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## Using Faculty Learning Communities to Improve Latino Student Success

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*The authors, members of a faculty learning community (FLC) within the College of Health and Human Development at California State University, Northridge, surveyed faculty participants to assess the perceived impact of the FLC on faculty members' ability to strengthen faculty-student relationships and student success, particularly among Latino students. The participants identified improvements in mentoring, increased awareness of cultural issues related to Latino students, greater knowledge of available campus resources, and a stronger sense of faculty support. These findings suggest that faculty development programs like FLCs may equip faculty with knowledge and strategies to help close the college completion gap for Latinos.*

The United States can take great pride in the progress it has made in giving more students access to college. But even this work remains both unfinished and insufficient. It is unfinished because access continues to be inequitable, especially for the poor and most minority groups. It is insufficient because many students do not succeed once in college and fail to gain the kind of powerful learning that equips them for a world in flux. (Ramaley & Leskes, 2002, p. 13)

The assessment presented in Ramaley and Leskes's 2002 Greater Expectations Panel Report may be even more relevant today. We are living in a world that is increasingly connected socially and economically to diverse

cultures and worldviews. The U.S. population reflects the new global reality; it is predicted that by year 2050, racial and ethnic minorities will become the emerging majority (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). Minorities, defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as being “something other than non-Hispanic White alone,” grew over 28% between the years 2000 and 2010 (Humes et al., 2011, p. 2). When compared to the 1% increase in the non-Hispanic White population over the same time period, the growth in the minority population is clearly noteworthy. Even more significant is that over half of our nation’s population growth between years 2000 and 2010 was primarily attributed to our increasing Latino<sup>1</sup> population, which grew by 43% (Humes et al., 2011). Are college faculty and students being adequately prepared to succeed in this emerging world?

The U.S. continues to progress in making college accessible to an increasing number of students, including most minority groups (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). However, it still lags behind other industrialized nations in the percent of adults with postsecondary education degrees (Lee, Contreras, McGuire, & Flores-Ragade, 2011). This is especially true for Latinos and African Americans. Between 2001 and 2011, only 21% of U.S. Latinos and 30% of African Americans earned a degree in higher education, compared to 57% of Asians Americans and 44% of non-Latino Whites (Santiago & Soliz, 2012).

The trajectory of the increasing numbers of minorities, particularly Latinos, in the U.S. population has many implications, including within higher education. While the number of Latino students enrolled in higher education has increased over the past two decades, the graduation rate of Latino students remains low (Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007). Latino students in higher education may encounter a number of barriers that explain their lower rates of school success. For example, Latino students are more likely to come from low-income families, and they also are more likely to be the first generation in their family to attend college (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). Thus, Latinos are likely to start their college education in a more vulnerable position, both in terms of the financial support and also the familial resources available to help them navigate through their academic careers (Thayer, 2000). Another barrier to Latino students’ college success is institutional racial/ethnic discrimination. Research by Hurtado and colleagues found that campus climate and perceptions of racial/ethnic tension impact Latinos’ connection to school and their college adjustment (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Latinos may come to internalize racial/ethnic tensions and feel they “don’t fit in” or belong at an academic institution (Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010).

Effectively teaching a diverse student body requires intentionally utiliz-

ing pedagogical methods that are culturally competent (Diller & Moule, 2005), and these methods should be used within a context where the teaching is culturally grounded to encourage educational success while maintaining high student expectations (Nicolas, DeSilva, & Rabenstein, 2009). It is imperative that the educational workforce learn to be culturally aware of their diverse students' values and belief systems, and that educators learn multiple pedagogical approaches considered necessary to connect with their diverse students' learning styles (Nicolas, DeSilva, & Rabenstein, 2009). Scholars have suggested that the use of culturally competent pedagogical strategies may increase the success and graduation rates of Latino students (The College Board, 2005). Given the possible link between college graduation rates and culturally competent teaching (The College Board, 2005; Diller & Moule, 2005), it is vital to explore the efficacy of strategies that aim to increase culturally competent teaching in higher education. By raising awareness of diverse student populations such as Latinos, faculty development programs can aid faculty in becoming better equipped to teach and support all students.

Universities offer a wide array of faculty development programs that focus on building the strength and skills of faculty members in areas such as teaching and facilitating student learning. Research suggests that faculty development contributes to an increase in student retention and success (Concepción, Holtzman, & Ranieri, 2009; McShannon & Hynes, 2001), and that topic-based FLCs, including sustained collaborative colleague interaction, increase faculty interest in teaching and learning as well as provide support for faculty to investigate and assess specific issues (Layne, Froyd, Morgan, & Kenimer, 2002; "What is a faculty and professional learning community?" n.d.).

### **The Faculty Learning Communities at CSUN**

Over two academic years, two FLCs were created at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) to examine and explore pedagogical practices that foster Latino student success (Plunkett, Welsh, & Seegan, 2012). CSUN's FLCs were a topic-based component of its faculty development program and supported by a U.S. Department of Education Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions Programs Title V grant. Latinos represented 28% of CSUN's 30,000 undergraduate students in 2007 (Huber, 2007; Office of Institutional Research, 2012). Thus, CSUN was identified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and qualified to apply for a U.S. Department of Education Title V grant. The objective of an HSI Title V grant is to assist HSIs to "expand educational opportunities for, and improve

the attainment of, Hispanic students" (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/idueshsi/index.html>). More recent data compiled by the Office of Institutional Research (2012) show a continued increase in the number of Hispanic students at CSUN. In 1993, Latinos represented just 16% of the student population; in 2008 that number had grown to 29%; and by 2012, Latinos represented 35% of the student body. By contrast, in 1993, Whites represented 49% of the student population, and by 2012, that number had dropped to just 29% of the total student body (the levels of other student minorities have remained constant, or have slightly decreased (Huber, 2007; Office of Institutional Research, 2012).

Because of this dramatic shift in the cultural makeup of CSUN's student body, along with a growing concern for a noticeable discrepancy in college completion between the culturally diverse groups, discussions began to focus on strategies to help close the college completion gap. The FLC was one such strategy. CSUN began its first FLC in 2010 with the creation of a cohort of faculty members from within the College of Health and Human Development (CHHD). The 2010 FLC facilitator was a senior faculty member who was selected based on recommendations made by the CHHD Dean; the facilitator was well known within the College as an actively strong supporter of faculty development. FLC recruitment for faculty participants began in the spring and continued into the summer through Retention, Tenure, and Promotion (RTP) announcements made via e-mail, during monthly faculty meetings, and in the summer College Faculty Retreats. In addition to the intrinsic value the FLC offered, members would receive a \$600 stipend for each semester of participation in the FLC and would be eligible to receive \$1,000 for travel to conferences or workshops having a pedagogical focus. Interested applicants were required to write a statement explaining their reasons for wanting to make a commitment to an FLC, as well as agree to serve as a mentor for another faculty member. The FLC facilitators selected the most compelling applicants, particularly those who seemed sincerely to want to learn more and better understand their students' cultures and enhance their own teaching skills.

The 2010 FLC, which met for one academic year, had 12 faculty members participating in the CHHD cohort, the majority of whom were tenured faculty, with a very small number who were either on the tenure-track or adjunct faculty. The facilitator felt that everyone in the cohort would benefit from an increased understanding of Latino students. Thus, the cohort's meeting agendas were organized based on this assumption. In addition to planning the meeting agendas and leading discussions, the 2010 facilitator provided educational resources and arranged for speak-

ers with expertise in the Latino experience to supplement discussions. An example of relevant reading material was the article “The Impact of Faculty and Staff on High-Risk College Student Persistence” (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011).

To increase junior faculty members’ participation in the 2011 FLC cohort, a concerted effort was made to recruit primarily new incoming tenure-track faculty for the CHHD. The 2011 FLC was facilitated by a member of the 2010 CHHD FLC. The recruitment incentives and process already established for the 2010 cohort were employed for the 2011 FLC. This yielded 15 new FLC members from CHHD, including seven new junior faculty. Although the two cohorts (2010 and 2011) were separate from each other, the two cohort facilitators had frequent meetings to share ideas about the FLC topics, discussion, and processes. The 2011 FLC cohort also met for one full academic year.

Two of this study’s authors were participants in the 2011 CHHD FLC cohort. One of the authors was the 2011 CHHD FLC facilitator, and another was the director of the Title V grant. With her cohort, the 2011 CHHD FLC facilitator chose to explore topics revolving around unconscious biases and assumptions that could impact a teacher’s teaching and a student’s learning at CSUN. The 2011 FLC facilitator focused on the faculty development portion of the Title V grant, that is, to increase Latino student achievement by improving faculty-student interaction and developing effective instructional techniques (Plunkett et al., 2012), to guide the FLC topic agenda selection. A sample list of agenda topics and speakers can be found in Table 1. Several of the topics and speakers in both cohorts were the same or similar.

Rousing and sometimes emotional conversations took place in the 2011 FLC meetings. All things considered, it was decided as a group that if we wanted to connect with our students both pedagogically and empathetically, these discussions, no matter how uncomfortable, were necessary, as long as our discussion environment was kept safe and confidential. As in the 2010 FLC, the 2011 FLC discussions were anchored by professionals in the field who deepened our understanding of the impact that culture made on our students’ college success. For instance, Dr. Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, a professor of educational psychology and counseling, discussed how Latinos’ *collectivistic* culture may lead a Latino college student to have a job and work an inordinate number of hours to help with the family’s finances (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). A Latino student may feel a strong sense of responsibility that says to him or her, “I cannot simply attend my college classes right now and ignore the financial issues that my family is experiencing. I must work to pay the bills and put food on

Table 1  
**Sample of 2010 & 2011 CHHD FLC Cohort Meeting  
 Topics and Speakers**

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Speakers</i>
Bridging Cultures at CSUN: Building on Students' Cultural Strengths; Dominant Values of Individualism and Collectivism	Dr. Rothstein-Fisch, CSUN Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling
Undocumented Students, CSUN AB540 Students and the California DREAM Act	Mr. Marvin Villanueva, AB 540 Representative and Coordinator of Advisement Services, CSUN College of Humanities
What New Teaching Strategies Have You Used in the Classroom? Were they effective? How do you know?	Dr. Frankie Augustin, CHHD FLC Facilitator
Junior Faculty: Dealing with Stress	Dr. Mark Stevens, Director and Psychologist, CSUN University Counseling Services
Highlights from the 7 <sup>th</sup> annual American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education Conference: Developing Your Ideal Day	Dr. Terri Lisagor, CHHD FLC Member  Professor Wendy Yost, CHHD FLC Member
Exploring Privilege and First- Generation College Students  Student Motivation	Dr. Veronica Stotts and Dr. Jose Montes, Staff Psychologists, CSUN University Counseling Services  Delinah Hurwitz

the table." In contrast, the *individualistic* culture, which is the culture that makes up the U.S. mainstream perspective, suggests that it is the parents' responsibility to work and take care of the household finances so that the children can be free to attend college without necessarily having to hold down a job. Learning about the far-reaching effects that the collectivistic culture had on our Latino students occasionally created moments of astonishment for our 2011 FLC members, particularly as we realized our own misperceptions and how our cultural values might potentially have blocked us from being culturally sensitive and culturally relevant in our

teaching. As a case in point, Dr. Rothstein-Fisch demonstrated for the FLC how the collectivistic culture could influence the level of Latino student participation in the classroom. She encouraged the FLC members to use a mixed-method approach in teaching that would encourage participation, while at the same time not penalize a student for not participating.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of participation in an FLC focusing on faculty members' ability to strengthen faculty-student relationships and student success, particularly among Latino students at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). Did FLC participation change faculty participants' understanding of teaching and learning in the culturally diverse student body at CSUN? Did it affect their teaching strategies and practices? Did participation affect faculty-faculty and/or faculty-student relationships? The hoped-for outcome of the study was to draw implications for improving Latino students' success, working toward closing the college completion gap between Latinos and Whites at CSUN.

## **Method**

These questions and others were examined by utilizing a qualitative research approach. Both FLC cohorts in the CHHD agreed to participate in the study. The underlying goal of both FLCs was to increase our understanding of the Latino student population. The thematic concentration of each cohort varied slightly because the facilitator, who emerged from the 2010 FLC, built upon the knowledge she gained from the first cohort. CSUN's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study's Human Subjects Protocol.

### *Materials*

The researchers designed an online survey, based on a modified version of Schreiner et al. (2011), to ensure content validity. The survey, posted on Survey Monkey®, consisted of 13 open-ended questions that asked about the impact of the FLC on the faculty participants' teaching, their perceptions of faculty development, their perceptions of the diverse student population, and faculty-student relationships (see Appendix A). Participants were asked their opinion regarding student needs and what advice they would share with faculty and staff about high-risk students. The survey also asked for demographic information, including participants' gender, rank, academic department, and years at CSUN.

### Procedure

An e-mail with a link to the survey went to all members of the 2010 and 2011 FLC cohorts. Two follow-up reminder e-mails were sent. Twenty-seven participants were members of the FLCs; the 3 authors did not take part in the survey. Of the remaining 24 members, four participants were deemed ineligible because they had attended only one or two FLC meetings due to scheduling conflicts. Seventeen of the 20 remaining eligible CHHD participants submitted narrative responses to the online survey (an 85% response rate). Of the 17 respondents, two were dropped from any analysis due to a substantial amount of missing data, thus yielding a final sample of 15 participants (2010  $n = 8$  and 2011  $n = 7$ ). The FLC participants were not compensated for their participation in the study. Table 2 contains descriptive information obtained from all participants.

Conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the data was performed to analyze the participants' responses. One of the authors (Coder 1) reviewed and analyzed the participants' narrative responses to the open-ended questions. Coder 1 conducted a thorough initial reading of all the open-ended survey questions and responses. During a second reading, the responses were grouped by question, with responses to some questions being combined because they led to qualitatively similar responses, or principal *themes*. Coder 1 then did a third reading of responses to identify any new themes that were not initially captured. For Coder 1, five themes emerged. To ensure credibility of the coding, another author (Coder 2) conducted the following process in analyzing the data: (1) A first reading of all questions and responses was done; (2) on the second reading, key terms were pulled from the responses for each question (for example, *leadership, mentoring, teaching strategies*). Occasionally, key terms were so similar that they were combined (for example, *support/camaraderie/networking*); (3) Coder 2 reread each response, identifying the number of respondents who mentioned a key term(s) per question; (4) the total number of participants who mentioned the key terms was calculated. After Coder 2 completed her process, both coders met to share their analyses. Coders 1 and 2 were in agreement regarding the five themes and key terms.

### Results

The five emergent themes related to the impact the FLCs had on participants' teaching and their faculty-student interaction were as follows: (1) an increased consciousness of the impact of collectivistic culture on Latino CSUN students; (2) a greater awareness of participants' impact on



Table 2  
**Faculty Learning Community Participant Respondents**  
**(FLC 2010 and 2011 combined)**

	<i>N</i> <sup>a</sup>
<b>Rank</b>	
Lecturer	3
Assistant professor	4
Associate professor	5
Full professor	0
Other/No Response	3
<b>Department</b>	
Family and Consumer Sciences	7
Child and Adolescent Development	1
Recreations, Tourism and Management	1
Physical Therapy	1
Health Sciences/Public Health	2
Other/No Response	3
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	12
Male	0
No Response	3

*Notes.* Total number of faculty respondents:  $n = 15$   
Time teaching at CSUN: 1-26 years ( $M = 8.68$  years;  
 $SD = 6.59$ )

students' success; (3) an intentional shift in pedagogy; (4) a greater awareness of campus support services for students; and (5) a greater awareness of the benefits of face-to-face faculty-faculty interaction. While three of these themes (1, 2, and 3) could be best captured by individual survey questions, themes 4 and 5 were captured in multiple questions. Some survey questions did not seem to fit into the five major themes.

Before presenting the themes, it is important to mention that, overall, 14 of the 15 participants noted having had a positive experience within their FLC; there was one respondent, however, who did not acknowledge an impact as a result of participating in the FLC. Also, not all participants answered every question.

*Theme 1:*  
*An Increased Consciousness of the Impact  
of Collectivistic Culture on Latino CSUN Students*

The theme of participants' increased consciousness of the impact of collectivist culture was most often elicited from the following survey question: "In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to advise Latino CSUN students?" Table 3 shows a tally of example response types for this theme. Ten of the 15 respondents experienced an increased level of understanding and awareness of the cultures represented by CSUN's diverse student population. One participant wrote, "I feel I understand diverse and nontraditional students' needs more than I did prior." Another commented, "I am more aware of what 'diversity' is and understanding the struggles that many of our students face—ranging from financial to travel to family obligations." Respondents went on to say that having a firmer understanding and an awareness of the Latino students' pressures—for instance, potential immigration issues, financial issues, family obligations, and the like—helped them to be holistic about the advisement they provided to the students. Taking a more holistic approach enabled the advisors to have a better appreciation of the additional circumstances that could affect Latino students' academic performance. Having learned about the differences between the Latino collectivistic culture and its association with student behavior, participants commented on having an ". . . increased understanding of values and pressures on the students," as one respondent put it.

Armed with what Major and Palmer (2006) describe as "new knowledge" (p. 631) in pedagogical content, participants appeared to make a concerted effort to be culturally competent inside and outside the classroom. One respondent wrote that the FLC provided a clearer understanding of the Latino culture and what additional pressures some students have to overcome to be successful college students. Another participant wrote about the students' competing interests, which may stem from their collectivistic culture, reflecting that these conflicts are perhaps what some of our students face on a daily basis:

I have gained a deeper understanding of first generation college students, of students on whom a family's future is often resting and the pressures of being put into that position at such a young age . . . of students who live in L.A. legally yet may not have all of the documentation necessary to secure work after earning their degree, and of students confronted with the need to overhaul their entire lives because the lives they were living

Table 3  
**Theme 1:**  
**Increased Consciousness of the Impact  
of Collectivistic Culture on Latino CSUN Students**

*Question:*

*In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to advise Latino/a CSUN students?*

<b>Key Term/s</b>	<b>Number of respondents who mentioned key term/s</b>
Cultural understanding/awareness/values/challenges/pressures/obligations	10
Better prepared	3
Awareness of pressures related to AB 540/immigration status/undocumented status	3
Awareness of first-generation students	2
Awareness of holistic advisement	2

prior to coming to CSUN may have involved frequent exposure to and/or involvement in activities that hinder or work against the pursuit of a college education.

Another participant wrote about the importance of family in the Latino collectivistic culture and how this can sometimes hinder college retention:

I tried to think of their culture accordingly as their lifestyle. [The] key word . . . is “family oriented.” Many of Latino CSUN students who drop out of school show . . . a tendency [to feel] that “My family’s problem is our problem. . . . I can’t be selfish and attend school while my family has financial difficulties.”

*Theme 2:*

*A Greater Awareness of Participants’ Impact on Students’ Success*

Table 4 provides a tally summary of participants’ response types related to the following question: “*Since your participation in the FLC, what*

Table 4  
**Theme 2:**  
**Faculty Awareness of their Impact on Students' Success**

*Question:*

*Since your participation in the FLC, what intentional practices have you employed to help students stay in school?*

<b>Key Term/s</b>	<b>Number of respondents who mentioned key term/s</b>
Increase/improve teacher/student communication	5
Intentionally reach out to students/Increase accessibility/availability	3
Increase willingness to be flexible to adjust deadlines for certain situations in consideration of students' personal/emergency obligations	3
Improve interpersonal skills to convey interest in students' success/improve student relations	2
Sharing personal story/improve student relations	2
Improve student empathy	2
AB 540 awareness	1
Address cultural issues as they relate to classroom participation	1
Limit electronic media in class	1
Adjust curriculum to support student success	1
Improved student referrals to campus resources	1
Relate the value of course assignments to students' experiences	1

*intentional practices have you employed to help students stay in school?"* This question best captures the second theme of participants' awareness of their impact on students' success. Five of the respondents wrote that they

had improved their level of communication with their students. Several participants commented on changing their own relational behaviors to improve their interaction with students. One respondent wrote, "I try to be even more patient in understanding my students' needs to convey my interest in their success at CSUN." Another participant wrote about her attempt to foster cooperative relationships with her students: "When I recognize some problem with students, I try to approach in a more humanistic way instead of being policy- and rule-driven." An additional comment was this:

Students need one person who cares about them, shows that they care about them, listens to them and is willing to help them cut through the mountains of red tape they experience that often gets in the way of their progress to graduation.

Three of the respondents said that they had intentionally reached out to their students and increased their level of accessibility and availability. A participant commented that "I've required office hour visits to touch base with students. . . . I've sent e-mails to students if they were falling behind in the first 3 weeks of class." Three of the respondents said that they have increased their willingness to adjust assignment deadlines in consideration for students' emergency obligations. For instance, one said, "Special consideration in relation to course assignments and deadlines are considered in relation to student's special needs & job or family commitments."

Other words and phrases used in response to this question were "improving interpersonal skills," "improving student relations," and "improving student empathy." Respondents mentioned, "sharing personal stories" in the classroom. As an example of sharing stories, a participant illustrated it this way: "In talking about stress management, I shared my personal story in class and with advisees about when I attended CSUN as an undergrad and being a first-generation college student." Another participant described her plan for promoting student success:

(1) Encouraging students; (2) Using empathy to build relationships; (3) Making myself more available for advising and tutoring students; (4) I make myself available by phone and e-mail to all my students so they feel I am responsive and they are supported; (5) It is important to me that my students feel that I care about them personally as well as academically.

Participants also reflected on the importance of listening to students and how that impacts student success: "Listen . . . for what is not being said. Ask questions to gain understanding. Inquire about why students were

originally interested in attending college." Another noted, "providing better listening to students, seeking to understand where they are coming from and what might remain unsaid contributes to their experience of the matter at hand." Several participants commented on the importance of helping students get a long-term view of their education and being able to advise students to think about where they want to be 5, 10, or 25 years from now.

### *Theme 3: An Intentional Shift in Pedagogy*

Table 5 summarizes participants' responses linked to the third theme of a shift in pedagogy, which was most closely linked to the question "*In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to teach Latino/a CSUN students?*" The narrative responses indicated that the participants became more thoughtful about how they teach and, consequently, improved their teaching styles. Three of the respondents revealed that they were now more conscious of their course content. As one commented, "The FLC has made me consciously think about making the content and images of my course materials to be inclusive of this group." Another respondent said, "I now incorporate diversity and cultural contexts in my course materials." Moreover, four of the faculty believed that FLC helped them to become better teachers—for example: "I was positively impacted. . . . I now understand the need for some of these students to have in-class help, mentoring and time to work on their projects." Another respondent noted "improvement in lecture and coursework style and assignments."

The FLC participants described bringing the FLC conversations back to the classroom as a way to raise awareness: "The lectures and discussion groups at FLC definitely exposed me to new and interesting ideas about cultural differences, the psychology of the student, and techniques and strategies I can employ to best support and overcome obstacles our students face." Now cognizant of the role culture plays in their students' lives, the participants discussed specific changes they made to their classroom curriculum to improve students' classroom participation and overall academic performance. Comments from several faculty were as follows: "I have used some of these techniques in eliciting more in-class feedback from students' whose cultures may [make them inclined to] be more reserved when sharing in group discussions"; "I now attempt to incorporate into my courses both individualistic-based and cooperative-based learning experiences"; and "I now provide choices with assignments that allow students to select options that will have them meet the intentions and obligations of the assignment, yet do so in a way that feels consistent with what matters most to them."

Table 5  
**Theme 3:**  
**An Intentional Shift in Pedagogy**

*Question:*

*In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to teach Latino/a CSUN students?*

<b>Key Term/s</b>	<b>Number of respondents who mentioned key term/s</b>
Improved teaching	4
Awareness of Latino collectivistic culture	4
More conscious of content and images in course materials	3
Incorporate into courses both individual and cooperative learning experiences	3
Awareness of cultural barriers/ competing demands	3
Providing additional assistance with strengthening writing skills	1
Restructure course to provide additional assistance during class	1

*Theme 4:*

*A Greater Awareness of Support Services for Students*

Participants discussed the importance of students feeling a sense of connection to the university; they discussed available venues to get students connected, such as peer groups and mentoring. Additionally, participants discussed the importance of campus support services and being able to link students to them. This fourth theme was captured in multiple survey questions (see Table 6). One participant commented, "I think that any way in which we can make navigating through the many departments/groups on campus easier so that students can get their questions answered and concerns addressed would be of great help to

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Table 6  
**Theme 4:**  
**Faculty Awareness of Support Services for Students**

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**Questions:**

*What do you think CSUN can do to be of more assistance to high-risk students?*

*What advice would you give faculty about how to respond to a student who was struggling or thinking about leaving school*

*What advice would you give staff about how to respond to a student who was struggling or thinking about leaving school?*

Key Term/s	Number of respondents who mentioned key term/s
Importance of building connections (e.g. peer and mentoring groups)	9
Knowledge of campus resources / utilizing referrals	4
Providing more services for students	4

*Note.* This theme is captured in multiple questions.  
 One participant offered no response.

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our students." When asked, "What advice would you give other CSUN faculty about how to respond to a student who was struggling or thinking about leaving school?" several of the respondents mentioned the significance of being aware of campus resources so that they can direct students to the appropriate unit on campus that offers the needed support.

Participants also discussed the significance that a mentor plays in a student's academic life. One respondent recommended that there be an active "core mentor" group made up of faculty with whom students routinely check in. Another recommended the development of student learning communities to promote peer-to-peer interaction early on in students' college careers.



*Theme 5:  
A Greater Awareness of the Benefits  
of Face-to-Face Faculty-Faculty Interaction*

Participating in the FLC has given me a chance to further connect with other faculty from different areas and departments. It has given me a sense of being part of a larger community with a common goal of learning how to become a better and a more effective teacher. . . . An opportunity to share our struggles as well as our successes.

The fifth theme, of the benefits of face-to-face faculty-faculty interaction, was echoed by the majority of the respondents, as can be seen in Table 7. When asked, “*What personal strengths have you gained by participating in the FLC at CSUN?*” eight of the respondents reported that they appreciated having a forum to discuss challenges and explore solutions with colleagues. Other words that were used in their responses were “camaraderie,” “community building,” “networking,” and “faculty support.” Another question asked the respondents, “*Is there anything else you would like to add about your participation the FLC?*” (see Table 7). Here, eight of the participants reported that they intensely enjoyed the cohort interaction. This faculty-faculty interaction theme is in line with Major and Palmer’s (2006) finding that there is value in the “exchange of ideas and information about teaching” with other peers because it instills self-confidence (p. 631). One participant wrote, “I’ve used a lot of the knowledge gained from our meetings in the classroom. Our conversations have given me good insights as to what to try out in the classroom.” Respondents seemed to experience a sense of collective contentment in having a private forum where they could meet and discuss anxieties, share insights, improve teaching skills, gain professional development, and learn that their individual experiences were not unique. As one participant stated, “I have met colleagues whom I feel I can turn to with questions or requests for possible resources.” Table 7 captures additional general comments made by the participants.

### **Discussion: Implications for Faculty**

While the U.S. has made progress in making college accessible to increasing numbers of students, we trail behind other industrialized nations in the number of students who actually complete their post-secondary education; the college completion gap is more pronounced among Latinos and African Americans (Santiago & Soliz, 2012). This disparity is evident

Table 7  
**Theme 5:**  
**How FLC Participation Affected Personal Strengths**

**Questions:**

*What personal strengths have you gained by participating in the FLC at CSUN?*

*Is there anything else you would like to add about your participation in the FLC?*

<b>Key Term/s</b>	<b>Number of respondents who mentioned key term/s</b>
Positive experience/ FLC is a good resource	8
Support/ camaraderie/ community building/ networking	8
Deeper awareness/ sensitivity of diversity/ cultural competency	4
Mentoring	3
Teaching strategies	3
Leadership	2
Understanding students' challenges	1
Student empowerment	1
Better understanding of undocumented students	1
Better prepared to support students	1

*Note.* One participant offered no response.

at CSUN as well (Office of Institutional Research, 2012). Studies suggest that faculty development programs such as faculty learning communities contribute to an increase in student retention and success (Concepción et al., 2009; McShannon & Hynes, 2001).

The authors examined the effects of participation in the two FLCs at CSUN: (1) Did FLC participation change faculty members' understanding of teaching and learning in the culturally diverse student body at

CSUN? (2) Did participation have an effect on their teaching strategies and related practices? and (3) Did participation affect their faculty-faculty and/or faculty-student relationships? The study results suggest that the FLCs influenced participants in all three areas.

1. Participants noted an increased understanding of teaching, learning, and the added complexities of advising for our culturally diverse student body. They began to grasp how issues such as pressures related to immigration status could impede students' navigation through college. One participant noted, "I understand diverse and nontraditional students' needs more than I did," and thus felt better prepared to help students as a result of what was learned in the FLC. Cultural competency is crucial for working with a diverse student body, and for helping improve student success (Diller & Moule, 2005; Nicolas et al., 2009).
2. Major and Palmer (2006) found that faculty professional development programs can significantly effect changes in faculty members' roles and their pedagogy, thus leading to changes in their teaching strategies and practices. In this study, faculty reported that they were now incorporating more diversity and cultural context into course materials, "listening for what was not said," providing more assistance with strengthening writing skills, and restructuring courses to provide more help during class.
3. Faculty mentioned feeling an increased sense of camaraderie and support, "being a part of a larger community" with common goals. They echoed an appreciation for being able to explore challenges and solutions with colleagues. This type of shared support could lead to improved faculty-student relationships (Thayer, 2000) and, thus, help to improve student success.

While acknowledging the positive effects reported by the faculty participants, it is important to mention some limitations of the study. For example, the survey instrument used in this study did not provide much opportunity for respondents to give more concrete examples of changes that occurred, or what effects, if any, these changes had. It would be valuable in future studies to include more specific questions or opportu-

nities for respondents to describe modifications. It might also be helpful to include measures that attempt to assess specific changes in faculty's teaching, mentoring, or advising of our culturally diverse student body.

Further, FLCs could address ways in which to get more faculty buy-in. In addition to having FLC discussions led by "experts" in their fields, we recommend that students be invited to tell their stories of personal challenges—bringing self, emotion, and reality to the FLC experience—to deepen faculty awareness. Additionally, more student participation with open dialogue and shared ideas and feelings between faculty and students within the FLC could further increase our understanding of what students need, which may lead to a cultural systemic change, not only within FLCs, but also throughout the larger academic community.

The types of FLC activities described within our University could be used as a guide in developing FLCs at other colleges or universities; however, other locations should consider the unique experiences of the students they serve when developing diversity mindfulness.

## Conclusions

This study provides evidence that FLCs are valuable tools in raising awareness of a diverse student population. Faculty members who participated in an FLC at CSUN described an increased understanding of issues associated with different cultures, such as collectivism versus individualism. FLC participation led most faculty to change their approaches to teaching, mentoring, and advising; participation in the FLCs gave faculty a knowledge of places on campus to direct students to go to for more specific help; and the FLC cohorts developed communities for sharing concerns and helping to find solutions to a myriad of issues related to specific student—and faculty—needs.

While longitudinal and quantitative studies are recommended to evaluate further outcomes, these findings suggest that faculty development programs like FLCs may equip faculty with knowledge and strategies to help close the college completion gap for Latinos.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Throughout the literature, there are multiple terminologies used in referring to people of Latin origin, including Hispanics and Latinas/os (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). In this article the term Latino is used, given that in ethnic/racial politics it is the term most embraced by Latino populations. By referencing Latino in this article, it is the authors' intention to be inclusive of both Latinas and Latinos.

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**Appendix A**  
**Faculty Survey**

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We are investigating the effects of your participation in the Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at CSUN. We will be asking you several questions about your experience with the FLC and its impact on CSUN faculty serving a diverse student population. At the end of the survey, you will also be asked a few demographic questions.

1. What personal strengths have you gained by participating in the FLC at CSUN?
  2. How have you used your strengths in working with a diverse student population at CSUN?
  3. Since your participation in the FLC, what intentional practices have you employed to help students stay in school?
  4. As you think about the students you know on this campus, what are the greatest needs you think they have in relation to being able to succeed and graduate from here?
  5. What advice would you give other CSUN faculty about how to respond to a student who was struggling or thinking about leaving school?
  6. What advice would you give staff about how to respond to a student who was struggling or thinking about leaving school?
  7. What do you think CSUN can do to be of more assistance to high-risk students?
  8. In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to advise Latino/a CSUN students?
  9. In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to advise all CSUN students?
  10. In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to teach Latino/a CSUN students?
  11. In what ways has your participation in the FLC impacted your ability to teach all CSUN students?
  12. Has participation in the FLC impacted your research? If so, in what way?
  13. Is there anything else you would like to add about your participation in the FLC?
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