

BUILDING COMUNIDAD: THE IMPACT OF THE CENTER FOR
MULTICULTURAL ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE ON LATINE/X
STUDENT SUPPORT AND BELONGING AT UO

by

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This thesis investigates the experiences of Latine/x students at the University of Oregon (UO), a predominantly white institution (PWI) aspiring toward Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) status.

Using a mixed-methods approach—comprising informational interviews with administrative staff, a student focus group, and a literature review—this research explores how institutional structures, student support services, and cultural identity intersect to shape Latine/x student experience. Informational interviews with CMAE leadership informed the development of a focus group with ten Latine/x students who have engaged with CMAE resources. Drawing on theories of racialization, shadow work, and community cultural wealth, the analysis critically examines both the structural barriers and cultural assets influencing Latine/x student retention and belonging. Key findings highlight the performativity of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, the importance of culturally responsive advising, and the power of identity-based spaces as sites of joyful resistance and collective resilience. Ultimately, this thesis argues that becoming a truly Latinx-Enhancing institution requires transformative shifts in institutional culture, leadership, and accountability, moving beyond demographic benchmarks to genuinely center Latine/x student needs and knowledge systems.

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to center Latine/x and Hispanic student voices at the University of Oregon (UO), particularly within the context of a predominantly white institution (PWI). Through a focus group with Latine/x and Hispanic students and interviews with staff from the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE), this project explores how CMAE may shape and support their experiences on campus.

This focus is deeply personal to me as a first-generation college student who identifies as both Latine and Hispanic. I wanted to create space for Latine/x students on campus to feel seen, heard, and valued—to remind them that they are not alone. This thesis aims to amplify their voices and connect their lived experiences to broader literature on Latine/x student success at PWIs and emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) across the United States.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the current political climate. Amid rising racism, hate crimes, and anti-immigrant rhetoric—particularly during and after the Trump administration—Latine/x and Hispanic communities face heightened vulnerability. At the same time, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are under direct attack. Conservative politicians and policymakers falsely frame DEI as "radical" or "exclusionary" toward white students, rather than what it truly is: an effort to rectify systemic inequities. This backlash has led to anti-DEI legislation like H.R. 1282, which would prohibit federal funding for universities with DEI programs—a direct threat to resources like CMAE (Text, H.R. 1282). Similar bills have already dismantled initiatives in states like Florida and Texas, stripping support from students of color under the guise of "neutrality." These actions sever the pathways to inclusive education and institutional accountability.

Later in this thesis, I offer recommendations with the hope that the broader dismantling of DEI efforts will not undermine CMAE's impact on Latine/x students. While the future seems uncertain, my hope remains that the University of Oregon will fight to sustain CMAE—because for many, this program is not just a resource but a lifeline.

To guide this inquiry, I pose the following research questions:

- **How do Latine/x students experience the CMAE? Specifically, how effective do they think it is in meeting their academic, social and cultural support needs?**
- **To what extent does CMAE foster cultural and community wealth, and contribute to student's retention, success, and sense of belonging?**

Key Terms

In this project, I use the term *Latine/x* as an identity label rather than *Latino* or *Hispanic*. While these terms are often used interchangeably, it's important to recognize that race and ethnicity are not the same. Growing up, I identified as being of Mexican and Guatemalan descent. Yet, filling out demographic forms that asked whether I was "Hispanic/Latino" and then prompted me to select a race from limited options like "White," "Black," or "Native American/Alaskan Native" was confusing and alienating. I often selected "White" alongside "Hispanic/Latino origin," even though that combination didn't reflect my lived experience. Each time, I felt a disconnect between these imposed categories and *mi cultura*, my background, and ultimately, myself.

Latine/x provides a more inclusive framework for those within Latinx communities who don't align with CIS heteronormative or binary gender identities. While "Latino" has been the dominant term, it doesn't equitably represent the diversity within our communities. *Latine/x* brings us closer to linguistic inclusion—rooted in the romance languages from which Spanish is derived—while resisting patriarchal naming conventions.

I use the slash in *Latine/x* to acknowledge both *Latinx*—a term commonly used at the University of Oregon—and *Latine*, which I personally prefer. *Latine* aligns more naturally with Spanish grammar and pronunciation and pushes back against U.S.-centric, gendered, and heteronormative frameworks. By including both forms, I aim to honor the diversity of voices in our community while signaling a shift toward more culturally grounded and inclusive language.

This understanding was deepened through my coursework, particularly in CHC 421: *Latine Testimonios*. In that class, I developed a project titled *Why It's Important to Have Latinx*

Stories at UO, where I first articulated my reasoning for using *Latine/x* and critiqued pan-ethnic labels like “Hispanic.”

Ultimately, I choose *Latine/x* as a term that bridges cultures and reflects the multiplicity within our communities. As a first-generation Guatemalan and Mexican college student, this choice is both personal and political—deeply tied to my identity and to the values I carry into this thesis.

Methodology

This project uses three research methods: informational interviews, a student focus group, and secondary literature analysis. The informational interviews and the student focus group were completed by going through the IRB Exempt Process. Specifically, this study has been reviewed under the 2018 Common Rule and determined to qualify for exemption under Title 45 CFR 46.104(d) ((2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk)).

Reasons behind why I conducted a focus group for this thesis project are that the only way to hear student voices is by holding a space for students to share their experience and opinions over the CMAE in a specific time frame. This time frame allowed me to prepare and fully develop a good plan of what I wanted the students to share rather than opening up a survey that may not be fully thought through or further explained without a follow-up interview. It all came down to time frame, and I had a limited timelines so having a focus group allowed me to collect information in order to complete my thesis.

Informational Interviews:

I first conducted two interviews with administrative staff at the University of Oregon's Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE):

- Rosa Chavez, Director of CMAE
- Ixchel Verdugo, Latine/x Student Retention Specialist

These interviews provided insight into CMAE's services and informed the development of focus group questions. Their perspectives helped ensure that the questions invited thoughtful,

experience-based responses from student participants. Both of the interviewees were okay with using their names and quoting them, so throughout my thesis I try to include their perspectives often.

Focus Group:

The second method was a focus group involving ten Latine/x undergraduate students who had accessed CMAE resources. Participants were recruited through a promotional flyer (included in the appendix) and were incentivized with a gift card to Panda Express. The session lasted approximately two hours and covered six categories of questions.

1. Introduction
2. Transition
3. Advising Frequency
4. Resources
5. Space/Comfortability
6. End/Conclusion

While the group was predominantly composed of female-identifying students (with only one male-identifying participant), I made a conscious effort to ensure all voices were heard and valued equally. While completing the IRB Exempt process I created consent forms for both the interviews and the focus group to determine if they'd like for me to use their names and if they agree to being audio recorded. For the students who decided for me to not use their name in my thesis project, I decided to not use their names as often and prioritized the individuals who allowed me to list their name. When I did list a quote from a student who did not want to be quoted, I differentiated them by their major. Importantly, the audio recordings from the focus

group were transcribed and analyzed to identify key themes and insights, which form the foundation of my findings and conclusions.

This method draws on guidance from Booth et al. (2008) and Hollander (2004). Booth et al. emphasize the importance of crafting focused, researchable questions that move beyond data collection to address deeper, meaningful problems. Hollander contributes a critical perspective on focus group methodology, noting that the knowledge generated in such settings is co-constructed through shared experiences, collective trauma, and identity. Her work frames the focus group not only as a tool for data collection, but also as a space of relational meaning-making and resistance.

Secondary Literature:

The third method involves analyzing secondary sources—including academic journals, dissertations, and books—to understand existing scholarship on barriers faced by Latine/x students in higher education. This literature provides context for my primary research and supports the development of institutional recommendation.

Literature Review

Introduction: Power and Possibility in Higher Education

Power dynamics fundamentally shape who has access to and who succeeds within higher education. For students from marginalized communities—particularly those who identify as Hispanic or Latine/x—these dynamics often manifest as institutionalized barriers that obstruct academic success. Michel Foucault (1982) famously argued that power is not something one possesses but a set of relationships enacted across society. Within higher education, these power relations determine whose knowledge is legitimized, whose voices are amplified, and whose presence is marginalized.

This literature review explores how these dynamics play out within predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and how institutional structures—like the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE) at the University of Oregon—either reproduce or resist these dynamics. In particular, it investigates how spaces like CMAE can foster cultural wealth, community, and retention for Latine/x students. Concepts such as shadow work, racialization, and community cultural wealth provide a critical lens to examine both structural harm and student resistance within higher education.

Critiquing DEI: Performative Promises vs. Transformative Possibilities

Although Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are often promoted as institutional solutions to inequality, critical scholarship reveals that they frequently fall short of transformative change. Rather than dismantling white-dominant systems, DEI efforts can adjust and reproduce them. As Arellano et al. (2021) argue, DEI policies are frequently performative

and leave BIPOC faculty and staff unsupported while tasking them with the emotional labor of student advocacy.

The journal article driving this discussion highlights how DEI failures manifest in work environments: the lack of tenure opportunities for BIPOC faculty, pervasive microaggressions, and the expectation that “*diversity must be earned*” (Arellano et al., 2021, p. 10). Further, it critiques the phenomenon of “*shadow work*”—uncompensated labor that faculty, particularly faculty of color, undertake as acts of care without institutional recognition. As the authors note:

“Shadow work amounts to an act of care with no certainty of what it might yield, no promise that it will fix that which is broken, and no guarantee of how it will be valued for tenure and/or promotion. Shadow work happens despite DEI—not because of it” (Arellano et al., 2021, p. 2).

This labor should not be necessary; instead, institutions should address the systemic issues that create such burdens. Shadow work often stems from faculty members’ desire to build community, especially in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) like the University of Oregon (UO). Yet, no substantive institutional effort is made to rectify the problem. Instead, faculty—particularly those supporting Latine/x students—perform this labor voluntarily, without formal acknowledgment or compensation (Arellano et al., 2021, p. 13).

Compounding these challenges, the national political climate has grown increasingly hostile toward DEI, with policies like the Trump administration’s rollbacks further destabilizing already-precarious efforts. Even at seemingly progressive institutions like UO, centers such as the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE) may face pressure to depoliticize or reduce their scope. These dynamics underscore the need to interrogate DEI not as a definitive

solution, but as a contested space where equity is continually negotiated—and where performative gestures often eclipse substantive change.

Reimagining HSI Identity and Institutional Culture

Federal designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) is based on enrolling at least 25% Hispanic full-time undergraduate students (Espino-Perez & McDonald, 2021). While this metric opens pathways to federal Title V funding, simply reaching enrollment thresholds does not equate to meaningful institutional transformation. Aguilar-Smith and Yun (2023) emphasize that although many HSIs apply for Title V grants, the majority receive limited or no funding, raising questions about equity in allocation and institutional commitment.

Gina Ann Garcia (2019) offers a more expansive framework through her Latinx-Enhancing typology, which urges institutions not only to enroll Latine/x students but also to **serve** and **transform**. Her model—spanning Latinx-Enrolling, Latinx-Producing, Latinx-Serving, and Latinx-Enhancing institutions—challenges universities to embed cultural responsiveness, decolonial approaches, and student-centered practices into their operations. Garcia argues that institutions like UO must move beyond demographic benchmarks and toward genuine transformation of structures and culture. This includes challenging whiteness in institutional norms, hiring practices, and curriculum.

While HSI designation is often reduced to a demographic threshold, critical scholars argue that truly becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution requires deep structural change and a commitment to Latine/x student success (Garcia, 2019). The University of Oregon's HSI Report, authored by faculty members including Laura Pulido, Rosa Chavez-Jacuinde, Jesse Nelson, Gabriela Perez Baez, Lucas Silva, and Lynn Stephen, reflects this more transformative vision. Rather than leaving interpretation of the data to top administrators, the report adopts a guided,

research-driven approach to synthesize demographic data, institutional statistics, and scholarly sources to emphasize the urgency of addressing racial inequities and underrepresentation of Latine/x students on campus.

Unlike generic DEI statements, the report foregrounds the structural barriers Latine/x students face, such as inequities in enrollment, retention, and representation in certain majors. It also identifies the institutional shifts needed to become not only Latinx-enrolling but Latinx-serving and -enhancing. Drawing from peer-reviewed literature and national best practices, the report outlines strategic recommendations rooted in equity and sustainability. These include forming an HSI Implementation Team with clearly defined goals and compensation for its members; refining data collection, outreach, and retention strategies; and investing in Latine/x faculty, staff, and administrators (Pulido et al., 2023, p. 25).

Importantly, the report positions HSI status not just as a funding opportunity but as a moral and demographic imperative. As Oregon's Latine/x population grows, the failure to adapt institutional structures and resources is both inequitable and unsustainable. Pulido and colleagues emphasize that meaningful transformation requires long-term commitment—not just temporary programs, but enduring shifts in institutional culture, leadership, and funding priorities. Their call for building a Latinx Cultural Center and ensuring Latine/x representation in decision-making roles speaks directly to Garcia's (2019) Latinx-Enhancing framework. In a predominantly white institution like UO, the report models how faculty-led, data-informed advocacy can challenge institutional inaction and create a pathway toward genuine inclusion and transformation.

Microaggressions and Navigating Whiteness

Bonilla's (2022) research highlights the racialized harm that Latine/x students face through microaggressions, particularly in classroom settings. While 63% of participants reported

experiencing these incidents, only one could name them explicitly revealing how normalized and internalized such behaviors have become (p. 102). Bonilla categorizes these microaggressions as tokenizing, name-calling, or based on assumptions about English language proficiency.

Importantly, she distinguishes between microaggressions initiated by faculty versus those by peers. Faculty, in particular, play a pivotal role; they can either affirm Latine/x students' identities or reinforce harm through silence or participation. This distinction underscores how institutions reproduce whiteness—not only through who is teaching but also through whose knowledge and lived experiences are legitimized in academic spaces.

Similarly, Burkham (2019), in *The Geography of Underrepresentation: Latino Student Success and Absence at a Predominantly White Public University*, highlights how Latine/x underrepresentation is often framed through socioeconomic and legal lenses, while cultural barriers remain underexplored. He notes, “while most scholars have approached the issue of low educational attainment for Latino students as a socioeconomic and legal problem, others have pointed to cultural obstacles” (p. 6). These cultural obstacles are often shaped by dominant racial discourses that dehumanize and “Other” Latine/x individuals. Leo Chavez’s (2013) concept of the Latino threat narrative captures this dynamic. Narratives about criminality, linguistic assimilation, and demographic threat frame Latine/x populations as inherently foreign, excessive, or dangerous. These associations—rooted in white supremacy—undermine Latine/x students’ sense of safety, belonging, and legitimacy within higher education.

To understand the broader implications of these discourses, the concept of racialization is key. Omi and Winant’s (2015) theory of racial formation defines racialization as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (p. 7). Race, in this framework, is not biological but a social construct shaped by power and

historical context. Racial meaning is constantly renegotiated through institutions and ideologies that determine whose identities are seen as normative or deviant. Ramírez (2014) extends this with the concept of racial naturalization, which describes how non-white groups are “violently included” in the U.S. through mechanisms of subordination and exclusion—especially in spaces like universities that continue to center whiteness (p. 11).

Finally, Mendoza (2023) introduces the concept of racial disintegration in his analysis of xenophobia and white nationalism. He writes, “Today the U.S. faces another looming demographic shift that threatens its White majority status. This shift is being led primarily by the growth in the Latinx population. If the U.S. is going to hold on to its White majority status, [there is] no other way to accomplish this task than by Latinx people undergoing a process of racial disintegration” (p. 10). Mendoza argues that this process involves absorbing Latine/x individuals into structures of whiteness while simultaneously erasing cultural and racial specificity. Within higher education, this results in superficial inclusion without structural change—masking continued marginalization behind narratives of “diversity” and “access.”

Together, these scholars reveal how racialization, microaggressions, and the persistence of whiteness remain central barriers to Latine/x student success. Becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution is not only about shifting numbers, but also about fundamentally transforming the cultural and ideological foundations of the university.

Latine/x Resilience and Community Cultural Wealth

One of the most influential frameworks guiding this project is Yosso’s (2005) theory of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). Bermudez Bonilla (2022), in her study of Latine/x students at a predominantly white institution (PWI), applies Yosso’s model to identify the cultural resources that students bring to campus—resources that often remain unrecognized by traditional

academic metrics. Among her participants, navigational (28%), aspirational (26%), familial (20%), and social (18%) capital were most frequently cited.

The prominence of navigational capital, in particular, illustrates how students learn to navigate institutions not designed with their needs in mind. Aspirational capital “draws on one’s dreams of future achievement. When reviewing digital testimonios related to aspirational capital, many Latine students referenced the importance of higher education to gain social mobility and economic stability. This accomplishment was not only for them but also for their family or community” (p. 119). Familial capital emphasizes the importance of family connection among Latine students, which differs from the U.S. society which prioritizes individualism. Bermudez Bonilla makes a beautiful relation to how students succeed, specifically Latine students which is with the help of not only their hard work but their family too. Having that familial connection to parents and siblings is a hugely important aspect of Latine students' lives, as well as the “Social capital” aspect with people who look like us (Latine students). Once you find your community in this new place of your life, that becomes the social capital that helps you keep going and makes you feel happy and safe, like family.

Bonilla (2022) also emphasizes the significance of familial and social capital, which are frequently excluded from mainstream academic success narratives but are deeply embedded within the Latine/x community. Her emphasis on *familismo* informs the design of this project’s focus group, where shared cultural ties and trust shape the space. Importantly, these forms of capital are not viewed as deficits but as assets for institutional and community engagement to students and faculty.

Identity-Based Spaces and Joyful Resistance

Institutions can begin to address structural inequities by investing in identity-affirming spaces and programs that foster a sense of belonging and empowerment. Warnock and Delgado-Riley (2021) found that students in the Latinx Scholars Academic Residential Community (Latinx ARC) at the University of Oregon demonstrated higher GPAs, greater leadership involvement, and deeper campus engagement. Their findings highlight how visibility, mentorship, and leadership development are critical for Latine/x student success. While they acknowledge certain limitations in their study, their work draws attention to the need for expanded mentorship networks tailored specifically to Latine/x students and the importance of leadership development programs led by and for people of color, rather than through white-centered frameworks.

Lorgia García Peña further reinforces this framing by positioning community-building as an inherently rebellious act within institutions historically structured to marginalize students of color. She reminds us that universities are not neutral; rather, they are rooted in systems of colonialism, white supremacy, and exclusion. However, they can also be reimagined as *freedom-making* spaces—sites where co-liberation becomes possible. García Peña’s work compels institutions not only to acknowledge harm but to actively create conditions for joy, resistance, and transformation.

Soares (2023) extends this notion of identity-affirmation through her concept of joy as a form of resistance. In *Playful Protest: The Political Work of Joy in Latinx Media*, she argues that joy “not only produces gratification but also unsettles social norms of gender, sexuality, race, and class” (p. 2). Within this framework, Latine/x-led student organizations and cultural programming become not just sites of celebration but of political and transformative

significance. At the University of Oregon, student organizations such as UO Muxeres, UO MEChA, and the UO Latine Male Alliance exemplify this joyful resistance. They cultivate community, confront systems of exclusion, and offer space for political expression and cultural affirmation.

Building on García Peña, Soares deepens this argument by emphasizing joy as a radical and politicized form of pleasure. It is not merely about celebration but about navigating hardship and disrupting normative structures. Thus, ensuring the continuity and institutional support of Latine/x student organizations is not only beneficial for retention and engagement—it is an act of cultural resistance. These spaces allow Latine/x students to imagine new possibilities, challenge structural barriers, and create joy on their own terms.

Faculty Engagement and Culturally Competent Advising: Addressing Intersectionality and Structural Vulnerabilities at UO

Pulido's (2022) *Latinx Advisors Report* underscores the urgency of structural investment in academic advising and student support systems. By centering the experiences of advisors, the report reveals key tensions between transactional and developmental advising models. Developmental advising—when practiced with cultural sensitivity and care—can be transformative, particularly for first-generation and undocumented Latine/x students navigating what Pulido terms “cascading vulnerabilities.” These vulnerabilities stem from intersecting barriers such as linguistic marginalization, financial insecurity, immigration status, and academic inexperience.

Pulido's policy-driven recommendations include expanding bilingual services, implementing Spanish-language financial literacy programs, and establishing administrative positions focused on Latine/x student success. These reforms not only address material inequities

but also recognize that institutional transformation must be both theoretical and actionable. Her work reframes advising as a critical site where student identities and systemic structures collide, reinforcing that culturally responsive advising is central to any effort to build an HSI that is Latine/x-thriving rather than merely Latine/x-enrolling.

Similarly, Dorantes et al. (2017), in the *Strengthening Networks of Support Among Latin@ Students at UO Report*, emphasize the importance of building networks that support students across personal, academic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions. Drawing on survey data from Latin@ undergraduate students at UO, the report reveals that while many students are highly engaged, they face persistent gaps in institutional support. Recommendations include integrating Latin@ students more intentionally across recruitment, orientation, retention, and graduation efforts; expanding investment in programs like CMAE, the Spanish Heritage Language Program, and Oportunidades; and hiring more ethnically and linguistically diverse faculty and staff. These findings reinforce the need to reimagine institutional culture by embedding cultural relevance and linguistic inclusivity across all levels of student engagement.

Lucero et al. (2017) add further nuance to this discussion by identifying two broad themes affecting Latine/x student experiences: academic/social challenges and *pull factors* such as *familismo*—a strong orientation toward family. Their findings stress the importance of faculty cultural competence, noting that professors can significantly impact Latine/x students' sense of belonging and academic success. As they write, “This awareness should relate not only to the ethnicity of students but also to their experiences as non-dominant, often nontraditional students.” The authors call attention to how Latine/x students often feel responsible not just for their individual success but for the uplift of their families and communities—a dynamic frequently overlooked in institutional frameworks.

Taken together, these reports suggest that reimagining UO’s institutional culture through an HSI lens requires attention to intersectional vulnerabilities and culturally rooted strengths. Advising, mentorship, and faculty training must move beyond deficit-based models to affirm the lived realities and knowledge systems of Latine/x students.

Lucero et al. (2021), drawing from Nora’s Student Engagement Model, examine how academic and social integration—alongside *pull factors* such as *familismo*—influence Latine/x student persistence. Through interviews with students, they reveal that while relationships with faculty can be a crucial source of support, many faculty members lack the cultural competence to engage with the intersecting identities of first-generation, transfer, and commuter students. As a result, students often navigate institutional spaces without the validation and understanding necessary for meaningful inclusion.

These findings align with Bonilla’s (2022) and Garcia’s (2019) calls for institutional accountability and deeper cultural awareness among faculty and staff. Lucero et al. emphasize that faculty engagement must be not only consistent but also intentional grounded in knowledge of student lived experiences and structural inequalities.

Further complicating the narrative, Arellano, Cortez, and García (2021) critically examine the institutionalization of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in their piece *Shadow Work: Witnessing Latinx Crossings in Rhetoric and Composition*. They argue that DEI frameworks often operate as performative gestures that uphold institutional whiteness rather than dismantle it. Cortez, a faculty member at the University of Oregon, notes that faculty of color frequently perform “shadow work”—unrecognized labor such as culturally responsive mentorship, advocacy, and community-building. As the authors assert, “Shadow work happens despite DEI—not because of it” (Arellano et al., 2021, p. 2). This invisible labor, which rarely

counts toward tenure and promotion, reinforces inequities by placing the burden of institutional transformation on faculty of color without adequate recognition or support.

Together, these scholars illuminate the pressing need to rethink faculty development and evaluation through a culturally sustaining and equity-driven lens. For the University of Oregon to evolve into a genuinely Latine/x-thriving institution, faculty engagement must be structurally supported, culturally competent, and aligned with the lived realities of the students they serve.

Centering Latine/x Student Voices in Higher Education Transformation

Exploring Latine/x student experiences in higher education—particularly at emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) like the University of Oregon—reveals that the barriers these students face are often embedded in institutional structures rather than individual shortcomings. The literature consistently emphasizes the importance of student voices, resilience, and the urgent need for cultural transformation within academic spaces. This review draws on critical perspectives that inform both the methodological and theoretical foundations of this thesis, particularly in the design of a focus group that prioritized relationality, storytelling, and collective knowledge-making.

Understanding how to better center Latine/x students in higher education requires attention to how these learners interact with their broader institutional environment. In *Indicators of Persistence for Hispanic Undergraduate Achievement: Toward an Ecological Model*, Renelinda Arana and colleagues apply Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, emphasizing that “the individual cannot be understood without understanding how he or she interacts with the environment” (Arana et al., 2011, p. 4). This model foregrounds the systemic conditions that shape student success, illustrating how “an unwelcoming environment for

Hispanic students in a predominantly white university hindered their academic performance” (Gonzalez, 2002, as cited in Arana et al., 2011, p. 6).

By taking seriously the ecological and relational dimensions of Latine/x student experience, institutions like UO can move beyond surface-level inclusion to address deeper structural inequities. This approach underscores the need for cultural transformation that is informed by student perspectives and grounded in justice-oriented frameworks.

The Missing Piece: Student Voices

The literature reviewed underscores the pivotal role that the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE) plays in supporting students of color at the University of Oregon, particularly Latine/x students. If DEI efforts were dismantled at UO, it would have a detrimental impact on the support systems that Latine/x students rely on, especially through resources like CMAE. This project seeks to bridge these critical concepts and theories by exploring how CMAE influences the academic, social, and cultural experiences of Latine/x students at a predominantly white institution (PWI).

A key focus of this research is to assess whether CMAE contributes to the cultural and community wealth of Latine/x students, fostering a sense of belonging, retention, and academic success. By centering the voices of Latine/x students through a focus group consisting of 10 participants, this project will explore how CMAE has shaped their college experiences and influenced their academic journeys.

What is the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE)?

The Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE) serves as a vital space where students feel empowered, engaged, and supported in their academic journeys. Located in Oregon Hall at the University of Oregon (UO), CMAE is easily accessible to many first-year students. However, after the first year, students often find it harder to visit due to the location and shifting campus routines.

CMAE's mission is:

“To promote student retention and persistence for historically underrepresented and underserved populations. We develop and implement programs and services at the UO and beyond. We reaffirm our commitment to all students.”

Its vision is:

“To build and empower an inclusive and diverse community of scholars who exemplify academic excellence and inspire positive change” (CMAE website).

CMAE is supported by a dedicated team who uplifts this mission. Two central figures who contributed to this research are Rosa Chavez and Ixchel Verdugo.

- **Rosa Chavez** is the Director of CMAE. She coordinates programs and services while cultivating partnerships with faculty, staff, and stakeholders across and beyond the UO campus.
- **Ixchel Verdugo** is the Latine/Chicana Student Retention Specialist. She leads RUMBOS (Rising Up, Mentoring, and Building Opportunities for Success), advises students, collaborates with the Latinx ARC, and provides counseling support. Her goal is to ensure all students feel heard, supported, and valued.

Although CMAE supports a wide range of students, this thesis focuses specifically on its impact on Latine/x students.

History of CMAE

According to Rosa Chavez, CMAE began in 1984 as the *Center for Counsel of Minority Education*. In the late 1980s, the center expanded to include writing classes and tutoring, sharpening its focus on undergraduate academic success.

Over the decades, CMAE evolved through several organizational transitions:

- In the late 1990s, it became the *Office of Multicultural Affairs*, then the *Office of Multicultural Academic Success*.
- Around the 2010s, it formally became the *Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE)*.

In the past, CMAE worked closely with UO Admissions and led the Opportunities Program, a student-led initiative that mentored incoming first-year students. That responsibility now belongs to the Dean of Students. However, the New Student Fall Retreat, a program designed for students of color to build community and find campus resources, remains a key legacy of those earlier efforts.

In 1999, the university established the *Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)*—a result of persistent student advocacy. This shift allowed CMAE to focus more on academic advising while DEI took on responsibilities like staff/faculty training, advocacy, and policy development.

Rosa explained:

“In 2010, the university became a three-legged stool... Up until 1999, CMAE was housed under the Provost Office. That’s the academic house of the university. All those majors and minors that are not professional schools report to the provost.

CMAE was under that house because it was about academic success and advising.”

By 2009–2010, CMAE was jointly overseen by the Provost and DEI. A third “leg” was added—Student Life—to support programs like the New Student Retreat and Academic Residential Communities (ARCs). At one point, the CMAE team was split across:

1. Cocurricular programming
2. Academic advising
3. Student Life & ARCs

Rosa emphasized that CMAE has evolved into a more student-centered program:

“CMAE became an academic support and a hub to connect students to other resources. It doesn’t matter their identity—the CMAE will provide support without making students feel judged.”

Today, CMAE is part of a “two-legged stool”, reporting to both DEI and Undergraduate Education and Student Success (UESS)—a branch of the provost’s office. Rosa reflected:

“Since I arrived, we really drilled down on being academic advisors. Things do look a little different. We try to minimize our cocurricular. We’re very much like— ‘You need to graduate? Come in and see us.’”

Building on this brief history of CMAE, I conducted a focus group to evaluate how effectively the center supports Latine/x and Hispanic students at the University of Oregon.

CMAE Programs and Services

CMAE offers a variety of programs and academic support, including but not limiting to:

- CMAE Scholars Program

Designed for incoming UO students (first-year or transfer) who lack access to existing support programs like Pathway Oregon or TRIO/SSS, this initiative provides *holistic academic advising* to help students navigate personal, academic, and professional goals. Unlike generic advising, CMAE Scholars emphasizes culturally responsive mentorship and tailored resource allocation (UO Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion [DEI] website).

- New Student Fall Retreat

A free three-day retreat for first year and transfer students from underrepresented backgrounds, this program facilitates community-building through structured activities and early exposure to campus resources. By creating affinity spaces before the academic year begins, the retreat aims to mitigate the isolation often experienced by marginalized students at PWIs (UO DEI website).

- Student Leadership Team

Composed of peer mentors, this team extends the retreat's support through ongoing facilitation, training, and advocacy. Their role underscores CMAE's commitment to *student-led* empowerment—a critical counter to top-down institutional approaches that often overlook lived expertise (UO DEI website).

- Scholarships

CMAE administers targeted financial aid programs, including:

1. The *Diversity Excellence Scholarship* (formerly UMASS),
2. The *Home Flight Scholars Program*, which covers full tuition and fees for Oregon residents who are enrolled citizens of federally recognized tribes.

These initiatives address systemic barriers to access, though their limited scope (e.g., restricted funding periods) reflects broader constraints of DEI in neoliberal universities (UO DEI website).

CMAE also provides academic services such as:

- One-on-one advising
- CMAE-affiliated writing courses
- Tutoring in writing, math, and science
- Cultural study halls, including RUMBOS

RUMBOS is a Latine/x cultural study hall that meets weekly (Weeks 2–10) on Mondays from 3:00–5:00pm and is led by Ixchel Verdugo. Beyond being a space for academic support, RUMBOS provides an informal, affirming environment where students can discuss classes, career plans, or personal concerns.

Ixchel reflected on the current challenges with RUMBOS:

“People love it, but how can we scale it up? The number of students that come into the space doesn’t represent the large population of the student body.”

Due to this, RUMBOS was paused in Spring 2025 to reassess and improve the program:

“We have to be flexible and willing to change to better suit new students coming in.”

Rosa Chavez emphasized her broader vision for CMAE:

“In a perfect world, there would be a career counselor and a therapist in order to better this program.”

She acknowledged the layered responsibilities many Latine/x students carry—as siblings, children, and community members:

“Having a therapist to help students unpack and manage all the complexities of being a Latine/x student—academics, identity, family pressures—would fill a major gap seen on many campuses.”

Key Findings of CMAE Focus Group

To provide context for how the CMAE focus group was conducted, the session included ten Latine/x undergraduate students ranging from second- to fourth-year standing. Most participants identified as female, with one male-identifying student. Upon arrival, students signed in on an attendance sheet I created and quietly took their seats. Since many of them already knew each other, the atmosphere was relaxed rather than awkward as we waited to begin the focus group.

Once everyone was present, I provided an overview of the focus group process and introduced my thesis project. I displayed the questionnaire on a screen so participants could follow along as I facilitated the discussion. All questions from the focus group are included in the appendix of this thesis. I moved through each question in order, encouraging open dialogue and allowing the conversation to flow naturally. While the students appeared nervous at first, they became more comfortable as the session progressed, which contributed to a more dynamic and engaged discussion.

The following section presents the key themes that emerged from the conversation, supported by direct quotes from participants.

CMAE as a Resource and Support System

When asked, “*How often do you engage with CMAE?*”, responses varied significantly—from frequent visitors to those who rarely utilized its services. Despite these differences, students overwhelmingly described CMAE as a critical hub for academic, financial and social support. It offers advising, connects students to scholarships, and provides access to essential resources that many might otherwise be unable to afford.

“I think the CMAE was designed to cater towards minority students, and it’s not only culturally based, I think it also supports students that come from different financial or family situations”.

—Lesly Santos, fourth-year Global Studies major

The CMAE’s “Resource Pond”—which includes iClickers, textbooks, laptops, calculators, and more—was highlighted as especially impactful for low-income students. Multiple students mentioned relying on free food, school supplies, and even informal emotional support from staff. A Psychology and Planning, Public Policy, and Management student noted:

“From there I got to meet with Ixchel, cause she is also my advisor, and that was my introduction into CMAE learning all that they do, and apart from advising, the biggest thing I take from there is from the resource pond. I’ve rented out many Iclickers my freshman year and many textbooks. I still use them now; it’s just I was introduced through the ARC”.

Students also associated the CMAE with a strong sense of belonging. Even those who visited less frequently recognized it as a supportive space. As Ivonne Lopez, a second-year student studying Human Physiology and Psychology, shared:

“It’s a sense of belonging... I feel like [resources] aren’t really there for me as much as I thought they would be, so I really am thankful for the CMAE. It’s really helped me navigate myself these last two years and make connections.”

The CMAE's connection to scholarships, especially the Diversity Excellence Scholarship (DES), also brought many students into the space. As described on the CMAE website, the DES “recognizes the academic achievement and potential of students who, through sharing their varied cultural perspectives, will enhance the education of all UO students and the excellence of the University.”

Space Limitations & Accessibility

A key concern was CMAE's small, hidden space in Oregon Hall. Students noted the lack of visibility, natural light, and seating, which can deter usage.

Sarahi Larios, a fourth-year Sociology major, reflected:

"My freshman year and my sophomore year, I thought, like, I don't work there, I can't go in there. Or like, I don't have an appointment, I can't go in there... Now I'm just walking there freely. But it is a small little area... You have the intimidation to walk in because I definitely had that for like two years."

Others emphasized that CMAE's distance from campus centers becomes a barrier once students move off-campus. Daisy Saucedo, a fourth-year Advertising student, said:

"When you're a freshman, the dorms are close. But I live out at union and then I have all my classes in Allen Hall and Lilis. It's like a 20-minute walk."

Students recommended expanding CMAE's space or creating an additional, centrally located space where students can study and socialize. They also requested extended hours to make the center more accessible.

Ivonne shared:

"I feel like I'm welcome...even if I don't say hi or know everybody that works there...I feel really drawn to it and like a place that feels like home— but I wish it was open longer."

Lesly Rios added:

"CMAE does provide that space, but I think it's just so difficult to get integrated into it... It's out of your way, or it's very hidden... there's not a lot of space for people to socialize or stay for an extended period of time."

Career Development & Professional Opportunities.

Students expressed a desire for more structured career development opportunities through CMAE. Sebastian Flores, a third-year Advertising major, proposed:

“I know they have, like, many events like Rumbos that they host throughout the terms. but I feel like that's the only thing that I hear that they do on a regular basis. Maybe implementing more side projects, like major events that they can put on. Like a yearly event they put on that gets people going, knowing that it's going to happen every year, it's something to look forward to. I think that brings in a lot of people, and then them having their name on it can really bring in numbers for them.”

Participants discussed the lack of awareness or connection to resources like the UO Career Center, often choosing instead to rely on trusted advisors within CMAE. They called for:

- More partnerships with companies (e.g., Multicultural Center's (MCC) Adidas internship workshop).
- More on-campus presentations by professionals who share their backgrounds.
- Unpaid internships for students through the CMAE that build leadership skills and networks.

The Importance of Diverse Advising Staff

For many, CMAE's advising staff—particularly Ixchel—played a pivotal role. Students advocated for more advisors of color who reflect their lived experiences.

Maria Gaspar, a third-year Advertising student, said:

“They need more advisors... I only know Ixchel... If there's more [advisors], there's also more people to reach out to more students... and a bigger capacity to do even bigger projects.”

Participants emphasized that diverse faculty and advisors—especially Latine/x mentors—made a tangible difference in their academic success and emotional well-being. Lesly Rios reflected:

“When I had a Latina advisor or professor, I really felt supported... But now it’s like you’re integrating more of these younger, fresh—no offense—white people that are brand new. You have to train them.”

Sarahi added:

“The only time I see diverse professors is Spanish... But it’s not fair to students who don’t major or minor in Spanish. They don’t get to see diverse faculty.”

Mental health was also frequently raised. Students reported negative experiences with therapists who lacked cultural competence and pushed for Latine/x mental health providers.

Sarahi explained:

“Mental health comes with everything we talked about—academic support, social support... More diverse therapists or counselors would be very beneficial—not just for Latino students but minority students overall.”

Improving Outreach & Promotion

Students noted that CMAE is under-promoted after students’ first year. Transfer students in particular expressed frustration over not learning about CMAE until later in their college experience.

Lesly Rios commented:

“CMAE should do more community outreach... They’re not connecting with departments... it’s mostly designed for first-year students.”

Elli Elias, a fourth-year Political Science student and transfer, shared:

“I didn’t learn about CMAE until I went to an event, they just happened to host... I would have loved to get an email before arriving on campus saying, ‘Here are resources for Latine students.’”

Students also recommended stronger collaboration with student organizations and suggested using surveys and regular focus groups to gather feedback. Maria Gaspar proposed:

“More collaboration with student orgs... Like, if a CMAE rep or student worker hosted a meeting instead of faculty, I think that would be cool.”

Lesly concluded:

“Why is this the first time in four years we’re being asked to talk about these issues on campus?... Institutions say, ‘If you have an issue, speak up’—but change doesn’t happen unless there’s pressure from student orgs.”

Focus Group Conclusion

The focus group proved to be both insightful and generative, with participants openly sharing their perspectives, experiences, and critiques in response to each prompt (see Appendix for the full list of interview questions). A key tension that emerged is that while not all Latine/x students actively seek support from CMAE, those who do often describe the experience as transformative—highlighting access to academic resources, mentorship, and the cultivation of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Below, I outline recommendations grounded in both participant voices and scholarly frameworks to strengthen CMAE’s impact.

1. Strengthen CMAE’s Role as a Support Hub

- Continue offering and expanding access to basic resources through the Resource Pond.

- Maintain and promote scholarships and emergency aid.

2. Address Space and Accessibility Challenges

- Expand CMAE's physical space or designate a satellite location in central campus.
- Extend office hours to increase access.

3. Develop Career and Leadership Opportunities

- Create internships and project-based roles within CMAE.
- Establish corporate partnerships for mentorship and job placement.

4. Increase Advising and Mental Health Support

- Hire more diverse advisors and mental health professionals.
- Collaborate with Clark Honors College (CHC) and departments lacking diverse staff.

5. Improve Outreach and Communication

- Enhance engagement with transfer students and non-freshman populations.
- Partner with student orgs and send regular updates about CMAE events.
- Use end-of-term surveys and focus groups to collect student feedback.

Conclusion

Students recognize CMAE as an essential resource that fosters belonging, provides critical support, and serves as a bridge to academic and professional success. However, key concerns include limited space, accessibility, career development opportunities, and outreach efforts. Students described while some challenges stem from broader institutional issues, CMAE can take strategic steps to enhance its impact—particularly in expanding awareness of its programming, strengthening advising, and improving access to study and professional development spaces in their location at the Oregon Hall.

The Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE) does what it can within its current limitations to support Latine/x students at a predominantly white institution. While CMAE offers vital academic, social, and cultural support—both individually and collectively—its impact is constrained by capacity. With only one Latine/x Student Retention Specialist, it's unrealistic and unfair to expect CMAE to meet the needs of every Latine/x student on campus.

As Rosa expressed, she believes CMAE is effective for Latine/x students and wants it to be a visible, accessible hub—not a place where resources or information are hidden. Regular check-ins with students in programs like the Diversity Excellence Scholarship and Latinx ARC help build trust and comfort with CMAE advisors. These consistent efforts foster cultural and community wealth for the students who actively engage with the center.

However, to expand this impact, the University of Oregon must take institutional responsibility. Ixchel made a crucial point: “Becoming an HSI is promising, but without real support for Latine/x students, it risks being symbolic rather than impactful.” A dedicated Latine/x student center that integrates academic advising, community-building, and holistic

support would demonstrate intentionality and create a centralized hub for student success and belonging.

Throughout this project—from CMAE’s history to the focus group discussions—it’s clear that students continue to advocate for what they need. CMAE plays a key role in Latine/x student retention and success, but its efforts must be matched by administrative action.

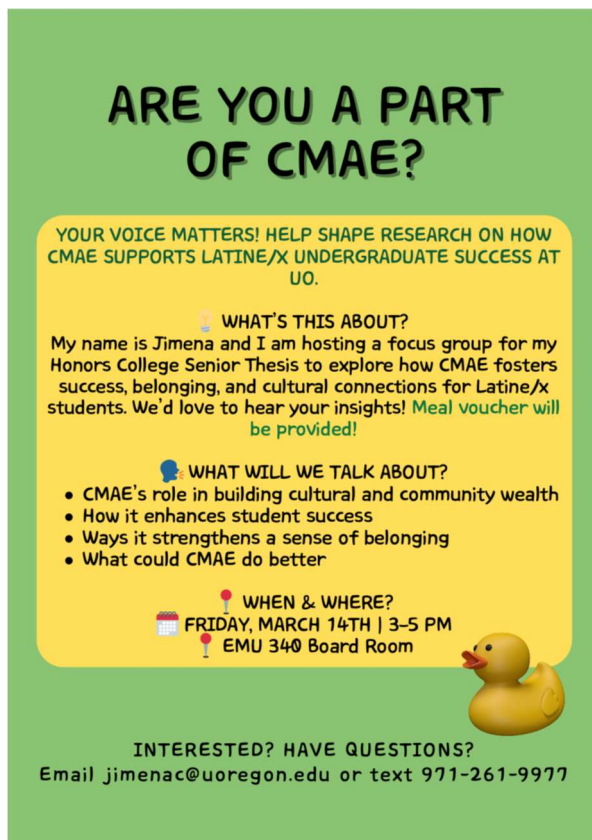
Expanding staffing, increasing funding, and embedding Latine/x support across campus offices are necessary steps toward meaningful institutional change.

Appendix

This research focuses on gaining insights from University of Oregon Latine/x and Hispanic students about how the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE) supports their academic, social, and cultural needs at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Specifically, it asks: *Does CMAE foster cultural and community wealth, and does it contribute to students' retention, success, and sense of belonging?*

This appendix includes the key components involved in conducting my focus group, including the promotional flyer, interview questions, and focus group questions.

Appendix A: CMAE Promotional Flyer



Appendix B: CMAE Staff Interviews

These two interviews were different questions that were directed to their specific role in the CMAE.

Rosa Chavez (Director of CMAE)

7. Can you tell us a little about yourself and your journey to your current role?
8. What is your role as Director? What are your main responsibilities in this position? How long have you been in the role?
9. Can you share a specific example of a partnership that helped launch a successful program?
10. Can you give me a brief history of CMAE and its mission?
11. What is your vision/key goals for CMAE?
12. Based on my research focus on Latine/x students' retention, success, and belonging at a predominantly white institution, I'd love to hear your insights on the role CMAE plays in these areas:
 - a. Can you share how CMAE fosters cultural and community wealth for Latine/x students?
 - b. How does it contribute to students' retention, success, and sense of belonging?
 - c. How effective do you believe CMAE is in addressing the academic, social, and cultural support needs of Latine/x students at UO?
 - d. What are the challenges CMAE faces and how it could do better?
13. Regarding CMAE's programs like the New Student Retreat and CMAE Scholars, how do these initiatives support Latine/x students?
14. I have a few questions based on what I saw on the website:
 - a. Is the first-gen student blog still active, and are there any upcoming plans for its development?
 - b. Given the current staffing, do you think adding more Latine retention specialists would enhance CMAE's impact?

- c. Does the Resource Pond accept donations? If so, what types of donations are most helpful?
 - d. Do Latine/x students actively attend CMAE workshops and classes? Which ones are most popular, and do students tend to return for multiple sessions?
 - e. What percentage of Latine undergraduates use CMAE services?
15. Do you think CMAE has effectively welcomed new students and provided opportunities for community building, integration, and connection to campus resources?

Ixchel Verdugo (Latine Retention Specialist of CMAE)

16. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your journey to your current role? Such as what led you here?
17. What duties come with being a Latine Student Retention Specialist?
18. How long has RUMBOS been around?
19. Can you share how RUMBOS fosters cultural and community wealth for Latine/x students?
20. How does it contribute to students' retention, success, and sense of belonging?
21. How effective do you believe CMAE (including RUMBOS) is in addressing the academic, social, and cultural support needs of Latine/x students at UO? BE SURE TO ASK FOR SPECIFIC EXAMPLES
22. Given that you, Ixchel, are the only Latine retention specialist, do you think adding another Latine retention specialists would enhance CMAE's impact? What else might enhance CMAE'S impact?
23. Do you think CMAE (including RUMBOS) has effectively welcomed new students and provided opportunities for community building, integration, and connection to campus resources?
24. RUMBOS - How do you promote it? Is the attendance high for/from the same years compared to others?
25. RUMBOS - How many people are in this team to make it happen?
26. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

1. Introduction questions:

- a. Introduce myself and participants:
 - What is your name, year, major/minors, if you identify as Latine, and How are you involved with the CMAE?
- b. In your own words, what is the CMAE, and how did you first hear about it?
- c. Can you share your experience with CMAE, including what motivated you to use their services and what your first interaction was like?

2. Transition:

- a. Do you believe that the UO does ENOUGH to support you– being a latine student?

3. Advising Frequency:

- a. How often do you come in?
- b. Do you go to other advisors on campus?
- c. Do you believe the CMAE has been a beneficial resource to your journey here at UO? Why or why not?

4. Resources:

- a. What other services or support offices do you receive other than CMAE?
- b. Do you receive assistance from CMAE less or more frequently compared to other services or support offices?

5. Space/Comfortability

- a. Is this space somewhere you feel drawn to come to or not?

b. What can the CMAE do to make YOU come more often to this space?

6. End

a. Ideally, how would UO best support you as a Latine student? That can be academic support, as well as social and professional support.

b. What would you want CMAE to do to improve your experience as a Latine student? *This is their opportunity to give constructive feedback so CMAE can better serve you all. *

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