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Northern Illinois University Student Government Association:  
How Currently Involved Undergraduate Latino Students Engage, Understand, and Interact with  
the Student Government Association

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore the varying experiences of involved Northern Illinois University Undergraduate Latino students and their engagement with their Student Government Association. This study attempts to analyze the research question, to what extent are involved undergraduate Latino students aware of the Student Government Association (SGA), and what is their past and current level of engagement with the organization? The goal is to analyze the current levels of understanding and engagement, understand breakthroughs in marketing, determine areas of opportunities and threats to involvement, and to determine the best course of action for future administrations to provide better outreach and engagement. Through the usage of a simple survey and two focus groups of five students, the findings indicate personal relationships and personalized engagement are encouraging factors in the studied students understanding, engagement, and interactions with the SGA, whereas lack of diversity, knowledge, and flexible schedules serve as blockades for further progress.

## **Introduction**

The Student Government Association (SGA) is the most influential student lead organization, making up part of the shared governance model with the Northern Illinois University administration. With over 80 seats on university council, six internal committees with varying impacts, and nearly 50 positions with the organization, representation and engagement with the Latino community is staggeringly low.

As part of the shared governance model, the SGA strives to serve as the bridge between students and the University. In the past decade despite Latino share of Undergraduate students growing to nearly one in five, representation within the organization has yet to pass 10%. Currently at an all-time low of 6% of the SGA coming from Latino decent, the organization struggles to be the voice of student concerns and to motivate the general student body to be active leaders on campus through the cultivation of learning and experiences that extend beyond the classroom.

With a budget of over one million dollars, the SGA has means of funding many initiatives that can benefit the Latino community. With organizations on campus such as De Mujer a Mujer, that focuses on the betterment of Latina womxn and DREAM Action NIU, which serves as an advocacy organization for undocumented people, the Student Government Association has abilities to fund these organizations directly through annual budgets, as well as through supplemental and executive allocations for events, campus initiatives, conferences, advocacy trips, and overall Latino experience advancement. With higher amounts of representation in all parts of the student government, the communication gap, in which many of these organizations do not reach out beyond annual budgets, can lower and the Student

Government Association may begin to support Latino students financially more than it currently does.

Given the long-standing cooperative and collaborative relationship between university administration and Student Government representatives, the organization can also begin to support Latino students more in terms of advocacy. Very often, the administration attends meetings and works closely with student officials. Being informed on the differing issues facing the community from mental health to academic policies, to employment opportunities, the SGA, with a proper amount of Latino involvement, can accurately address intimate issues that allies are inherently unable to. Generational issues and personal issues such as facing institutional racism or micro-aggressions, can be topics that the average student may be uncomfortable bring forth. Having members in both the Executive and Legislative branch that come from similar backgrounds or similar experiences opens the door for meaningful interactions and change.

With a lack of representation, the organization will naturally fall short of properly advocating for the needs of all students. Analyzing and understanding the current state of the engagement, awareness, and interaction of involved Undergraduate Latino students is crucial to the long-term ability of the SGA to recruit, represent, and retain one fifth of its shared constituencies. This study hopes to answer the research question, to what extent are involved undergraduate Latino students aware of the Student Government Association, and what is their past and current level of engagement with the organization?

## **Literature Review**

The Student Government Association of Northern Illinois University has a purpose of using its position as a key component in the University's system of shared governance model to serve as the voice of the student body and motivate each individual to be active leaders on campus through the cultivation of an environment of learning and experiences that extend beyond the classroom. Representing a student body of about twenty-thousand students, the SGA oversees the college experience of a diverse campus. Though over the past decade, the share of all undergraduate students being of Latino descent has nearly doubled to twenty percent, representation within the SGA has lagged (*NIU at a Glance*). Given the unique ability to providing impactful resources, affect University policies, and aiding each individual in the community, having proper representation by the Latino community is fundamental for the organization to fully actualize its purpose and mission. Latino students, for the purpose of the study, are all those who have at least one parent who has descendants from Latin-America. To understand the awareness and engagement of the Latino community with the SGA, one must first look at the existing research on the affects and associations by the Latino involvement in higher education.

### **Factors in Latino Involvement on College Campuses**

Given the lack of research into the direct awareness and involvement of Latino students with Student Government, specifically at this University, it is important to analyze what factors play large role in organizational involvement.

Given the unique relationship with many Latino community members and immigration, research conducted by Peguero on immigrant youth involvement in extracurriculars, found that

Latino students (first through third generation) are less likely to be involved in school-based involvement such as Student Government (Peguero, 2011). This shows that Student Government is not an area in which many Latino students, specifically Latino students with immigrant backgrounds, find themselves. This research is further supported by the work of Berger and Milem, who found that students who were least similar to the dominant peer group on campus, are least likely to persist in terms of engagement and retention (Berger and Milem, 1999). Lastly, in their research on student engagement, peer social capital and school dropouts of Mexican American students, they found that lack of engagement approaches that incorporates opportunities for social capital, school-oriented networking, and resource-rich opportunities has left engagement stagnated (Ream and Rumberger, 2008). Applying these findings prove that Latino students are one of the largest communities that struggles with involvement and persistence overall on campus. Though these findings characterize a pattern of lack of engagement, other studies have shown that this is due more to a plethora of factors rather than just simply not engaging by straightforward choices.

Looking at what are the different involvement levels among Latino students in the college level, Diaz and Flores-González found that economic affluence and geographic location of the Latino students played a large role in their engagement. Further, they also identified that groups focused on friendship and peer community building saw much more noticeable and impactful Latino involvement (Diaz, 2005; Flores-González, 2000) Understanding historical barriers to the community in terms of involvement and areas of growth narrates the need, by governmental organizations, to incorporate the methodology of groups that turn out the community.

Considering the long term cultural and social hesitancies of many in the Latino community in terms of engagement, findings from Hurtado and Carter additionally suggest that involvement by Latino college students, in particular social community organizations, had a much more positive sense of belonging on campus, in comparison with other active students (Hurtado and Carter, 1997). Thus, these findings suggest that part of the lack of engagement is due to a lack of connection to the campus, and the solution is founded within simply doing just that. Therefore, the mechanics to solving this issue is seemingly apparent in the pure involvement and marketing aspect of turning out the community.

A last and important understanding to the factors relating to Latino engagement is the ways of outreach. When attempting to engage the Latino community, governance at all levels has struggled at properly gaging the efforts by the governing bodies. Research by conducted in Utah by de Lancer Julnes suggests that one of the larger factors contributing to the lack of Latino participation with governance is outreach methodology. Reliance on pure method ologies that solely provides information or simple surveys was found to be detrimental to engagement. De Lancer Julnes suggests that outreach that incorporates participatory decision making, and collaborative discussions were much more effective. Further, she found that the most notable barriers to engagement were distrust of the government, internal factions within the community, time limitations, language, and cultural/educational differences (de Lancer Julnes, 2011). De Lancer Julnes' findings help characterize a long-standing cultural challenge in getting the Latino community to engage with governance.

In sum, there are a large variety of intersectional issues at play when analyzing the lack of participation of Latino students. These issues include geographical, lack of proper outreach, a lack of sense of community, and historical traumas that limit much participation. Understanding



these factors will help better the understanding of how to use the benefits of participation, outlined below, to properly encourage involvement on campus.

### **Effects of Involvement in College on Latino Students**

Involvement within outside organizations plays an important role in the success of minority students and addressing the community's needs. Talbert's analysis of strategies to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of minority students highlight one important contribution this involvement plays. Providing special attention to minority populations, first generation students and new attendees, Talbert finds that involvement in community-based organizations seeking change is mutually beneficial for the institutions as well as the students. The involvement plays an important role in creating institutions and structures that are more socially aware of what the community needs, what issue it is facing, and building interconnected relationships that in turn advance the learning experience and growth of all students (Talbert, 2012). The research brought forth by Talbert highlights that Latino involvement within organizations are based on the betterment of institutions and community provide a unique benefit to Latino students and the organizations dedicated to the welfare of all. In this way, there exists an important connection between the involvement in community welfare organizations and the betterment of all students, specifically Latino ones.

When understanding retention, social building, and academic performance, the research done by Fischer concluded that the satisfaction of Latino students with their college experience, factors leading to higher GPAs, and probability of not transferring were all positively related to those students' involvement within organizations (Fischer, 2007). This benefit of involvement is

also found in the work done by Peguero, Ovink, and Ling Li. Focusing on social bonding to school, educational inequality and the importance of finding place and the decision to drop out, the researchers discovered that social ties through organizations are one main facet of lowering the dropout gap between Latino students and their white counterparts (Peguero et al., 2016). One important facet of this research was that the correlation is strongest in rural college communities and weakened with proximity to more urban centers. This is most telling given the involvement serving as a near sole source of building community in typically whiter and more rural areas.

In general, an important part of involvement on campus begins within the first year. The first year plays an influential role in the long-term success of a student on campus. Researchers Fosnacht, McCormick, and Lerma, in their research into the time usage of first years, concluded that members of involvement classes consistently showed more engagement with other beneficial activities across a wide variety of domains, and showed significantly increased educational experiences (Fosnacht, et. Al, 2018). This study, though not speaking enough on the varying experiences that come in to play with different identities, goes to show the correlation between involvement in outside organizations and overall success of the individual. This study therefore makes an important distinction in which Latino students stand to benefit greatly from the overall involvement in outside organizations.

Though there exist many assessments in Latino students and engagement in college extra-curriculars, there is not any specifically on engagement with Student Governments of the same size and similar demographics. The Latino community serves an important role within the student body and both the community, and the larger university stands to gain a lot from proper representation and involvement within the highest student lead organization on campus.

## **Methodology**

In this study, I examined what is currently involved Undergraduate Latino students' awareness of the Student Government Association, its functions, and current or past engagement throughout their experience.

Over the course of the past decade diversity at Northern Illinois University has continued to grow. In 2010 Hispanic, including Latino, Undergraduate students made up 9.5% of all students on Northern Illinois University's campus. Five years later, that percentage rose to 15.5% of all students. In the first year of 2021, the University has seen again an increase to 19.21% of all undergraduates coming from Latino backgrounds. This rise, of the course of just over 10 years, accounts to an increase of over 70% in sheer number. Within 10 Directorships, 30 Senator Seats, and 5 Executive positions, there are only 3 members of Latino descent currently holding office.

Given the relationship between those involved in one organization and receptiveness to becoming part of a second, the population being studied will be defined as follows:

Undergraduate students of Latino descent at Northern Illinois University that are currently holding membership in at least one organization. Membership and involvement will not be an evaluated factor but will solely be a qualifying factor.

The desired information to suffice the research question will be as follows: what percent of involved Undergraduate Latino students are aware of the Student Government Association? What percent of involved Undergraduate Latino students know the purpose of the Student Government Association? What percent of involved Undergraduate Latino students have engaged with the Student Government Association, and if so in what capacity? What are the

most common factors encouraging engagement? What are those most common deterrents discouraging engagement?

Given that both the defined population of study and sought out information are empirical percentages, a quantitative survey of the studied population was one of the means of analysis. Using existing data provided from the Student Affairs department of the University that contains the contact list of all organizations Presidents and Vice Presidents of organizations and affiliations, the population sought was accessible.

The questions listed in the surveys were distributed as follows:

1. Do you know what the Student Government Association is? (Yes/No)
2. If you do know what the Student Government Association is, how did you find out about the organization? If unknown, please indicate so.
3. Have you ever been a member of the Student Government Association? (Yes/No)
4. To your understanding, what is the purpose of the Student Government Association? If unknown, please indicate so.
5. Have you ever engaged with the Student Government Association? (Yes/No)
6. If you have engaged with the Student Government Association, in what capacity did you engage with the Student Government Association? (Drop down with the following selections: social media, events hosted by the Student Government Association, Tabling's hosted by the Student Government Association, Flyers, Personnel Connections with Current or Former Members, Other (please state))
7. What are some contributions the Student Government Association makes to your organizations and you personally?

8. What are factors that could encourage you to be a part of the Student Government Association?
9. What are factors that potentially discourage you from being a part of the Student Government Association?

The simple survey was gathered electronically through a questionnaire that was presented, in person, to all members at Latino based organization meetings as well as through email to all eboard members of said organizations. Through the previously mentioned contact list, I will connect individually with members of the organizations, of Latino descent, that were not present at the time of distribution. Additionally, the QR code was distributed at all new member reveals and premier events of the Multi-Cultural Greek Council during the two-week distribution time period.

Collection was done electronically through Qualtrics, and the data was amassed and analyzed. Due to the limiting of available responses, percentages was easily reduced to find the desired information. The primary data, or response numbers for each of the questions, was then converted to percentages through division against the total number of involved Undergraduate Latino students who responded to the questionnaire. While questionnaires were distributed, respondents were also asked if they were interested in further participating in the study, those who indicated that they were, were asked to be a part of the second data collection method. The ideal sample size for the survey is 70-100 qualified students. This range was determined through the ideal sample size calculator found on Qualtrics on the basis of overall number of qualified students for the study of the University.

In order to characterize the experiences of involved Latino undergraduate students with the Student Government Association, two focus group sessions of five students each were held on

April 21st, 2022, at 4:00PM-4:30PM and 4:30PM-5PM. The five qualified students at each session were asked the following questions to have an open discussion on their experiences and understandings of the Student Government Association:

1. What is your understanding of what SGA does and how it serves students?
2. What are some of the ways in which the Student Government Association can help the Latino community as a whole?
3. Have you ever considered being a part of the Student Government Association? If yes, can you speak to some of the reasons why?
4. What are some hesitations for why you would not join the Student Government Association?
5. What are some better ways the Student Government Association can do to connect, represent, and engage with you?
6. From what you know and have seen in the past years how would you evaluate the work we're doing?
7. What is something that SGA can do better day to day? What about in terms of advocacy or issues?

Collection was done manually through note taking and anonymity was provided for those a part of the focus group to ensure confidence in the results of the survey. As a result, the participants were referred to as participant one-ten. The common themes discussed were analyzed in order to understand qualitative data.

Both the empirical and qualitative data were then assembled to determine patterns, eliminate outliers, and consolidate the findings to reveal larger understandings of the population being studied.

## Results

### Qualtrics Survey Results

The study reached the goal of the ideal sample size, reaching 81 responses over the two-week distribution time. In terms of determining what percent of involved Undergraduate Latino students are aware of the SGA, this survey found that 78% of respondents indicated that they knew of the SGA. Question five, which asks for the purpose of the SGA, showed that the vast majority (88%) of respondents who knew of the SGA, could correctly identify one of the purposes of the organization. Despite this high level of awareness of presence and purpose, participation within the organization was low. Reflecting the findings by Peguero, which found Latino students are less likely to be a part of organizations surrounding governance, of the 81 respondents, only 6% had previous or current involvement within the SGA (Peguero, 2011). Despite this finding, however, the survey showed promising results that even with this low direct involvement within the organization, the findings by Berger and Milem, that students who are least like the dominant peer group (Latino students) are least likely to have higher rates of engagement, are not reflected of the Latino community on the NIU campus (Berger and Milem, 1999). Of the respondents to question six, on whether respondents have engaged with the SGA, 56% responded that they had engaged in some capacity with the organization. This study has shown similarly that a variety of factors of marketing have led to high engagement levels. Of the respondents to question seven, which gages in what capacity where respondents who have engaged with the SGA have typically engaged, 32% of respondents engaged through personal connections to members of the organization, 23% through social media, 18% and 19% through events and tabling's respectively, and 6% through flyers. Combined with question three, which evaluated first engagements found that 51% of respondents first engagements came through

personal connections or connections with members within the SGA, the results from the survey show the important role personal connection and individualized discussions played in first engagements and all engagements to follow with the studied population. This overall net positive engagement by those within the studied population suggests that involved students of the population are interacting with the SGA but the disconnect becomes apparent when examining the factors in determining whether or not to join. The disconnect can be seen through the results of questions nine and ten which evaluated factors that encourage and discourage participation. Of the respondents of question nine, 24% suggested that diversity alone would encourage them to join SGA, another 24% suggested that learning more about the organization would encourage them, and 10% suggested flexibility with times and workloads as an encouraging factor.

Alongside the smaller more solitary yet less mentioned factors, such as leadership opportunities, seeing more presence at events etc., these factors are also reflected in what is discouraging to joining. Of the respondents of question ten, 29% of respondents indicated time restraints and meetings on weekends as a discouraging factor and 24% of respondents again responded that lack of diversity is an inhibiting factor. Among the other less categorical responses such as professionalism, lack of presence on campus, and making larger decisions, this finding indicates the two largest inhibitions to participation beyond engagement by the population of study.

The survey's findings suggest that NIU's involved undergraduate Latino community is much more active and more engaged and aware than previously thought. Despite the lack of representation currently, the respondents within the sample size have shown a larger understanding of the SGA and its purpose. The high percentage of awareness of the studied population suggests that the disconnect is more so due to controllable factors in engagement, messaging, marketing, and addressing the factors that discourage engagement. Addressing



concerns of time commitment, educating the student body more about the organization, shifting away from weekend meetings, and prioritizing diverse recruitment are the most feasible actions steps the SGA may take to address the results of the survey.

### **Focus Group Sessions**

The two focus group sessions were very successful in building open and clear discussions on experiences and engagements with the SGA. Though participants one through ten were able to highlight various benefits and contributions the SGA plays to the Latino community and NIU community as a whole, such as funding and representation, the conversations about this never reached past surface levels. The understanding of larger functions of the SGA, were very surface level and when asked to expand more on benefits to the Latino community, only participant eight was able to identify impacts beyond funding to organizations or advocacy. In this way, the conversation was short but seems to suggest that the understanding as a whole of the SGA is a minimal understanding. When asked to expand on hesitations or past considerations to join, the same suggestions from the survey resurfaced. Participants two, four, and ten's immediate response was the lack of diversity made them feel not only discouraged to join but also, according to participant one and six, made them feel inadequate and intimidated. Participant six additionally said that to their knowledge one organization has over representation that makes them worried that "minority voices would be quieted." Though not being a main factor in encouraging participation in the survey, one important point of discussion was the presence of SGA members at various Latino organization events. Participants one, three, five and nine suggested that participation at notable events such as Latin Chills, an annual event at the Latino Resource Center that celebrates Latino unity and cultural expression, new member reveals for Latino Greek organizations, and philanthropy events would facilitate a relationship of

understanding and respect, helping comfort students toward engagement. Though all students, as previously said, knew of the SGA, participants one, four, five, and six indicated that their awareness and limited understandings were as of recent. Around the time of elections and election outreach by the SGA, these participants first times engaging with the SGA. In terms of outreach and success, most participants said this year's election was the most effective the SGA has been in outreaching to the Latino community. Referencing emails, attendance at events, word of mouth, and presentations, the participants in both sessions agreed that personalized engagement was the most effective in spurring Latino involvement.

The focus group sessions highlight the important factor of diversity in the lack of participation by the studied population. Further, the focus group sessions suggested that personalized outreach and engagement in events by the SGA sets the foundation for long-term collaboration and thus representation within the SGA. In these ways, the focus group results suggest that the SGA prioritize personalized outreach such as collaborative events, participation at organization events, and honest and open dialogue to recruit newer and diverse members from this population, paving the way for long-term proper representation within the organization.

### **Limitations**

There was unfortunate, yet unavoidable, limitations in the study. Most notably was my personal relationship with the population of study. As the Deputy Speaker of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Session of the SGA Senate, Chairman of the Board of Elections, and a member of Sigma Nu fraternity, many of the attempts of engagement and outreach made in these organizations the past year have been by me. Through attendance at Latin events, new member reveals, philanthropies, etc. I have built a personal rapport with the vast majority of Latin-based organizations on campus. Though I may not have a personal relationship with each individual, the work I have done to bridge the

gap between the Latino community and the SGA is very well known. Thus, a limitation of the study was the name recognition with both the survey administration as well as in the focus group. This could have created a culture of positivity around the study making those less likely to report negative answers.

A second limitation of the study was the under input by men within the studied population. Of the three men who participated within the focus group, only one gave regular contributions to the conversation. The other two did not make comments at all or barely at all. Combining this with the fact that the majority of Latin-based organizations were predominately female, the data is likely to be skewed slightly on this basis.

A final limitation in this study was the time constraint on the focus group sessions. 30 minutes, including the time to go over the structure of the focus group as well as obtaining consent, left too little time to get all opinions of each participant fully developed and examined. In this way, the time limitation restricted more data collection that would be helpful for the more long-term and underlying issues.

### **Conclusion**

The Student Government Association has an important responsibility to the student body of Northern Illinois University to strive to represent the interests of all people. The results of this study highlights that to a large extent, despite a historical failure on the side of the SGA, the majority of undergraduate involved Latino students at Northern Illinois University understand and engage with the Student Government Association. Through the usage of a simple survey as well as two focus groups, this study suggests diversity, personalized and informational outreach methodology, as well as flexibility in time schedules are the most influential factors for

considerations to join. The applied methodology also suggests that lack of diversity, lack of presence on campus, and failures to communicate with the community are the factors inhibiting progress. A further study that seeks to solidify a singly most effective outreach method in recruitment of the involved undergraduate Latino community would be extremely helpful in further strengthening this study and providing future focuses for the Student Government Association to do, to uphold its responsibility to the student body.

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