

Democracy's College

Episode 3: Educational Achievement and Outcomes along the Academic Life-Course of Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at ocrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Angel Luis Velez, a research assistant at OCCRL, talks with Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira, an associate professor of Higher Education at University of Maryland, College Park, on understanding community context and institutional responses associated with educational achievement and outcomes along the academic life-course of racial and ethnic minorities.

Angel Luis Velez: Dr. Espiño Lira joined the Maryland faculty in 2012 as an assistant professor in the student affairs concentration at University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Espiño Lira's contributions to the field of student affairs administration and higher education focus on understanding how institutional cultures, policies, and practices, as well as community context, affect and inform educational achievement, outcomes, and experiences along the P-20 pipeline for racial and ethnic minorities, particularly for Latinas and Latinos. Dr. Espiño Lira draws upon cultural assets, traditions, and personal elements of resiliency at the individual, familial, community, and institutional levels to illustrate mechanisms within the educational system that can lead to success.

Angel Luis Velez: Dr. Espiño Lira how are you today?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: I am doing very well. Thank you very much for inviting me to the podcast.

Angel Luis Velez: Looking at your research expertise, I can see that you place central attention to issues of equity in higher education using cultural assets and traditions, especially critical race theory, Chicano family theory, and even using community cultural wealth by Thad Yosso. What were the factors or experiences that led you to your current research interest, and why is this research significant to higher education access and equity?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: One of the most important aspects of conducting any research is knowing whether it resonates within you. It is something that I often talk to my doctoral students about this: Can you wake up in the middle of the night and be willing to work on the project? And so for me it is a question that I don't think I have ever been able to fully answer and it's: How did I, as a first-generation college student, manage to go through these different educational systems and now find a really strong career being a faculty member? This is not something that I knew, anyone who was a professor. I saw them on T.V. maybe and television shows, but it wasn't something that we had access to at all. And yet, that seemed to be the path that I took. And I think part of that is not just thinking about it from the individual level, but really thinking about how systems are put in place from a very early age to siphon people into different tracks. And we know this with academic tracking as an example, the ways in which children are tracked into a vocational track or academic track. I happened to be tracked throughout my childhood through academic tracking and honors classes, advanced placement, and those kinds of courses that allowed me to enter into a college curriculum even in high school, and then advance into college. That happened for me and not members of my own family. It wasn't because we had different

values or that we were taught differently. I mean we had the same family structure, and so it is a question that I do not think that I will ever be able to fully address. And so that is the quest that I have is this one question: About how did this happen for me and not for others? I don't really think it was just about me as an individual, but how I fit into this greater cog. Right? I am a cog within this greater machine that weeds students out. That particularly happens at the community college level. And we know that it occurs when they're accessing and trying to think about affordability. When you get the sticker shock from the onset you think "well I can't really go to a four-year university so I will try my hand at community college." But we know that there are community college students who actually end up spending more than if they had gone straight through to a four-year college. That often happens. So there is a disconnect between trying to have an understanding of how to work that system, in terms of financial aid and access and opportunity. We also know that there are not transfer articulation agreements across all institution types. So we have community college students who are taking credits that will never transfer. And they lose time and they lose money, when they try to transfer. The whole notion that are even different tracks within community colleges. That some are, their intent is to be in college so that they can transfer to a four-year, and then there are some who are there to receive specific certification and training. And so, a community college is having to do multiple kinds of services and fulfilling the needs of multiple types of student populations in ways that our four-year institutions really do not have to think a lot about and do not really see themselves in relationship often with community colleges

Angel Luis Velez: Why equity is important in your research?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: I think it is important in my research because it is important for our students. We have changing demographics. Everybody talks about these changing and shifting demographics, but the reality is that our students in K-12 education are changing. They are a different face but they also have a different lived experience. So why are we not trying to figure out better ways to educate our children? So I think: How do we create practices that not only help to sustain children in K-12 education but help them to aspire to college if that is the avenue that they wish to take? And then help them to stay there and pursue there and then aspire to other opportunities, whether that is graduate school, or professional school, being entrepreneurs, or giving back. There are different ways in which to contribute to our society. So I think we are not creating systems that are in place to support those students to be able to see what is possible. Right now, we are only dictating that for certain communities there are only certain avenues that you can take.

Angel Luis Velez: Thank you for that insightful answer. I started at a community college myself. I was tracked also to do more of a vocational, more of a certificate, and it was not until my brother actually transferred to a four-year institution that I actually thought that I could actually make it to the four-year and graduate. And so, I agree with you that we need better systems in place, especially articulation agreements.

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: Absolutely, I will say also as an undergraduate I went to a Hispanic-serving institution and had no idea that I was in an HSI. Although we were probably 60% Latino on that campus, I didn't understand that there was a difference between the experiences that I had as an undergrad and being at a PWI. It wasn't until I went to graduate school that I realized that most of the people were not going to look like me. I had no idea that was going to happen. It was quite a culture shock, when I went to a predominantly white institution.

Angel Luis Velez: Thank you. You talk a lot about stories to tell the experiences of Latina/Latino students, administrators, and faculty in the educational pipeline and how those are rooted in inequity and historical factors. Can you talk a little about your research in that area?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: Well one of the things that I think is very important is that we understand where we came from. That is something that was always taught to me. You do not know where you are going if you don't know where you have been. To acknowledge that there are people who paved the way for us, that is one of the things that I try to do, when I think about the work. It is to look back at how particularly Mexican-American children have been treated in educational systems. Inevitably how that is playing out even in today's society, the view of who our communities are and how we can contribute. So, I think that really dictates for me the kind of work that I am trying to do is develop these counter-narratives. Not just counter-narratives so that I resist these narratives about our communities, these myths and stereotypes. It is also about empowering our community to believe that it is possible. That there are new pathways that we can blaze for the future generations that will be important. So, I think that is an important aspect that we have to be always conscious about is how laws and policies they can be changed and there is more that we have to do and it happens at the grass roots level, but then it also happens at university leadership levels. And so I think that that is something that we are going to have to continue to critique for ourselves.

Angel Luis Velez: Thank you. What role can community colleges exercise and play in the advancement of Latinas and Latinos in higher education. And I ask you this because we know that Latinos, for the most part, begin at community colleges. Right?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: Um hmm.

Angel Luis Velez: What can those institutions do to support Latinas, like yourself, to really continue advancing in the education pipeline? To improve those rates that you talked about earlier about the graduation at the doctoral level, which is way less than 1 percent? Right?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: Right. Yes. Well, I think it isn't just the community colleges' responsibility. They are doing a lot. As I mentioned, they are having to manage multiple populations at the same time. I think one of the things we have to do is figure out what is the university's (role) especially in terms of developing those top down relationships, that includes community colleges. What are we doing to ensure that there are pipelines in place? And so some of that has to do with financial literacy, helping students to consider what the costs are, and not just financial costs. But the costs of education in terms of, you know, I think often what happens is with many students and particularly low-income and students of color, is this idea that if I start working now I am making money now for my family. And right now is what is most pressing. I cannot be thinking five years down the line that this is going to pay. But, it does! And I think that the more that we spend trying to help students understand if you were to actually earn that four-year degree, that bachelor's degree, that this is how much more you can contribute. Even if right now in the short term, it seems like you really need to be giving back to your family. This is the challenge. We also have to incorporate families into this, and we think about community organizing from the parent-teacher experience in K-12. Well the same thing needs to be applied in college. Thinking of not just college students as individuals but as people who are part of these larger relationships and communities. How do we incorporate them onto our college campuses? Where my institution is located, we are nestled right between a Latino immigrant community and a predominantly Black county. I will tell you that it is very possible that neither population has really ever

visited our campus, even though we are right in the middle. So these are the realities, is that we have an obligation. What does it mean to be a land grant university? With HSIs specifically, I think what troubles me the most about HSIs, those emerging HSIs, really see it as: I want to meet the 25% for whatever motivation that you have. But that doesn't mean that you are Hispanic serving, you just happen to have by no real intention of your own (the designation). There is no change in your mission statement, there is no change to your learning outcomes, and there is no evidence to prove that you are making a specific difference for Latino communities. When that is not happening, then this moniker, this designation, doesn't mean anything outside. It is just a fancy stamp that we get to put on our university. We are still 75% non-Latino. Who are we really catering to by doing that? Whose interests are being met by getting that designation? So I think we have to hold those institutions accountable as well to say: If you are going to be designated in this way, it is not just for federal funding, but for really transformation of your communities.

Angel Luis Velez: Today we have a very politicized environment, nationwide. Many people are unsure about the future of public education, from P through 20 and beyond. I would like to know your thoughts on the current national political climate and its potential effects on educational policy and equity in higher education institutions?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: Well that is a really challenging question. It is something that many faculty are going to have to really think about, that our work isn't just being done for the sake of research anymore, that there really needs to be a balance between doing the work and then using that work to inform policy. That can happen at the local level within our institutions, but then also within the larger city or town and then the county and so on and so forth with the state policies. Because often what happens is that states are reacting to federal policy, but they are still implementing their own policies, regardless of what the federal, national discourse is occurring. So, states do have some power in deciding how they want to best support education, regardless of who is in the Department of Education or what kinds of financing policies are being put in place. I think we have some real serious issues: financial aid, and I am very concerned about college debt, and what we are doing to support students with college debt. But I also think: What can I do and how can I translate my work? I think as a qualitative researcher the challenge is very great, because people will look at the stories and just see them as anecdotes. I think there is a way to map these stories with data points as well. The community, the scholarly community, has to get together to figure out: How do we do interdisciplinary kinds of work that will inevitably go into policy briefs, that we can establish relationships with our congresspeople? This is how we need to make these changes. To advocate and lobby and I think that is across the board. We are talking about scientists going on marches; we are talking about women and communities of color and migrant groups. I think one of the things we are challenged by is the narrative of being a country of immigrants. I do think we need to unpack that a little bit because we are not all a country of immigrants. We are a country of colonization. We are a country of slavery and of land acquisition. And so I think those are particularly communities of color, underrepresented minorities, and minoritized communities that were not immigrants and far more subjected and subjugated to a lot of our policies and laws. So I think that is what we have to consider as well. It is thinking about: How do we support our brothers and sisters who are our international faculty, our Muslim faculty, and our students, who are coming here for a good education? But then also what are we doing to help and support our domestic talent pool? What are we doing to educate our underrepresented minorities in this country too? I think

there are different angles that we have to take and we have to piece apart what is going to be a priority for each of us. Where are we going to put our efforts and our fight and resistance?

Angel Luis Velez: Do you want to give us any pearls of wisdom? Any final thoughts that you have for us?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: For in general?

Angel Luis Velez: About equity and access?

Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira: I think in the end our work, it has value if we are working together to advocate for our communities. This notion of a lone scholar or that I am going to do my piece and not share, and this whole notion of competitiveness, this rugged individualism, competitiveness, not celebrating each other's successes, I think that that is something that really hinders us from being able to celebrate those small achievements along the way. I think that isn't going to sustain us. We have to find a way to sustain and motivate each other. And that is why brother/sister scholars are so important. That is why finding your Latino scholar collective is an important part of this. We have to stop just fighting for our own small piece, but figuring out how we can fight for a larger piece that we can share with others, I think that starts with our families all the way through to college, and then into graduate school and beyond.

Angel Luis Velez: Thank you, Dr. Michelle Espiño Lira.

For more information about the academic life course of racial and ethnic minorities, we recommend that you visit Dr. Michelle M. Espiño Lira's website at University of Maryland, College Park, for a list of publications. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occril.illinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @occril. Tune in for a bonus episode this month when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher from OCCRL will talk to Dr. Laurie-Patton Davis, a professor of higher education at Indiana University and President-Elect of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, about the role of black women in institutional transformation in higher education. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contribution to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.