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**The Story of Creando Conciencia: A Latinx Student-Focused Professional
Learning Community**

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Abstract

Universities continue to see equity gaps in retention and graduation rates for Latinx students. To enhance Latinx student success, a team of Latinx faculty at a HSI developed innovative programming for educators centered on creating culturally sustaining educational spaces for Latinx students. *Creando Conciencia* is an ESCALA Educational

Services, Inc. certified professional learning community (PLC). Using a cohort model, participants were supported by facilitators and coaches as they implemented a project within a course designed to reduce equity gaps. Nine participants completed the pilot year's programming. To assess the effectiveness of the PLC, participants completed a baseline and exit survey which measured participants' understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), HSIs, cultural frameworks, and perceptions of their role as an educator of Latinx students. Open-ended responses revealed participants were more likely to understand the importance of students' backgrounds and cultural assets, enact CRP practices, and were more confident in teaching Latinx students. Creando Conciencia can serve as a model for HSIs looking to develop Latinx student-focused programming centered on CRP, students' strengths, and becoming a Hispanic Thriving Institution.

Keywords: professional development; culturally responsive pedagogy; professional learning community; university students; faculty

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Universities across the U.S. have seen a profound shift in student demographics as many Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) have become Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) or Emerging HSIs. Over the past three decades, the number of HSIs has tripled to more than 600 institutions in 2023 (Excelencia in Education, 2024). At the same time, however, Hispanic/Latinx/é¹ populations continue to earn college degrees at lower rates (21%) than African American (28%), European American (42%), and Asian American (59%) populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Large and consistent equity gaps (also termed achievement gaps) also exist in academic performance metrics between racially minoritized students and their more represented peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Change is slow despite educators and institutions working to address structural inequities and biases. Fundamental changes are needed that value and seek out the experiences, cultural knowledge, ways of knowing, and strengths inherent in Latinx students to reduce students' feelings of being "marginalized, alienated, isolated, unsupported, and unwelcomed by their peers and faculty members" (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 303). The purpose of the current study is to describe and assess a Latinx student-focused professional learning community (PLC) in a university setting. *Creando Conciencia: Empowering Hispanic Learning* is the first at its institution to specifically focus on culturally sustaining educational spaces for Latinx students. This article will cover the development, implementation, assessment, and attempts to institutionalize the data-driven PLC.

¹ In this paper, Hispanic is primarily used to refer to government designations such as HSIs while Latinx is used to refer to the diverse group of people originating from Latin America. Latiné is a similar gender inclusive term (Miranda et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

There is a myriad of contributors to equity gaps for Latinx students, some of which educators can control and some which they cannot. As educators, we can structure the content and structure of our courses to disproportionately benefit minoritized students by embracing culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Culturally responsive pedagogy views instructors as institutional change agents for social justice and equity (Gay 2018). The Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Framework is a collection of empirical, strength-based pedagogies that view cultural differences as assets in both teaching and learning (New York State Education Department, 2018). This framework emphasizes the importance of educators creating a welcoming environment that affirms racial, linguistic, and cultural identities, elevates historically marginalized voices, and empowers students as agents of social change.

Racially minoritized students thrive when learning environments utilize inclusive curriculum and context diversity by honoring multiple cultural frameworks (e.g., individualistic and collectivistic; low and high context) (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016). Since many U.S. higher education learning environments are heavily biased towards low context or individualistic cultural frameworks, students from higher context or collectivistic backgrounds, such as many Latinx students, experience a cultural mismatch and must adapt to survive. In courses where Latinx cultural frameworks are deprivileged and underutilized, Latinx students are more likely to perform poorly or drop out (Ibarra, 2001). However, when educators intentionally create diverse learning activities and environments, Latinx students are more likely to thrive.

Faculty Professional Development

Faculty professional development fosters change in educators' classroom practices, attitudes, and beliefs; and has been linked to increased student learning outcomes, retention, and academic success (Concepción et al., 2009; Guskey, 2002; McShannon & Hynes, 2001). In response to the demographic shifts noted above, there is an increased need for faculty development programs to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (Beach et al., 2016) and move away from a colorblind ideology that ignores or downplays ethnic and cultural group differences (Hachfeld et al., 2015). A “one-size-fits-all” approach to education only benefits students that universities were designed to serve.

Some of the most successful professional development programs for educators are faculty learning communities (FLCs) and professional learning communities (PLCs)² because of their long-term nature, group format, and focus on critical reflection (Beach & Cox, 2009). The PLC in the current study, *Creando Conciencia*, addresses each of Malcom-Piqueux and Bensimon's (2017) guidelines for professional development programs that enact systematic equity-minded institutional change around equity gaps: *Creando Conciencia* is data-driven (in both content and assessment) and centers on implementing high-impact practices in the classroom that positively impact Latinx students.

FLCs that specifically address Latinx students or HSIs are sparse. Lisagor and colleagues (2013) outlined two FLCs at a comprehensive teaching university with the goal of increasing Latinx student success. Faculty who completed the program

² PLCs are broader than FLCs because they are open to many different types of educators.

experienced improvements in mentoring, increased awareness of cultural issues specific to Latinx students, increased knowledge of campus resources, and a stronger sense of faculty support. The authors conclude that FLCs can raise awareness of diverse student populations, increase cultural knowledge and pedagogical practices, and strengthen faculty-student relationships, all of which may positively impact equity gaps (Lisagor et al., 2013).

Developing Creando Conciencia

Creando Conciencia was developed at a small, rural comprehensive teaching university that became an HSI in 2013. Latinx students typically come to the university from more diverse areas and report a cultural mismatch when they arrive. Although the university enrolls Latinx students, it is not adequately serving this population, leading many students to leave (Garcia, 2019). In an effort to better serve Latinx students, the university began a partnership with ESCALA Educational Services, Inc. in 2017 to implement equity programming centered around culturally responsive pedagogy and equitable practices for Latinx students. ESCALA is a consortium of HSI practitioners based in the U.S. Southwest that provides professional development and programming to college educators at HSIs. Over two years, more than 40 faculty were sent to ESCALA's 27-hour Certificate in College Teaching and Learning in HSIs in an attempt to shift instructional culture campus-wide. Through this process, challenges to creating a campus “culture of equity” were identified, including racism, otherization, and difficulties institutionalizing concepts from ESCALA.

In May 2020, the ESCALA collaboration moved forward in a new direction to create internal, self-sustaining HSI professional development. Creando Conciencia was

developed over several years through the collaboration of multiple stakeholders: HSI grant directors, ESCALA faculty/staff alumni, Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI), the HSI Advisory Committee, the Learning Center, and the Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL). The aim of these collective efforts is to shift the campus culture from a Latinx-enrolling to a Latinx-thriving institution, one that graduates Latinx students at equitable levels and has a strong Latinx organizational cultural identity (Garcia, 2019).

Creando Conciencia - Empowering Hispanic Learning is a year-long PLC developed with the oversight of ESCALA and based on the ESCALA model. *Creando Conciencia* is Spanish for “creating consciousness or awareness”. Its vision is to raise awareness of the institution’s identity as an HSI and the formidable strengths of Hispanic/Latinx students, staff, and faculty to create culturally sustaining learning environments. In this program, “learning environments” are educational spaces where interactions between educators and students occur to pursue a learning goal (this could range from classroom, offices, centers, etc., and can be formal, informal, or non-formal).

The inaugural *Creando Conciencia* team was comprised of four Latinx faculty who developed content and served as facilitators, one Latinx faculty who led assessment, and three coaches. Faculty facilitators were trained by ESCALA in culturally responsive facilitation and an additional 8-10 people were included in ESCALA-led workshops on faculty curriculum development. The final result, *Creando Conciencia*, included several curricular elements and materials of ESCALA's Certificate in College Teaching & Learning in Hispanic Serving Institutions (CTL-HSI) Course and Culturally Responsive Practices for STEM Faculty Teaching Latinx Students (STEM-X) Course,

loaned with permission to the initial pilot in order to ensure success. The development process took 18-24 months with a small pilot program being launched in Fall 2022.

Creando Conciencia: Empowering Hispanic Learning

Creando Conciencia has four learning outcomes for its participants: (1) To critically reflect on one's current understanding of Latinx students at the institution and their cultural-based strengths; (2) To explore, study, and reflect on specific topics and practices in the literature associated with culturally sustaining educational and community spaces with particular attention to Latinx populations; (3) To revitalize one's educational resources and practices using a culturally sustaining lens; and (4) To create and support culturally sustaining educational and community spaces for Latinx students by increasing students' connections, social integration, and sense of belonging to the campus and community.

Creando Conciencia's curriculum focuses on culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks, Latinx students' cultural assets, exploring data, engaging in continuous critical reflection to reduce bias, and a community of professional learners. The model for the program utilizes trained coaches and facilitators to guide participants through modules that examine their educational resources and practices using a culturally sustaining lens. Each module implements a variety of learning methods which took approximately 10 hours to complete: (1) prework readings, prerecorded content videos, and reflection questions; (2) a workshop led by coaches and facilitators on select topics culminating in an in-depth reflection; (3) a faculty, staff, or student panel or presentation on a particular topic and a Q&A session; (4) post module assignments in the form of actionable reflective equity exercises. Examples of modules include

Understanding and analyzing equity gaps for Latinx students; Equity in assessments; and Boosting engagement with contact M.E.S.H. (Multiple Culturally Sustaining Opportunities, Embedded Structures for Hyper-Engagement) (Otero-Díaz & Salazar, 2021).

At the end of the first semester, participants formally identify a Targeted Inquiry Project where they implement inclusive and equitable practices in a course of their choosing. In the second semester, participants have monthly one-on-one meetings with their coaches and continue to learn from faculty, staff, student panels and presentations. During the summer, participants analyze equity data from the Targeted Inquiry Project course and reflect on the outcomes. During the third semester, participants present the results of their project to Creando Conciencia staff, cohort members, and the campus community.

Data is an important part of every step of Creando Conciencia. Participants analyze pre- and post-equity data in a course of their choosing via disaggregated grades (e.g., course assignments and final grade). They also have the option to collect and analyze qualitative data from students. Assessment of the program involves pre- and post-surveys for each module and a baseline and exit survey, the latter of which is the focus of the current study.

Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the pilot year of the Creando Conciencia PLC through changes in university faculty's knowledge and views about culturally sustainable teaching practices and Latinx students. We hypothesized there would be: (1) an increase in knowledge related to culturally responsive teaching

practices and HSI, (2) a positive change in mindset regarding Latinx students (e.g., from deficit-based to strengths/assets-based), and (3) greater confidence in educators' ability to use practices that particularly benefit Latinx students from baseline to completion of the program.

Method

Participants

Although the PLC is designed for all educators to participate, the pilot year cohort was comprised of college instructors based on convenience. Participants were primarily recruited from faculty teaching courses affiliated with an HSI grant. In Fall 2022, 12 instructors started the PLC (all colleges with the university were represented). The average age of participants was 47.90 ($SD = 9.95$; range 36-68 years). The average number of years teaching at the university was 12.13 ($SD = 12.32$; range 2-41 years) with 55.6% of participants identifying as tenured/tenure-track faculty (44.4% as lecturers). One-fourth of participants identified as first-generation college students. In terms of gender, 58.3% identified as men, 33.3% as women, and 8.3% as non-binary. For ethnicity, 58.3% identified as White, 8.3% as Middle Eastern, 8.3% as Asian, and 25% preferred to self-describe or did not state their ethnicity. Last, one-fourth of participants ($n = 3$) previously participated in an ESCALA summer institute.

Procedure

Participants completed programmatic assessments as part of Creando Conciencia. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to answer research questions in multiple ways and to capture participants' voices. Surveys were completed online via the survey management platform Qualtrics. The baseline survey was

completed before the start of the program in August of 2022 and the exit survey was completed during the week of final presentations in October of 2023. Both surveys took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants were not directly compensated for completing each survey but received a \$3,000 stipend for completing the PLC. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Measures

For the baseline survey, participants completed a series of questions assessing demographic variables (age; gender; race/ethnicity; highest education level; first-generation student status; years in higher education; position on campus).

The baseline and exit surveys assessed knowledge and views about culturally sustainable teaching practices and Latinx students. Specifically, participants were asked about current teaching practices and their role as an educator at an HSI. Questions were modeled after a survey created and used by a research group on campus assessing the impact of ESCALA on educational practices at the institution. These questions were adapted from the institution's Center for Teaching and Learning FLC Goals Inventory which were adapted from Sandell and colleagues (2004, p. 59-61) and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Survey and Diversity Modules (National Institute for Transformation and Equity, 2017). Scales used in the current study all achieved at least acceptable reliability ($\alpha > .70$).

Understanding of HSIs. Participants completed 5 items on their knowledge of various typologies of HSIs measured on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha_{\text{baseline}} = .80$; $\alpha_{\text{exit}} = .84$). A sample item is: "I understand what it means to be a Hispanic Thriving institution."

Role as an Educator at an HSI. Participants were asked to reflect on their role as an educator at an HSI. This scale contained 12 items measured on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha_{\text{baseline}} = .92$; $\alpha_{\text{exit}} = .77$). A sample item is: “I am knowledgeable about the scholarship and literature on best practices for Latinx students in higher education.”

Engaging in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Participants were asked to think about the past academic semester and report on the frequency of engaging in culturally sustaining teaching practices. This scale contained 12 items measured on a Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*; $\alpha_{\text{baseline}} = .82$; $\alpha_{\text{exit}} = .89$). A sample item is: “Make efforts to get to know the backgrounds of students whom you work with.”

Responsibility for Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Institution and Self). Participants were asked how important it was for them to implement culturally sustainable teaching practices, and for their institution to implement them. This scale contained 9 items measured on a Likert-type scale (1 = *not important at all* to 5 = *absolutely essential*; institution scale: $\alpha_{\text{baseline}} = .97$; $\alpha_{\text{exit}} = .90$; self scale: $\alpha_{\text{baseline}} = .72$; $\alpha_{\text{exit}} = .86$). A sample item is: “Value the diverse forms of knowledge from students’ cultural communities.”

Program Outcomes (exit survey only). Additional quantitative and qualitative questions were asked in the exit survey to assess the overall impact of the program. Participants rated on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) whether each of the four program learning outcomes were met. Participants also had an opportunity to comment on their ratings for each learning outcome.

Open-ended questions. Participants were asked to reflect on the following open-ended questions at baseline and again during the exit survey (language was revised for use in the exit survey): (1) Please describe your approach to being an educator at an HSI, (2) How would you define student success?, (3) Describe how previous professional development experiences influenced your approach to being an educator at [the institution], (4) Describe how previous professional development experience has catalyzed shifts in your thinking about how you conduct your educational activities, (5) How do cultural frameworks influence your educational work?, and (6) What are your expectations for this PLC?

Results

A total of nine instructors completed the pilot year of *Creando Conciencia*. The three participants who did not complete the program stopped soon after starting due to capacity constraints. Eight participants completed both baseline and exit surveys, with some missing data.

Quantitative Analysis

We ran paired sample *t*-tests between participants' mean scores in the baseline and exit surveys, although it should be noted that these analyses were underpowered. To achieve a power of .8 with a .05 alpha, assuming a medium effect size, we would need close to 30 participants, or about three times the participants in our study. Because we ran multiple paired *t*-tests, we used a Bonferroni-corrected *p*-value of .01 ($.05/5 = .01$) to reduce the likelihood of a Type I error, or a false positive. Using the Bonferroni corrected value ($p < .01$), none of our tests reached statistical significance (see Table 1). If using the uncorrected *p*-value, increases in participants' understanding

of HSIs, view of their role as an educator at an HSI, and engagement in culturally responsive pedagogy would have been statistically significant, which indicates that changes are in the expected direction and could become statistically significant with a larger sample size.

Table 1

Paired Sample t-test for Outcome Measures

	Baseline		Exit		t-test	p-value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Understanding of HSIs	3.63	0.90	4.38	0.61	-2.36	.050
Role as an Educator at an HSI	4.83	1.39	5.96	0.57	-3.16	.016
Engaging in CRP	3.30	0.58	3.85	0.86	-3.23	.018
CRP: Institutional responsibility	4.43	0.96	4.57	0.40	1.28	.248
CRP: Your responsibility	4.70	0.33	4.41	0.58	-0.54	.607

Note. Scales ranged from 1 to 5, except Role as an Educator at an HSI which ranged from 1 to 7. Bonferroni-corrected p -value was $p < .01$.

Regarding whether the program outcomes of Creando Conciencia were met, averages for each program outcome were 4 (“agree”) or above (see Table 2). When combining the four items, the average was 4.19 ($SD = 0.64$). In the write-in comments, program outcome 4 (increasing students’ connections, social integration, and sense of belonging) had the lowest endorsement and the most responses. One participant suggested this outcome would only be met via additional programming outside the PLC.

Similarly, another participant stated this learning outcome was outside the scope of the PLC but could “be indirectly achieved through the actions of some participants.”

Qualitative Analysis

To analyze the open-ended questions in the survey, we used thematic coding (Braun & Clark, 2006). Because we asked participants the same questions at baseline and exit surveys, the main focus of the analysis was on how participants changed over time. It is important to note our small sample size limited the ability to achieve saturation in themes.

Table 2

Were Program Learning Outcomes Met?

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. To critically reflect on your current understanding of Latinx students at [the institution] and their cultural-based strengths.	4.38	0.52
2. To explore, study, and reflect on specific topics and practices in the literature associated with culturally sustaining educational and community spaces with particular attention to Latinx populations.	4.13	0.99
3. To revitalize your own educational resources and practices using a culturally sustaining lens.	4.25	0.89
4. To create and support culturally sustaining educational and community spaces for Latinx students by increasing students' connections, social integration, and sense of belonging to the campus and community.	4.00	1.07

Approach to Being an Educator at an HSI

Faculty participants were asked at baseline and exit surveys to describe their approach to being an educator at an HSI. Many participants were quite advanced in their responses at baseline, described using “culturally appropriate teaching methodologies”

that catered to different ways of learning (e.g., active learning), relationship building through sharing experiences, connecting material to students' lives, and celebrating students' heritage. Participants with advanced responses did not change much from baseline to exit. However, among these responses, only half made specific reference to Latinx students or being an HSI.

For the few participants who did demonstrate change from baseline to exit, their baseline responses focused on broad equity-based practices such as “meeting students where they are” and “making adjustments” based on students' needs. After participating in Creando Conciencia, participants' responses were much more specific, centering around three themes: the inclusion of cultural frameworks, tangible equitable practices, and asset-based approaches. Participants' exit responses now included the addition of cultural frameworks with special attention to augmenting high context learning environments. An example of more equitable and specific language in an instructor's approach was: “I try to proactively seek ways to promote belonging among my students and continually try to create a learning environment that can equitably empower all students to become successful.” Lastly, participants changed from a deficit-mindset (“include themes relevant to HSI students like inequalities/disparities in access to resources”) to an asset-based approach (“tap into student's biographical agency and cultivate learning around their personal and geographic experiences”). It is important to note that some responses in the exit survey still did not mention Latinx students or being an HSI.

Definition of Student Success

Participants were asked at baseline and during the exit survey how they defined student success. Definitions of student success varied (e.g., focused on the classroom and grades vs. exclusively social justice oriented). Almost all responses (especially at baseline) included students making progress toward and attaining educational or life goals. After participating in Creando Conciencia, most participants had broadened definitions of student success which fell into two themes: student application of knowledge and achieving equitable student outcomes through the use of culturally responsive pedagogy. The most common expanded definition included application to students' lives: "carrying forward knowledge," "gaining a set of tools that they can use in their lives," and "continual learning." Next, participants were more likely to include equity-focused goals: "all students that show up and do the work can achieve the learning outcomes of my field of study". One participant cited specific culturally responsive pedagogical practices they used to achieve equitable outcomes: "critical reflection on the course material" and having students "culturally connect with course material." Overall, participants' definitions of student success changed in ways consistent with culturally responsive pedagogy and the goals of Creando Conciencia.

Influences of Professional Development/PLC in Educational Approach

Participants were asked to describe how previous professional development experiences influenced their approach of being an educator at the institution. Interestingly, every participant had previous professional development experience, although the foci varied. The most common topics of previous professional development included general teaching strategies like active learning and assessment strategies. Some

participants completed professional development on equity and institutional racism while others earned a certificate from ESCALA.

After participating in Creando Conciencia, participants were asked how the PLC influenced their approach of being an educator at the institution; three themes emerged: participants were informed, attuned, and empowered. Regarding gaining knowledge, one participant said, “I feel more informed about cultural differences, and more aware of how improving my cultural understanding will help me be more effective as a teacher.” Another participant’s approach was now data-informed:

During the PLC was the first time that I examined demographic patterns in grades and success in my courses. It was eye opening! I realized that just because I did not perceive any inequity, that did not mean it was not there.

Other participants noted that after participating, they were more reflective and more thoughtful about their courses and how they structure course material, assignments, and assessments.

Armed with new information and new insights, participants felt empowered to make changes in their courses: “I feel more empowered to help Hispanic students succeed in my courses and more broadly.” Overall, although participants’ approaches may have already leaned toward improving equitable outcomes for students, Creando Conciencia further fueled this approach and shed light on the specific challenges and assets of Latinx students.

Shifts from Professional Development/PLC in Educational Approach

Participants were asked during baseline how previous professional development catalyzed shifts in their thinking about their educational activities. Previous professional

development (excluding ESCALA) helped participants integrate the following pedagogical practices: active learning, best practices for novice learners, decentering tests and quizzes, giving students control over their learning (e.g., topics covered), and focusing on student success beyond academic success.

After completing *Creando Conciencia*, participants' changes fell into 3 themes: shifts in themselves and their perceived responsibilities as instructors, their views of Latinx students, and pedagogical practices in the classroom. First, participants described changes in how they perceive themselves as an educator. One participant said, "The PLC made me a more reflective instructor" which led them to make substantial changes in their course that semester. A couple participants noted changes in their self-efficacy as an instructor, such as "I used to be not very confident. Now I feel more confident as a teacher, especially teaching Latinx students". Another instructor who had previously questioned their pedagogical approach at the university said, "[*Creando Conciencia*] gave me the confidence to trust the training that I received during my master's degree."

Participants also described a change in their sense of responsibility to students: "I am much more aware of my role in designing and delivering courses that will help all students succeed by paying attention to cultural differences and not accepting performance gaps as somehow inevitable." In alignment with program learning outcomes, one participant described adopting an asset-based approach in how they view Latinx students: "I have moved away from the deficiency point of view with respect to the performance gap and am learning to see the cultural differences in my students as a source of strength."

Many participants spoke of a shift that led to integrating more “culturally relevant topics into my assignments and readings”. For example, one participant noted, “now I try to co-construct some of my course content throughout the semester by asking my students what they would like to explore.” Another instructor removed a significant amount of content from the syllabus to focus more on what was most relevant for students. After completing Creando Conciencia, participants gained confidence and felt empowered to revitalize their educational approaches to better support Latinx students.

The Influence of Cultural Frameworks in Educational Work

Participants were asked at baseline and in the exit survey how cultural frameworks influence their educational work. Prior to participating in Creando Conciencia, about half of participants knew of cultural frameworks from ESCALA or were scholars of related literature. In the baseline survey, these participants discussed their intentionality in integrating culture as a lens of interpretation in their courses.

In exit survey responses, three themes arose: greater understanding, opportunities, and challenges. After participating in Creando Conciencia, one participant who was previously unfamiliar with cultural frameworks noted, “I am more conscientious about applying both low and high context materials in my teaching, because now I understand how that can affect the learning of students from different cultural upbringings.”

Many participants were excited to be creative about cultural frameworks in their courses. One participant reflected, “I have a lot of opportunities to incorporate culturally relevant material into my classes.” However, participants also recognized challenges in incorporating cultural frameworks due to their own biases and needs, or

the type of course they teach. More than one participant discussed the importance, but difficulty, of moving beyond their own cultural framework (low context) in course design and activities. Another participant stated:

I have a very traditional individualistic approach. I feel a great richness fill my work here when I allow myself to get to know students in a more casual or one-on-one manner. But I struggle to make myself more available, feeling that I am stretched pretty thin as it is - and need time to myself.

Overall, after completing *Creando Conciencia*, participants who were both familiar and unfamiliar with cultural frameworks were now inspired to integrate cultural frameworks into course creation and design.

Expectations for Creando Conciencia

Participants were asked at baseline what their expectations for the PLC were, and during the exit survey, whether those expectations were met. Four themes arose at baseline: (1) to improve knowledge, skills, and abilities; (2) to improve Latinx students' retention and success; (3) to engage in personal reflection about their backgrounds; and (4) to network, learn, and share experiences with colleagues. The most frequently endorsed expectations for the PLC were to improve "knowledge, skills, and abilities with respect to my role as an educator at an HSI." Several participants mentioned their desire to learn and dive deep into the literature around Latinx student success and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Participants were excited to positively improve Latinx students' retention and success in their classes. In one such student-centered response, a participant expressed the desire to be "more aware and sensitive to our student's cultural needs, and to be

able to connect more with my students in the classroom.” Participants also looked forward to opportunities for personal reflection as they sought to better understand how their background impacts their effectiveness as an educator. Lastly, several participants were eager to network, learn from colleagues, share experiences with colleagues, and share what they learned with their departments. One participant stated, “I want to share my insights and innovations with my colleagues” while another wanted to “inspire other STEM teachers to do the same.”

Out of the available responses ($n = 6$), all noted that their expectations were met. A couple participants stated their expectations were exceeded with one participant responding, “Yes. I believe that Creando Conciencia should be mandatory for all faculty.” The same participant noted in the comments that Creando Conciencia improved their sense of belonging and feeling valued at the university: “Through this process, I have felt like I belong at [the institution] for the first time since I started.”

Three participants noted personal and programmatic limitations. One participant reflected that although expectations were met, they could have gotten more out of the program if they invested more time reflecting, doing homework, and processing the content with others. Another participant identified program organization as a place for improvement, but also recognized the PLC was in its first year. Lastly, a participant requested to learn more directly from Latinx students, as well as Latinx facilitators’ experiences as students.

Discussion

The goal of Creando Conciencia is to empower educators to create culturally responsive, equitable educational spaces that validate, engage, and inspire Latinx

students to leverage their full spectrum of assets as they pursue their educational and professional goals. Overall, in this pilot study, we found evidence that Creando Conciencia was associated with various changes in participants that aligned with program outcomes and institutional goals. Instructors were empowered with data and pedagogical tools to reduce or eliminate equity gaps in the classroom.

In terms of the first hypothesis, given our underpowered statistical analyses, we did not find quantitative evidence of instructor change in the desired outcomes. Participants' scores at baseline for these scales were quite high (e.g., $M = 4.4$ on a 5-point scale) suggesting that the majority of participants already viewed these practices as important. Furthermore, similar studies at the institution found that faculty were generally very supportive of implementing highly equitable classroom practices (Villarreal et al., 2023), and a peer-to-peer equity-based faculty professional development program was effective in changing faculty pedagogical perceptions (Villarreal et al., 2022).

Not only did Creando Conciencia participants acknowledge that these practices were important, but qualitative evidence indicated that participants were more likely to enact culturally responsive practices after completing the PLC. In open-ended responses, instructors were more likely to know about and use culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom after participating in the PLC. This was most evident in participants' new definitions of student success, discussion of how the PLC influenced their educational approach, and described shifts in their educational approach. Overall, participants became much more specific in describing culturally relevant pedagogical practices used to achieve their goals. As a result, participants' pedagogical practices

went beyond their intentions, an important goal of culturally responsive pedagogy (Hailu et al., 2017).

For the second hypothesis, we found evidence of changes in participants' views of Latinx students and their communities in open-ended responses (i.e., Approach to being an educator at an HSI, Influence of PLC in educational approach, and Shifts from PLC in educational approach). Some participants specifically used the language "strengths-based" or "asset-based" in describing pedagogy, while others highlighted shifts in course content (e.g., not only referencing disparities and inequities when it comes to Latinx peoples). One participant who spoke Spanish directly addressed Latinx students' linguistic wealth for them to feel empowered (Yosso, 2005). These results are promising since programs attempting to change educators' deficit mindsets frequently fall short of their intentions (Sleeter, 1992).

Lastly, we found evidence for our third hypothesis in open-ended responses. In the question about shifts in participants' educational approaches, educators referenced increases in their confidence levels, both in using culturally responsive pedagogies and in teaching Latinx students. It should be noted that boosted confidence does not necessarily lead to change or positive outcomes; in some cases, it may lead to inflated egos without application or change. For confidence to positively impact teaching practices, professional development must go beyond general information to elicit critical reflection and increase competence (Tucker-Smith, 2021). Completing a Targeted Inquiry Project in a supportive and structured environment held participants accountable for implementing culturally responsive practices.

Overall, participants' responses revealed shifts in how they conceptualize their educational spaces. After completing the PLC, participants were more likely to understand the importance of and consider their students' backgrounds, enact culturally responsive pedagogical practices, and were more confident as educators to Latinx students. Participants who previously completed ESCALA experienced most of these shifts prior to participating in Creando Conciencia, but they continued to perceive positive changes in themselves during and after the PLC. This demonstrates the need for ongoing professional development and critical reflection.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this is an empirically based PLC that has been certified by leaders in the field, we must recognize that it is also a pilot study. Our small sample size resulted in underpowered statistical analyses which limited our conclusions. Ideally, we would like both qualitative and quantitative evidence of the program's effectiveness. As the program continues, we aim to expand our program assessment to include the voices of students, data from participants' projects, and yearly follow-up surveys to measure continual growth.

The pilot year cohort of Creando Conciencia was unique in ways that may not generalize to future cohorts. Participants in the pilot study all indicated interest in participating. Some participants had already been through some type of ESCALA programming and were familiar with concepts like cultural frameworks. Many participants were already invested in and knowledgeable about topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., the "choir" as outlined by Wood & Harris, 2015). Future cohorts will likely have less knowledge related to Latinx student success and less

motivation or different motivation than the first-year cohort, which may impact overall engagement and involvement in the program.

To maximize response rate, future data collection should occur in-person.

Attrition of participants was also a concern. Ideally, these educators would participate in the following year or at a more convenient time.

Implications for Educators at HSIs

Ongoing goals of Creando Conciencia include institutionalization, sustainability, funding, staffing, and program integrity. McNair and colleagues (2020) found that professional development for faculty is most successful when it secures an institutional commitment. Ideally, the PLC will be institutionalized such that it is housed in a permanent academic unit and has dedicated funding for both staff and participants.

Adequate compensation for PLC staff can be in the form of release time or additional financial compensation. This is especially important if the staff identifies as Latinx since educators of color often experience cultural taxation in the form of heavier serving workloads because of their identities (Padilla, 1994).

In addition to PLC staff being compensated, educators going through the PLC must also be adequately compensated (Blanton & Stylianou, 2009). This is especially true for lecturers and staff who do not get credit for service work via the tenure process. Completing the program is a substantial undertaking that should be recognized. Furthermore, after the completion of the program, faculty should be incentivized to continually reflect on and assess their classroom practices and equity outcomes as part of a larger departmental, college-wide, and institutional commitment to equitable learning outcomes.

Creando Conciencia exists because of the persistence of faculty and staff who want better experiences and outcomes for Latinx students. The mere existence of Latinx student-focused professional development is meaningful in and of itself at campuses that are not yet HSI Thriving institutions. The more faculty and staff who complete intensive and meaningful professional development opportunities like Creando Conciencia, the more equity leaders and allies on campus to increase HSI servingness. Over time, this can lead to positive changes in reducing equity gaps and improving campus culture.

Conclusion

Faculty professional development programs focused on equitable student outcomes must be explicit in addressing cultural strengths and be informed by data to create lasting change. This study outlines the development and implementation of a year-long Latinx student-focused professional learning community centered around culturally sustaining pedagogy which can be used as a model for HSIs seeking to become Hispanic Thriving Institutions. The results of the pilot year are promising, yet continued efforts are needed to support educators in transforming their educational spaces to empower Latinx students.

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