 (100%)	23 (100%)	242 (100%)
WU	Selected 1 definition	1 (33%)	25 (81%)	79 (73%)	18 (90%)	123 (76%)
	Selected 2 definitions	0 (0%)	5 (16%)	14 (13%)	1 (5%)	20 (12%)
	Selected 3 definitions	2 (67%)	1 (3%)	15 (14%)	1 (5%)	19 (12%)
	Total	3 (100%)	31 (100%)	108 (100%)	20 (100%)	162 (100%)
Missing	127					

Table 6 Definitions of social justice by ethnicity

Institution	What comes to mind when you read this word? "Social justice"	Caribbean	Central American	North American	South American	Total
CU	Selected 1 definition	23 (64%)	22 (55%)	90 (63%)	15 (68%)	150 (62%)
	Selected 2 definitions	2 (5%)	7 (18%)	26 (18%)	5 (23%)	40 (17%)
	Selected 3 definitions	11(31%)	11 (27%)	27 (19%)	2 (9%)	51 (21%)
	Total	36 (100%)	40 (100%)	143 (100%)	22 (100%)	241 (100%)
WU	Selected 1 definition	1 (33%)	22 (76%)	70 (66%)	17 (89%)	110 (70%)
	Selected 2 definitions	1 (33%)	4 (14%)	17 (16%)	2 (11%)	24 (15%)
	Selected 3 definitions	1 (33%)	3 (10%)	19 (18%)	0 (0%)	23 (15%)
	Total	3 (100%)	29 (100%)	106 (100%)	19 (100%)	157 (100%)
Missing	124					

Affirming Equity and Social Justice

Participants who affirmed equity and social justice did so through themes of identifying social hierarchies, working to dismantle them, and embodying a targeted racial identity. Most open-ended definitions of equity presented a positive disposition. For example, one participant affirmed equity by defining it as "The opportunity for all to rise, by acknowledging and overcoming the unequal distribution and access to resources." In relation to the foundations of LatCrit, this definition is evocative of the essential function of racialized inequality acknowledgement as a starting point to transformation and equity (Villalpando, 2004). Yet another participant wrote a representative affirming statement of equity as "Overcoming and dismantling unjust systems of power that have made it difficult [or] near impossible for targeted groups to advance in society." These participants' statements captured that "targeted groups" exist in the NS. The targeted groups created within this region's sociopolitical context or elided from it as is the case of Latinx persons (Guerrero, 2017), experience a different social reality than those in recognized, esteemed, and socially-accepted powerful groups.

An additional participant wrote that social justice is "The fight to include and incorporate the opinions and feelings of all individuals to improve the social and living standards we're currently experiencing." This participant stated that they, among other minoritized Latinx people, personally felt and lived the effects of being the "other". The affirming definitions of equity and social justice evoked the rigor and mobilizations of anti-racist activism and social justice advocacy. These movements within the NS articulate the presence, legitimacy, and necessity of equity.

Avoiding Equity and Social Justice

Some study participants disparaged equity and/or social justice in their open-ended responses defining the terms. Definitions with negative connotations represented themes of rugged individualist rhetoric, the politicized nature of the terms, and perceived potential risks. For example, one participant defined social justice as "A falsified term used by minorities to try and benefit off of the guilt of the majority." Although this statement named the categorization of minority and majority, the participant presented notions of equity and social justice as opportunistic. Another participant response typified an individualistic perspective opposed to social justice because they stated it is "A way to take the blame off one group and put it on another." These definitions were representative of dispositions against social justice in favor of individualistic responsibility. Another participant's definition incorporated this theme of opposition to social justice over individualism. They stated that social justice is:

> A millennial term used by people who think life is unfair and don't want to put forth the effort their parents and grandparents did to achieve happiness and their own definition of success.

This participant took the millennial generation to task for personal responsibility; this is important because it indicated a stance toward social justice as reminiscent of a younger generational fad. That is, because, presumably, the participants' family elders worked hard and achieved a modicum of success, then so too should younger Latinx people. The subtext of this sentiment indicated a distaste for social justice as a pivot away from an ethic of personal responsibility and presumed ageist maturity. This rhetoric was surprising to read from Latinx participants in the study who, as typified by participants' affirming definitions, are targets of racialized othering. However, that Latinx college students defined social justice in such unfavorable terms mirrored the pervasiveness of the ideological messaging present in NS educational institutions.

Mixed Messaging

Across the affirming and disparaging definitions, most participants provided consistent stances that affirmed both equity and social justice or disparaged both. However, some participants affirmed equity and disparaged social justice. This finding suggested that the underlying logic of politicized perceptions reflect participants' perceptions of the terms. For example, one participant described equity as "Equality of opportunity;" the same participant dismissed social justice as "liberal snowflakes." The abrupt transition from a moderately positive disposition toward equity to the reproduced language of political conservative dismissal of movements for racial and economic justice is significant. This participant's statements indicated that equity, by comparison to social justice, was more palatable. Rhetoric of "liberal snowflakes" has garnered support in the Southern states due to the rhetorical appeals, again to a mythologized rural, conservative, and fundamentalist ethic, predicated on racialized hierarchies of inclusion and worthiness.

Discussion

In response to our first research question "how do Latinx students perceive the sociopolitical context of the NS based on ethnicity?", findings confirmed that most participants did not feel valued by their state regardless of institution, which signals a consistent sociopolitical context across NS states. "The South's" history and culture are sociopolitical and ideological foundations that frame race within a Black-White binary that racializes any other racial-ethnic group that does not fit this paradigm based on stereotypes (Browne & Odem, 2012; Yarbrough, 2010). More importantly, these stereotypes simplify Latinx identity and ignore that there are mixed-race individuals (e.g., Afro-Latinxs). Furthermore, although the NS's racialization of Latinxs impacts each ethnic group under this pan-ethnic label differently, there were no major differences in how they perceived their state to value their presence. More than half of respondents across all ethnic groups at both institutions believe that their state does not value the presence of the Latinx community.

These assertions demonstrate consistency with respondents' views as to whether they believed their state's sociopolitical climate increases available resources to disrupt the inequities impacting the Latinx community. Most participants were either Undecided or Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed regardless of institution or ethnicity. These responses reinforce participants' belief that limited access to resources are a concern among Latinxs and demonstrate that the sociopolitical climate is not equipped to disrupt the structural inequality impacting this ethnic group. Amid these findings, it is essential to reinforce that the Latinx community possess deep community cultural assets and agency to disrupt inequality of resources. More importantly, given that our respondents are college students at two state institutions, it is crucial to underscore the responsibility that these public universities play in disrupting inequalities and equipping students to challenge social issues that impact the Latinx community. The results of our study indicate higher education's responsibility to engage all students in discussions about issues of social justice and equity that the Latinx community faces. CRT and LatCrit theorists argue that lack of resource distribution to communities of color is a function of institutional racism that causes and sustains inequity. Furthermore, Villalpando (2004) highlights the importance of higher education as a resource to help disrupt these inequities. Concretely, Latinx college students already possess awareness and knowledge of inequities; where higher education can contribute is supplying tools and resources that enable Latinx students' knowledge to flourish as action for transformation. Employing a culturally relevant curriculum that acknowledges students' lived experiences as an asset helps create a community memory and serves as a resource of empowerment for them to feel that these state universities value Latinxs and that disruption of inequities is possible. Despite the deficit lens imposed on Latinxs by society, the fact remains that the Latinx community possess assets to disrupt inequity. The essential distinction to make is that higher education has a responsibility to acknowledge these assets and expand on efforts to serve the Latinx community with respect and awareness of the community's inherent strengths.

In response to our second research question "how does the sociopolitical context of the NS shape students' definitions of social justice and equity across different ethnic groups?" we consider results from our descriptive and qualitative analyses. Results revealed that most participants selected only one definition for social justice and one for equity, regardless of institution or ethnic group. Yet, all definitions together gave a more comprehensive response to define each term. These findings hint that most respondents did not have a comprehensive understanding of social justice or equity. Given the work of Ramos and colleagues (2021), this may be an indication that class discussions within these two universities are not accounting for issues of social justice and equity or how systems shape access for communities of color. Therefore, Latinx students who are being engaged in discussions about these issues may hold a basic understanding of these terms and how they impact communities of color. Furthermore, not discussing these topics can prevent students from gaining knowledge as to how they can strive for equity (Rodríguez et al., 2016). From a CRT and LatCrit frame, this finding, along with how respondents believed their state did not value their

presence, demonstrates how racism in higher education institutions replicates institutional racism in society at large. A culturally relevant curriculum is especially urgent in the NS as there is a need to build an infrastructure to support the needs of the Latinx community.

CDA open-response findings further descriptive analyses and highlight differences within the Latinx ethnic group, demonstrating within-group heterogeneity. Most participant definitions provided consistently affirming or disparaging definitions, and a few were mixed. Affirming definitions demonstrate that participants could identify social hierarchies, believed in working to dismantle them, and saw themselves as embodying the Latinx identity. Moreover, these definitions acknowledged the existence of hierarchies and systems among college students living in the NS, demonstrating a level of consciousness that allowed them to be critical of their individual and community's existing conditions. Overall, these definitions support and align well with the political stance of CRT and LatCrit. Disparaging and mixed definitions complicate our application of Villalpando's (2004) framework as participants' beliefs about social justice and equity surprisingly aligned with ideologies of institutional racism prevalent in the NS. These unanticipated findings demonstrate the need to amplify CRT and LatCrit tenets to trouble the American Dream rhetoric embedded in higher education (Weber, 2010) and the NS.

Furthermore, the ideology of White supremacy historically spread through colonization of ideals, and, despite changes in this ideology's vectors, its effect of racialized hierarchies continues. Importantly, an effect of stratified valuation based on race results in differential treatment, and this dynamic is apparent in higher education where the institution was created and designed based on an ideology of White supremacy (Wilder, 2014). Contemporary evidence of this demonstrates student enrollment numbers that privilege White identities over students of color rather than enrollment that mimics population demographics based on race and ethnicity (Schak & Nichols, 2017). Our results indicate that more expansive adoption of LatCrit would additionally offer a lens to identify and challenge systemic racism in higher education and the effects of its power such as norms that perpetuate racial stratification and promote unequal treatment.

Altogether, the results and findings of the present study are of significance to higher education research as follows: 1) Our work contributes to the scarce area of research that examines and elevates the experiences of Latinx college students who grew up and attend college in the NS. 2) Furthermore, our work disrupts monolithic understandings of the heterogenous communities present within the pan-ethnic label Latinx by presenting their perspectives in connection to their ethnic identity. 3) Lastly, expanding upon research (Browne & Odem, 2012; González, 2006) that explains the racialization and ethnic identification of Latinxs in the U.S. South, our study examines participants' experiences within the sociopolitical context of the NS by closely analyzing their perceptions of this unique sociopolitical environment in connection to their ethnic identity.

Implications

The results of our research indicate actionable and concrete approaches in practice, policy, and research for higher education personnel, including Student Affairs (SA) professionals, faculty, and institutional leaders

Practice

Our findings demonstrate that SA educators and higher education leaders need to equip students with comprehensive social justice and equity knowledge in the NS. This aligns with Villalpando's (2004) tenet promoting culturally relevant higher education pedagogy. SA educators are essential to develop co-curricular opportunities engaging students in discussions of equity and social justice. Latinx college students and other minoritized groups cannot be the only intended audience for such content; to disentangle justice from the erroneous responsibility on minoritized groups, SA must reach students with majority identities and privileged social positions. For example, one model for this approach is Spartans-in-Dialogue, a five-week co-curricular dialogue program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (n.d.), that promotes intercultural and mixed identity group conversations about challenging social topics. This implication corresponds with the SA mission fostering holistic student development, which incorporates support for students in developing all aspects of their personhood. As advanced through CRTand LatCrit, there are multiple linguistic, generation to college, generation of presence, gender and sexual identities, and cultural backgrounds represented within the panethnic grouping of Latinx people. Succinctly, one admitted student, nor one new hire may embody the broad spectrum of identities and backgrounds within this diverse, multi-ethnic group. Therefore, SA personnel can demonstrate responsiveness to this reality by advancing the promotion of an equally broad distribution of Latinx people's multiple identities and not presenting this group as homogenous. A further suggestion is assessing current programming's equity and social justice content to identify opportunities for improvement that intentionally empower students to think critically about these topics.

Furthermore, Latinx students engaged in discussions about equity and social justice issues may hold a basic understanding of these terms and how they impact communities of color. Relatedly, not discussing these topics can prevent students from gaining knowledge as to how they can strive for equity (Rodríguez et al., 2016). From a CRT and LatCrit frame, this finding along with how respondents believed their state did not value their presence demonstrates how race and racism in higher education institutions replicate systemic racism in society at large. A culturally relevant curriculum is especially urgent in the NS as there is a necessity to build an infrastructure that supports the needs of the Latinx community. Specifically, content about equity and social justice can respond to our results in pedagogical approaches and delivery that does not assume students' prior knowledge: curriculum about equity and social justice topics is robust when situated

within students' sociopolitical realities and responsive to their identities and lived experiences based on those identities. Concretely, higher education can model equity and social justice efforts in curriculum development, pedagogy, and programmatic practices that mirror the extant beliefs and assets to disrupt inequity already present in the Latinx community. Higher education faculty can respond to our results by building connections with students that foster an environment built upon respect and awareness of how Latinx students experience othering in broader society. Holding space for critical conversations across racial-ethnic identities and ensuring ethnically and racially diverse scholars are on syllabi's reading lists further respond to the reality of social injustice and inequity experienced by communities of color.

Historicizing curricula and campus programming to be responsive in higher education's effect on Latinx students further responds to Villalpando's (2004) LatCrit framework and its tenets by challenging hegemonic perceptions of Latinx college students and underscoring power structures that severely disadvantage this population. Concretely, culturally-responsive curricula would historicize the longstanding presence, exploitation, and vast contributions of Latinx people in the US. One way this can be achieved is by critically addressing migration and immigration patterns, especially their politicized shifts over time. For example, encouraging students' awareness of how the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American war, transformed the movement of people between Mexico, other Central and South American countries, and the U.S. historicizes contemporary racialization. Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah –lands formerly home to Mexican and Indigenous peoples –were ceded to the United States. Through a militarized, monetized, and politicized series of events culminating in the expansion of the southern U.S., people residing in those areas had to choose between Mexican and American citizenship. To become American required relinquishment of heritage, home, and place-based identity. Curricula that are culturally-responsive to Latinx students include critical historical perspectives, as in the example of the effect of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that illuminate contemporary social injustices that seek to reproduce racialized marginalization.

Our findings also present practice implications for higher education institutions and their leaders. Most respondents did not believe the state valued their presence nor that they were provided adequate resources to disrupt the inequity in their community; this implicates public higher education institutions as part of the state. This implication becomes especially important as we consider the need to increase a leadership that is culturally competent across all educational levels and can address issues of the Latinx community (Rodríguez et al., 2016). Increasing such leadership across disciplines, departments, and research centers disrupts the ideology that only those in the humanities and social sciences, or academic affairs, need to cover "soft topics." Those in the physical sciences, SA, and all echelons of organizational leadership must also account for Latinx community needs as they advance knowledge in these fields to prepare students to think inclusively about the various communities that they may serve.

Policy

Furthermore, higher education institutions can advance equity by recognizing that while affirmative action can aid in advancing racial equity, it is only one form of socially just practices. As guided by Villalpando's (2004) framework, cognizance of the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression historically minoritized groups face calls for structural transformation where all facets of minoritized identity are represented among college students, staff, faculty, and administration. To reiterate, the panethnic group Latinx encompasses multiple linguistic, cultural, and ethnoracial identities; even if not required for federal demographic reporting, individual institutions can disrupt a flat representation of Latinx people by maintaining disaggregated demographic data on ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds to enable Latinx people –in their multiple identities –to be recognized.

Similarly, NS higher education institutional leaders must think about the Latinx community heterogeneity when developing educational opportunities that will prepare Latinx students to serve their communities. Countries like Mexico have adopted a higher education model that includes an intercultural and bilingual focus (Secretaría de Educacíon Pública, 2017). Within this model, a total of 11 public institutions (intercultural universities) throughout the country contribute to equalizing the distribution of educational opportunities in Indigenous regions of Mexico. Intercultural universities are part of a subsystem that is governed by representatives from all levels of government (federal, state, regional, municipal). This group of universities seeks to provide opportunities for adolescents in Indigenous communities of diverse cultures and languages to develop academically with the purpose to preserve cultural expressions and strengthen their roots (Secretaría de Educacíon Pública, 2017). Institutions are located in diverse Indigenous regions and offer degrees at the undergraduate and graduate level (Secretaría de Educacíon Pública, 2017).

Mexico's model can be adopted as we think about the heterogeneity among Latinxs and the unique social justice and equity challenges that they experience in the NS. Similar to Mexico's intercultural universities, institutions in the US can work to create partnerships that are developed in relation to policies (e.g., funding, course credit) that establish broad access to these opportunities for Latinxs. This model is in line with LatCrit (Villalpando, 2004) in establishing robust opportunities of learning in a manner that centers Latinx college students and communities' success rather than centering and sustaining Whiteness.

Additionally, more leadership roles must be filled by Latinx higher education professionals and intercultural training must be offered to professionals that have limited knowledge of historically minoritized communities. Such training must account for the Latinx population's heterogeneity, Latinx history, and students' competence to advocate for their communities. Simultaneously, leaders of higher education institutions, must establish an organizational culture that is open to having Latinx individuals transform their institutions rather than simply increasing structural diversity. Organizations cannot become inclusive and socially just through mere structural representation (Camargo, 2017). Therefore, per CRT and LatCrit theoretical underpinnings, it is crucial for university leaders to understand that race-neutral policies can work against transforming their organizations.

Because Latinx students, faculty, and staff already possess resources and motivation to disrupt inequity, higher education's actionable responsibility is to support and expand on these assets by providing resources, tools, and pathways to elaborate on the pursuit of social justice. Higher education institutions must identify ways to express and enact greater value for the Latinx community on their campuses. More importantly, they must also define their role in maintaining and disrupting inequity impacting Latinx communities and incorporate content about the reality of racism and White supremacy to advance transformation toward equity. As state institutions, these universities have a responsibility to the state and its residents.

Research

Our study highlights several research implications. First, researchers should consider intersecting CRT and/or LatCrit and participatory action research to further examine this topic and geographic region. Through participatory action research, Latinx college students can become decisionmakers in how research is designed, conducted, reported, and implemented. Participatory research is in strong alignment with CRT and LatCrit's goal of achieving social justice and equity for communities of color. More importantly, it gives a higher level of agency to communities of color in knowledge production about their own ethnoracial groups and can provide them with tools to work towards societal justice and equity.

Second, additional research needs to be conducted on the process of socialization of Latinx college students within the context of the NS. As demonstrated through participants' disparaging and mixed definitions of social justice and equity in our study, ideologies of institutional racism are being upheld by some Latinx college students. Therefore, it important to examine how these ideologies are transmitted within the context and history of the NS. Furthermore, for the purpose of reaching social justice and equity as proposed by CRT and LatCrit it is imperative to better understand how Latinx college students develop ethnic identity in relation to the sociopolitical environment of the NS.

Third, research on the NS sociopolitical environment requires a collaboration between the fields of political science and higher education. Naturally, CRT and LatCrit's goal of liberation can require interdisciplinary approaches while conducting research. Due to the complex political history of the South, we cannot come to understand the current higher education treatment of Latinx students in this region using apolitical lenses. Therefore, to more deeply understand the role that higher education plays in equipping Latinx students with knowledge to uplift their communities, researchers must examine the complexity of politics in relation to geographic region and higher education. The connection between these impacts the educational opportunities available in NS universities and can provide implications for navigating institutional racism within this geographic region.

Fourth, research must continue to recognize the heterogeneity of the Latinx group. Our CDA open-response findings reinforce the differences within the Latinx ethnic group. Future research on this population needs to prioritize the intersectionality of identities. In line with LatCrit, experiences related to immigration status,

language, ethnicity, culture, phenotype, and sexuality (Pérez Huber, 2010; Villalpando, 2004) can contribute to how individuals experience college and their understanding of social justice and equity. Furthermore, using an intersectionality lens would produce examinations that consider within-group racial complexities (e.g., Afro-Latinxs) that further shape the experiences in the NS, a place that continues to operate within a Black-White binary.

Limitations

While our intent was to be as inclusive as possible with our analytical approaches, we must consider what was lost when collapsing ethnicities into regions of the American continent. For instance, participants' perspectives could have been unintentionally erased or homogenized to include ethnic groups with lower representation. This limitation is especially relevant to the North American group where most participants are of Mexican origin and only two participants identify as Native American.

Additionally, the instrument employed in this research was administered for the first time in this study. Thus, survey reliability remains unassessed until further iterations of this research. Lastly, the epistemological grounding of the NS in the Black-White racial paradigm presents another limitation. Precisely, future research must problematize the Black-White binary more extensively to understand how this paradigm perpetuates the erasure of mixed-race populations, including Afro-Latinxs who do not clearly fall within Black and White racial categories and how the dichotomy inherent to the Black-White binary obscures the agency and resistance of racially minoritized communities.

Conclusion

Our results demonstrate a consistent negative perception of the sociopolitical context of the NS among Latinxs in our study. Further, the sociopolitical context of the NS manifests in participants' understandings of social justice and equity through positive, disparaging, and mixed sentiments. Lastly, our results demonstrate the need to further explore the role of higher education institutions in empowering students to engage with and expand their curricular and co-curricular understanding of social justice and equity and to consider the heterogeneity present within the Latinx community when designing programming and curricula.

Code Availability The coding related to these data are not publicly available and were not generated using coding software.

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