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Understanding Civic Engagement through the Perspective and Experiences of Mixed-Status Latinx Students in Higher Education

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Understanding Civic Engagement through the Perspectives and Experience of Mixed-Status Latinx Students in Higher Education

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Introduction

Civic engagement promotes a community's quality of life through political and non-political processes(1). Civic engagement can range from political behaviors, such as voting and political activism, to community-based civic engagement, such as volunteering. Studies have shown that concerns around a particular social issue often motivate a participant's civic engagement(2). Awareness and interactions with structural inequities may provide college students with unique frameworks, ideas, and leverage points in pushing for social change both within and outside traditional forms of civic participation(3).

Research Goal

This project aimed to analyze the participants' perspectives to examine the extent of their civic engagement and related motivators. I hypothesized that the participants would be more likely to engage civically due to their experiences with their undocumented parents.

Methods

The methodology of this project will have a qualitative focus. My project investigates the perspectives and experiences of college-aged Latinx students from mixed-status families in relation to their understanding of and participation in civic engagement. I conducted eight oral history interviews to understand what motivates a person to participate civically. I found similar themes in the participants' retelling of their experiences and viewpoints.

A strength of my methodology was that the interviews were structured similarly and provided firsthand accounts of unique perspectives and personal experiences.

A limitation of my methodology was that participants could not always recall specific dates, places, or times. I also did not systematically code for themes and waited until after re-listening to the interviews to identify similar themes.

Figures and Results

I found that there is a spectrum of engagement. Participants shared that work responsibilities and family obligations made it difficult to participate civically, but student organizations actively encouraged them to become involved in advocacy or community-engaged activities.

Participants' Definitions of Civic Engagement

- Fiona: "It means to show your own voice, to protest, to boycott, and to not stay silent."
- Nicky: "I would define it as advocating and trying to promote a change to different laws and regulations."
- Marisol: "Standing up for what you believe in."
- James: "Community involvement. Feeling passionate and getting your ideas across to people about a certain issue."
- Laura: "Interacting with our governing process… there’s this one slogan that this organization that I volunteer with it’s like ‘not for the fewer, for the many.’"

The table above describes the eight participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants' Pseudonym</th>
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Participants' definitions of "civic engagement".

I found an evolving spectrum of participation among the participants. Future works should continue to examine families and social ties rather than only targeting individuals' perspectives to understand the importance of active civic engagement in a community.

Conclusion

Undocumented students and allies advocating for change on their campus for DREAM Action NIU’s 11th Annual Coming Out of the Shadows.

I found an evolving spectrum of participation among the participants. Future works should continue to examine families and social ties rather than only targeting individuals' perspectives to understand the importance of active civic engagement in a community.

Acknowledgments

This project would not be possible without the guidance of Dr. Christina Abreu and the Center for Latino and Latin American Studies' NIU Latinx Oral History Project. Special thanks go to all eight of the interview participants who shared their stories.

References