Survival Pláticas of Latinx/a/o Scholars During a Global Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Using collaborative autoethnography and pláticas methodologies, authors explore their experiences as first generation Latinx/a/o doctoral students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings consider the participants' initial response to the pandemic, creating and maintaining virtual communal spaces, and resistance to traditional norms in academe. Recommendations include the support of Latinx/a/o doctoral students through the cultivation of an authentic and caring community, creation of counterspaces through collaboration and mentorship, and future practice and policy that is culturally responsive to Latinx/a/o culture and identity.

SURVIVAL PLÁTICAS OF LATINX/A/O SCHOLARS DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Higher education was not positioned to provide spaces and platforms for Latinx/a/o graduate students to access community and support during the COVID crisis (National Science Foundation, 2020). Now more than ever, student affairs leaders must reflect and pivot toward reinventing structures, policies, and practices that increase their ability to adapt, respond, and mitigate risk in order to provide equitable learning and successful outcomes for Latinx/a/o graduate students. Unfortunately, graduate students have been largely left out of the conversations related to institutional plans for instruction and support for students (Aguilar-Smith & Crossing, 2021).

Despite the COVID pandemic, Latinx/a/o doctoral students are expected to successfully manage academic milestones, all in the name of rigor without a critical analysis of why these milestones are still important (Walsh et al., 2021). Instead, what is needed is an intentional and humanizing approach on how to support graduate students in the midst of the chaos (Kee, 2021). To this end, the COVID pandemic has made it increasingly important to reimagine what support through *comunidad* (community) can look like for graduate student success.

POSITIONALITY

We (the authors of the study) reflect a nine-member virtual collective; one that was formed as a response to the pandemic. While each of us have differing personal and professional experiences, we collectively believe that first generation Latinx/a/o doctoral students face unique challenges that need to be met in ways that move beyond the traditional socialization of the academy. As higher educational professionals, who occupy and navigate multiple intersectional spaces, we hold a variety of insider and outsider statuses and approached this project from a variety of standpoints. In recognizing the fluidity of our shared Latinx/a/o identities, we recognize and embrace our shared status as first generation Latinx/a/o doctoral students who continue to experience postsecondary education for the first time, in multiple ways, and often in spaces that limit our authentic sense of being. In entering this research, we understood that we brought both privilege and bias to the work. From these identities and experiential perspectives, we were able to utilize our positionalities to build rapport with one another, confront biases as they emerged, and contextualize findings and implications.

This report was driven by the social-political context of the COVID-19 pandemic, modern civil rights movement, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and white supremist government regime that had an impact on the United States at large. We recognize that this impact should be considered in ways that are specific to the lived experiences of the many intersecting identities that co-exist across societal constructs. To accomplish this, we sought to consider our unique lived experiences as Latinx/a/o doctoral students during a global pandemic, particularly because reflections of our stories are limited within the academy. As scholars from various backgrounds, we decided to create them the same way our ancestors have done for generations - through the use of pláticas. The authors of this report engaged in pláticas throughout the national lockdown to facilitate wellness checks, which developed into virtual comunidad spaces.

This report focuses on informing innovative practice and policy through our individual and collective reflection processes. As a part of this process, we focused on

answering the following research questions by pulling from our own experience as graduate students during the pandemic:

> 1. **How has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on our graduate studies?**
>
> 2. **What role did virtual comunidad play in supporting us as a Latina/o/x scholar in higher education?**

We hope to shape practices and policies by informing those who lead graduate programs or work with graduate students in any capacity to critically consider the needs of these students during times of both crisis and relative calm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have recognized the need for increased attention to the graduate Latinx/a/o student experience, as much of the extant scholarship in higher education focuses on the undergraduate experience (Holloway-Friesen, 2021). The literature has broadly examined the experiences of graduate students in a range of higher education programs and pathways (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Levin et al., 2013; Nyquist, 1999; Yi & Ramos, 2201). The following literature review will serve as a foundation for our construction of an asset driven approach to the support of Latinx/a/o doctoral students through intentional comunidad.

GRADUATE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Scholars note how graduate students experience isolation, extraneous mental health challenges, and anxiety as a response to the social positions we occupy within institutions of higher education (Evans et al., 2018; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hyun et al., 2006; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Truong & Museus, 2012). Navigating these spaces can be difficult given that graduate students are required to engage with the broader, and often uneven, power relations with faculty advisors, peers, and these institutions (Grady et al., 2014).

Most recently, the Council of Graduate Schools and The Jed Foundation (2021) published a report looking at the mental health and well-being of graduate students where they presented ten years of data that illustrated the increasing levels of stress and anxiety that graduate students are facing. The report provides insight into factors shaping mental health for graduate students broadly and posits that little is known about the stress and stressors that arise for minoritized graduate students and "even less is known about student pathways to care, or about the effectiveness of resources, policies, and practices designed to create healthier departmental and campus cultures" (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021, p. 2). As a part of the study, the researchers surveyed graduate deans, or their equivalent, at 780 U.S. and Canadian higher education institutions. The survey questionnaire focused on institutional practices and policies regarding graduate student mental health and well-being.

Despite the focus on administrators, and the programming they oversee, one major study finding was that individual classmates were often the first to notice that their peers needed help. More specifically, the researchers indicated that graduate students often support each other using compassionate mentoring (Council of Graduate Schools and the Jed Foundation, 2021; Elliott et al., 2018; Gonzalez, 2021). This insight led to the recommendation that institutions better understand, and leverage, the "critical role" that graduate students "play in helping faculty and administrators understand the challenges they face and the resources they need" (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021, p. 19).

However, the literature fails to situate the unique experience of Latinx/a/o doctoral students within higher education and student affairs programs (Espino, 2014; 2016; 2023). Recent research has begun to explore the ways in which Latinx/a/o graduate students in higher education and student affairs make meaning of their racioethnic identities at the intersections of their graduate student status, being first generation, being queer or trans, and more (Garcia et al., 2021).

Given the multitude of identities Latinx/a/o graduate students hold, it is evident that the stressors and other factors experienced by graduate students broadly are exacerbated by their unique doctoral journeys. Furthermore, this has been made clear by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic wherein the need to create a sense of community and sustain human relationships became critical.

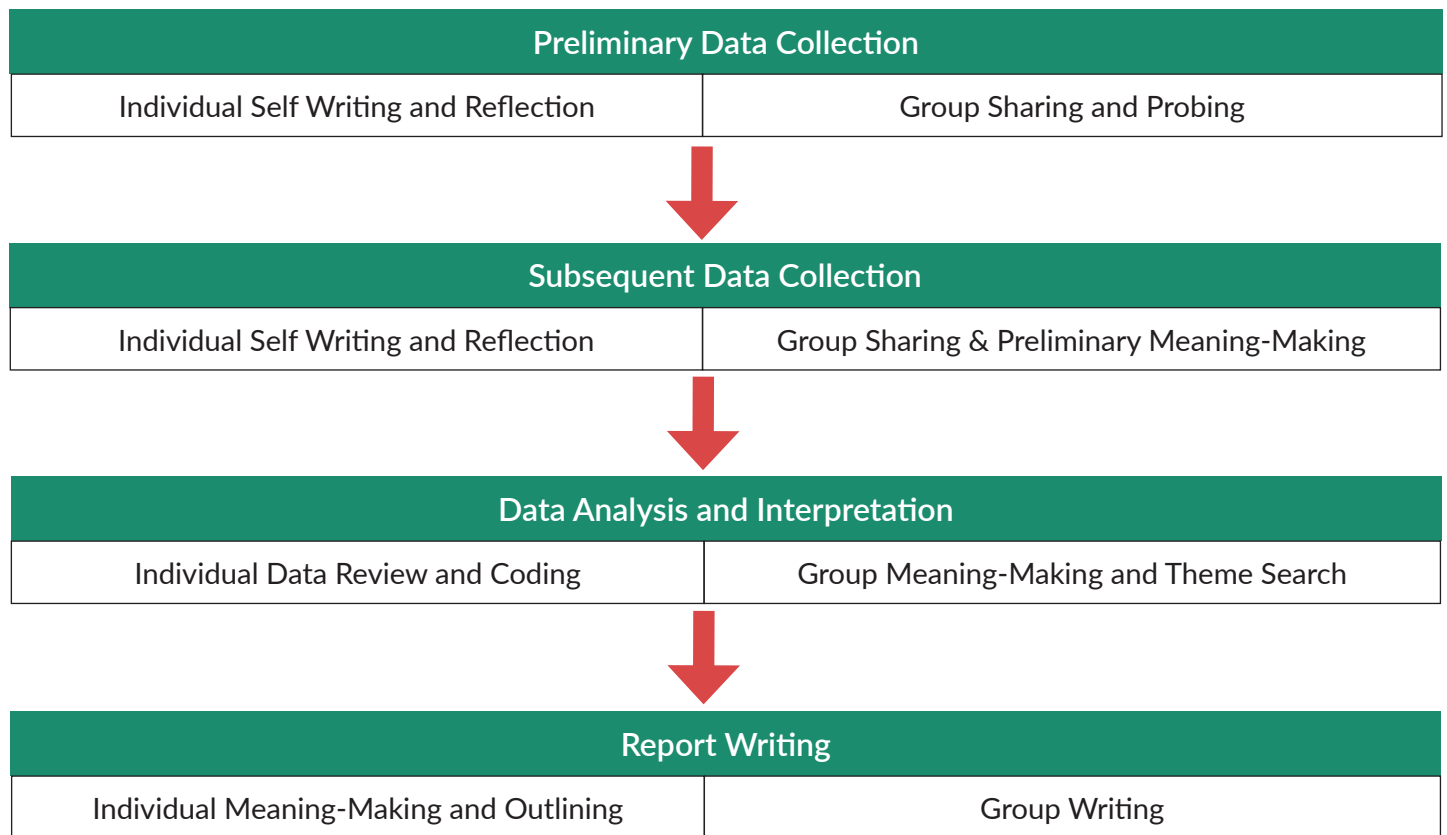## THE EXPERIENCE OF LATINX/A/O GRADUATE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In 2016, over 1 million graduate credentials were completed. Of those, 77% were master's degrees and 6.8% were doctoral degrees (Espinosa et al, 2019). When broken down by race/ethnicity, Latinx/a/os made up only 7.4% of master's degrees and 4.9% of doctoral degrees (Espinosa et al., 2019). Longitudinal data shows that graduate completion rates for Latinx/a/o individuals in 1996 were 3.4% and in 2016 the number increased incrementally to 7.1% (Espinosa et al., 2015). Latinx/a/o students continue to encounter struggles in attrition and completion in higher education, yet scholarship that focuses on their multi-faceted experiences once they move beyond the P-12 level is scant. Given the challenges that Latinx/a/o students face throughout their educational journeys, it is important to understand the experiences these students face in graduate education.

Ramirez (2011, 2014), for example, focused their research on the experiences of Latinx/a/o doctoral students as they struggled with barriers in the application process, lack of support, both academic and emotional, while enrolled in their programs. Latinx/a/o graduate students in these studies noticed a clash between their cultural identities and institutional cultures embedded in racism and sexism (Ramirez, 2011, 2014). For students who may have a strong connection with family and culture, as is common among Latinx/a/o students (Phillips & Deleon, 2022), they are not only navigating the rigor and academic demands from their graduate programs but are also forced to make calculated choices as to how much of their authentic selves are valued in their graduate student role, and how they can include their family in their academic journey (Leyva, 2011). This is often done by sharing with family members what they

FIGURE 1

THE ITERATIVE PROCESS OF COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Preliminary Data Collection	
Individual Self Writing and Reflection	Group Sharing and Probing

Subsequent Data Collection	
Individual Self Writing and Reflection	Group Sharing & Preliminary Meaning-Making

Data Analysis and Interpretation	
Individual Data Review and Coding	Group Meaning-Making and Theme Search

Report Writing	
Individual Meaning-Making and Outlining	Group Writing

Note. adapted from Chang et al. (2013)

are learning in classes, explaining to them what their dissertation study is about, or inviting them to be part of their dissertation defense.

Work on trying to improve the Latinx/a/o educational pipeline tends to focus on how first generation Latinx/a/o undergraduate students are guided and supported (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Morales et al., 2021) while first generation Latinx/a/o graduate students' needs tend to fall a little through the cracks. First generation Latinx/a/o undergraduates must navigate the transition to college, financial barriers, academic expectations, and new socio-cultural campus environments that may differ from those of their home communities (Clayton et al., 2017). While Latinx/a/o graduate students continue to face challenges similar to those of undergraduate students as it pertains to the first-generation identity, they are also at a crossroads where they are developing their academic and professional identities. First generation graduate students are presented with limited networks and receive push back from institutions that may not value their authentic selves (Standlee, 2018). They also face dissonance in how they translate their graduate educational journeys with their families which adds additional stress and disconnection to their graduate experience (Tate et al., 2015). These challenges faced by Latinx/a/o graduate students make it especially important for them to find a community that can help support them throughout the doctoral journey.

SOURCES OF COMMUNITY

While reimagining what comunidad looks like has not always been a priority within higher education, the onset of COVID has made it imperative to recognize and value the spaces where graduate students find solace. As disenfranchised communities, we have always found ways to build spaces of resistance and of community. Whether deemed discursive spaces - meaning those that are counter to the institutional boundaries or norms (Rodríguez, 2003) — or new counterspaces (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Yosso & Lopez, 2010), our innate communal desire leads us to exist and create meaning when structures and systems are in opposition with our values. Universities and institutions of higher education thrive on solitude, competitiveness, and individualism, all instruments that do not reflect who we are. Thus, we think about our collective space deriving from la paperson's (2017) notion of a third university space, wherein our praxis "actively reinvents" and "synthesizes these disparate sources into not only a coherent discourse

but a far-reaching, transformative radical project" (p. 44), the project of existing in comunidad. In what we call the #ScholarHomies collective, we formulate "small working groups of like-minded university workers [and] research centers" (paperson, 2017, p. 44) who get to shift the narrative we write for ourselves as graduate Latinx/a/o students as we create the spaces of comunidad that we needed to get us through our programs.

METHODOLOGY

In our collective process of coming together and making meaning of our experiences as Latinx/a/o doctoral students during a global pandemic, we lean on the use of a methodology that serves as a site of critical individual and collective reflection. This report uses a collaborative autoethnography methodology conducted through the use of pláticas to highlight how Latinx/a/o graduate students survive the terrain of academia, navigate multiple personal, professional, and academic realities, and build community in a global pandemic. Chang et al., (2016) define collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as "a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectivity to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (p. 24). They assert CAE, "focuses on self-interrogation but does so collectively and cooperatively within a team of researchers" (p. 21). Moreover, "CAE is emerging as a pragmatic application of the autoethnographic approach to social inquiry" (p. 21). The benefits of utilizing a CAE research method include: (1) collective exploration of researcher subjectivity; (2) power-sharing among researcher-participants; (3) efficiency and enrichment in the research process; (4) deeper learning about self and other; and (5) community building (p. 25). As a collective, we employed CAE to individually and collectively examine the aforementioned research questions (See Figure 1).

PLÁTICAS AS METHOD

Alongside our methodology of collaborative autoethnography, we assert a Chicana/Latina feminist method of pláticas. This concept of pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) is "different from interviews because they are reciprocal exchanges in which participants are co-collaborators and co-creators in the production of knowledge and the research process" (Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2019, p.7). Additionally, using

pláticas as the form of data collection provides insight into critical questions that speak to our realities as graduate students in these unprecedented times while also pushing against Eurocentric based methodologies that we do not deem trustworthy, and feel should be re-examined and questioned. Methods of pláticas draw on similar notions of participatory action-based research, where we as the authors are researchers, and also are participants in the meaning making of our own narratives (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Lozano et al., 2021). Given our multiple and intersecting identities, our pláticas formulate a way to interrogate higher education structures that often exist in opposition to who we are (Espino et al., 2010). At the same time, pláticas allowed us to hold a reciprocal space of reflection and healing individually and collectively.

Furthermore, we take up the work of Fierros & Delgado Bernal (2016) by positioning pláticas through each step of the research design, including its specific relationship to our methodological approach. We honor the five contours of pláticas by situating our knowledge and experiences within a Chicana/Latina framework. Second, we honor the ways that each of us holds individual knowledge as co-contributors of our collective process (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Third, throughout our pláticas we brought our daily realities coupled with holding space for the daily realities of our families because we were simultaneously experiencing our own understanding and feelings throughout the pandemic while also holding space or taking an active role in the challenges many of our families were facing back home. For all of us, pláticas also served as a site of healing the wounds inflicted on us by academia but also the constant wounds that came with feeling like our communities were seen as disposable by the U.S. government's response to COVID-19. Lastly, throughout each of the pláticas we acknowledged the process of reciprocity and vulnerability to each other.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study was collected in two parts. We met via Zoom to collectively reflect on the time the group has spent meeting virtually over a one-year period. In line with the plática method, we engaged in group-based discussions related to the impetus for the #ScholarHomies virtual group, the events that shaped our interactions together as a group, and the continued significance of the group a year later. From this collective feedback and insight, we used the conversation to establish formal

journaling prompts. Each of the #ScholarHomies was asked to journal in response to following reflection questions:

> 1. How did we make sense of community?
> 2. What were our needs for community?
> 3. What did community mean?
> 4. What was the role of vulnerability?

Individual self-writing and reflection, centered in group sharing and probing, served as our primary data collection. After the initial sharing, we: a) continued collecting subsequent data through more individual self-writing and reflection followed by group sharing and preliminary meaning-making amongst the collective; and b) finalized our data analysis and interpretation through individual data reviewing and coding and group meaning-making and thematic search.

DATA ANALYSIS

After reviewing all the material at least once, coding was facilitated via multiple cycles of coding. During each cycle, the research questions and the methodological design were used to guide the process. To analyze the data we drew from qualitative coding processes to identify thematic clusters (Saldaña, 2013). Informed by pláticas contours, we aligned these thematic clusters with communal, personal, and professional experiences (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). In the first phase of coding, descriptive coding was used to analyze the data, which consisted of 41 codes (Saldaña, 2013). In the second phase of coding, pattern coding was used to consolidate related codes into smaller sets, comprising 21 primary codes (Saldaña, 2013). In the third phase of coding, axial coding was used to identify prominent categories and themes (Creswell, 2014; Saldaña. 2013).

From the coding, five prominent categories – *emotions, community needs, virtual group characteristics, core values, and benefits* – were consolidated into three findings, presented below. To conceptualize the collaborators' shared narratives, the title of each finding was structured to reflect a composite-like description of the codes that make up each dominant category (Creswell, 2014). Doing this allowed the collaborators to convey a shared understanding of identity, environments, geography, and politics (Williams-Shakespeare et al., 2018).

FINDINGS

Each of the three findings helps to create a more comprehensive understanding of how the collaborators described their lived experiences as Latinx/a/o graduate students during a global pandemic and how they created culturally significant virtual counterspaces to support their collective success. The first finding, *Responding to the Pandemic*, provides answers to the first research question by describing how the collaborators were negatively influenced by the pandemic and how they sought remedy for the challenges they initially experienced. The second and third findings, *Sowing and Growing the Seed*, and *Reaping the Benefits of Communal Synergy*, answer the second research question by describing how the collective shared their time in virtual community and how they not only grew stronger because of this shared time, but how they used this space to resist the challenges of participating in academe.

RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC

When asked to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on their graduate experiences, the collaborators shared similar narratives that described their initial response to the pandemic. All of the collaborators conveyed a shared sense of loss, disconnect, and uncertainty in response to the pandemic. Due to the implications of the pandemic's social distancing requirements, Sergio was left feeling "lost and hopeless." He described his feelings early in the pandemic when he shared, "the pandemic started to take over and isolation surrounded my existence." Similar to Sergio's feelings of isolation, Nancy and Roberto experienced a sense of disconnect.

Nancy felt compelled to prioritize her wellbeing once faced with the challenges of the pandemic. As a first-generation college student, she felt unsure of exactly how to do this, and she sought some form of assurance. Nancy shared, "I needed confirmation that I was not alone in the dissonance of first-gen students; literally living in the borderlands [reflected via the intersecting spaces] of the academy, the profession, and our home communities whose priority was survival." One of the major challenges that she felt in navigating this borderlands space was making sense of how to balance the desire to solely prioritize the survival of herself and her community but feeling the socialized pull to focus on her doctoral related responsibilities. For Roberto, his primary concern at the start of the pandemic, and throughout, was centered in getting back to his family. While he sucessfully defended his dissertation proposal at the start of the pandemic, his attention to his graduate studies was fading. He found himself inwardly declaring, "Fuck all of this!" Roberto stated, "I felt very disconnected at first because I literally did not give a fuck about anything related to academia. All I wanted to do was be with my family."

In an attempt to move on from their initial feelings, the collective eventually recognized the need to adapt and identify their specific needs in response to the pandemic. Yolanda captured this transition succinctly when she stated, "When the pandemic hit, it impacted our emotional well-being and our ability to find spaces to engage." The need to find a shared space of engagement became a major priority. Melissa shared, "As we were experiencing a pandemic, I immediately felt the need to keep connected to the academic community." Like Melissa, other members of the collective felt the need to find a space to connect with others. For Ángel, his need for connectivity was also based on solutions to his everyday needs. To create the needed solutions, he asked himself, "on a very practical level, how do I and others create routine, a sense of normality, of belonging?" To achieve this goal, he would have to take a more proactive approach to meeting his needs. To this end, Ángel shared, "more and more I realized I had to build community and share space with folks who perhaps were feeling similar to me and in a similar space."

Reflecting on the conversations that she was having with Ángel during this time, Yolanda said, "I know that for both of us, surviving in academe has meant creating community in-and-outside of the cohort." This desire to create community as a means to ensure survival in the academy was consistent with other collaborators. Like Yolanda, Nancy shared, "As someone who was living alone [on the other side of the country away from family], community was a means of survival." To realize the goal of creating a virtual community, Ángel hosted the first in

a series of virtual Lotería (game similar to bingo) nights. For some of the members of the collective, the virtual Lotería nights would be incredibly meaningful. Andréa shared: "After the first Lotería game the #ScholarHomies hosted, I went to my room and cried because I felt seen." Given the isolating nature of the pandemic lockdown, she had felt alone in her thoughts and feelings as a Latinx/a/o identifying doctoral student. Knowing that others were having similar life experiences validated the individual experiences that she was navigating.

The notion of feeling seen, as described by Andréa, really captured the feelings of loss and disconnect that was conveyed by the group of collaborators. The feelings were made worse by a sense of uncertainty; one centered in an unknowable timeline of when the world might return to normal. To combat the uncertainty, the collaborators needed to know that they were not alone in this struggle. Being seen meant that they were not alone, and that others had a shared understanding of the challenges related to the pandemic.


SOWING AND GROWING THE SEED OF COMUNIDAD

During the pandemic, the individuals of the #ScholarHomies collective, like so many other individuals, navigated a variety of educational, familial, and work-related responsibilities. Melissa shared, "although we were in different spaces on our academic journey, either in coursework, dissertating, or working in a postdoctoral position, the commonality was that we were all navigating academia as first-generation scholars during a pandemic." Regardless of how their individual intersectional identities, needs, and obligations manifested, each member of the collective was connected through the shared struggle of having

to meet the high standards of the academy despite the state of the world. Each collaborator understood that their doctoral and postdoctoral obligations would not wait for them, pandemic or not. If the members of the collective were going to make it through this major life event, they would have to try to adjust quickly. In reflecting on his initial reaction to having to shelter in place with his family, and close himself off from the world, Roberto shared, "I knew I couldn't sustain that mentality and so the different virtual communities became so integral to me staying sane and actually doing things." Although the Lotería nights served as helpful one-off events to connect individuals remotely at the beginning of pandemic, eventually, the members of the collective would recognize something more substantial was needed.

Yolanda recalled how the foundation for the #ScholarHomies got started when she shared, "Ángel reached out to get onto a Zoom meeting invite and we shared about the possibility of creating a space where we could connect with other scholars in a virtual format." Adding his perspective, Ángel shared, "we organically realized that we all needed something to hold on to, to look forward to every week where explaining ourselves was not needed, but just being ourselves." The availability of a space that allowed individuals to just show up and not meet a certain criterion was important. For members like Lazaro, who was unsure of how to conceptualize his needs, he knew he just needed to belong somewhere. To this end, he said, "my understanding of community became something that lacked physical shape but was still tangible. It became something that I could hold on to emotionally and spiritually." For others, they knew they needed a space that centered their needs in ways that other spaces were not meeting. Melissa shared, "what I realized was that I was overwhelmed by these webinars…these spaces were not cultivating comunidad." In reflecting on the group's time together, she said, "The notion of comunidad was central to why this group was so necessary." The importance of cultivating comunidad was further highlighted by Berenice when she stated, "Community means everything!! I truly believe that I would have not finished my program had it not been for different small communities, including this group."

These scholars relied on the collective community for emotional and spiritual support. As such, this organic virtual shelter created the type of communal space that all of the members of the collective were seeking. For Berenice it meant being a world away from her biological
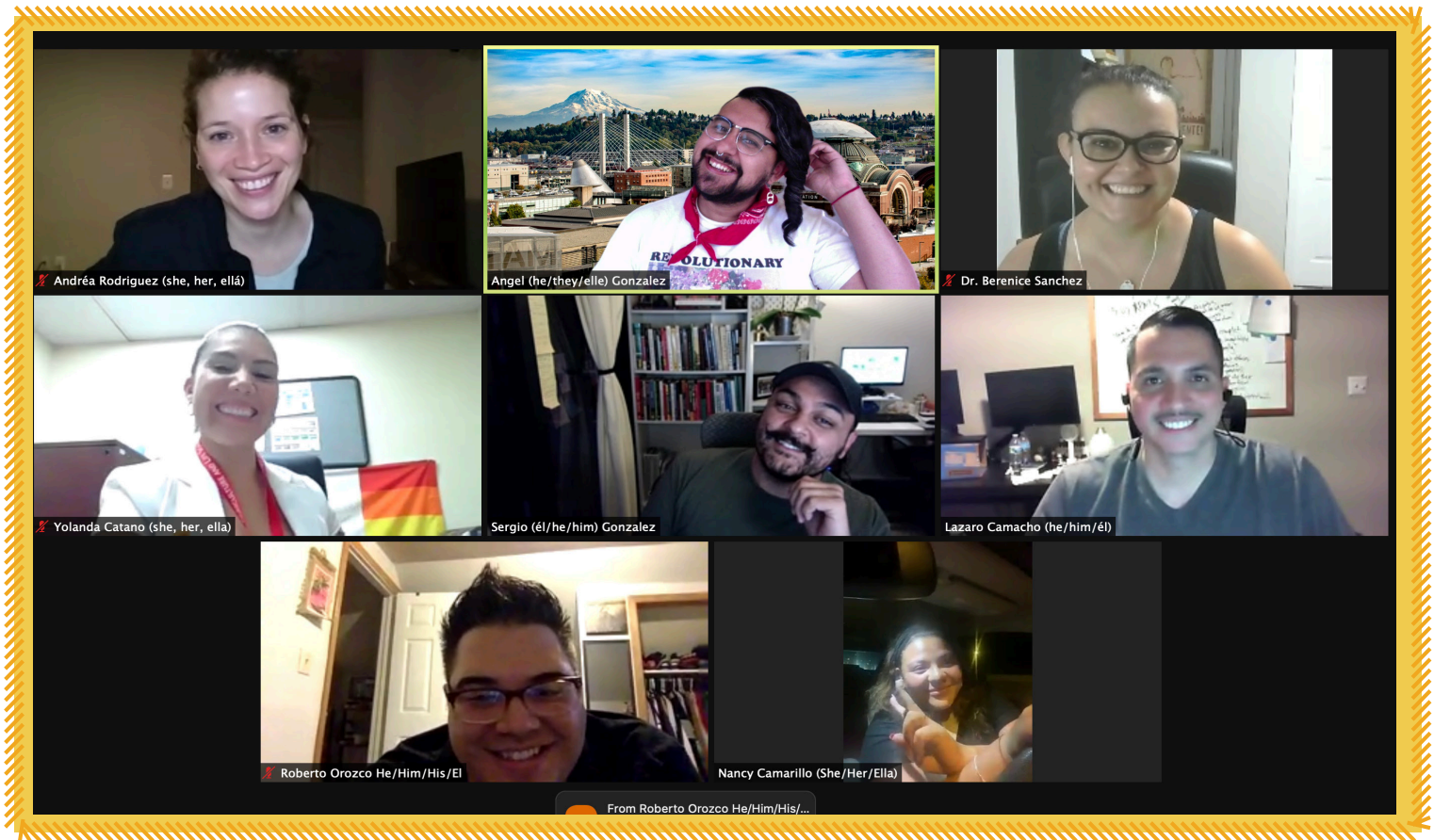
family and finding shelter through a "Zoom call with the Scholar Homies," a group that she referred to as her "familia, and… saving grace." She went on to explain, "the couple of hours twice a week that I logged on with the Homies was the most human interaction that I had most days." Nancy provided further insight into this organic space of support when she said, "community through the Scholar Homies…was a space to process our feelings, to offer advice, and see that we were not alone in our worries and fears." To take full advantage of these spaces as a place of communal healing, the space had to meet one important criterion – a safe space centered in vulnerability. Sergio captured this notion most succinctly when he shared, "vulnerability played a key role in the development of the #ScholarHomies collective."

Outside of a web accessible device and an internet connection, a willingness to be vulnerable was the only major requirement for participation in the group. This requirement was important because, as Yolanda shared, "many of us in the group haven't even met in-person." Andréa added to this when she said, "I had never met any of the #ScholarHomies. I had only engaged with them via Twitter." She also shared, "I feel comfortable and safe enough to let go and be vulnerable because I know this community would be able to hold my emotions

and be there for me!" Lazaro elaborated on the notion of vulnerability when he shared, "during the pandemic, vulnerability meant being willing to meet someone who you have never met in person, to trust your personality and feelings to someone who was just an image on the other side of a screen."

Participation in the group often meant having raw conversations that started via collective Zoom sessions, but eventually led to shared text messages, and social media posts filled with vulnerability, chisme, and warmth. Nancy shared, "This group became a space where I could share when I was feeling like shit, when I felt like I wanted to quit, or when I needed to sit with my emotions." In appreciation of the group dynamics, Roberto stated, "I remember feeling so grateful for each of the homies and for them being so vulnerable with sharing what they were also experiencing." Although the group started as a virtual writing space, it became a place where the whole individual was welcome. Melissa shared, "It was a very fluid, authentic space." In alignment with Melissa's thoughts on the benefits of a space that was fluid, Lazaro added to his earlier statement, "It [the virtual community] became something that could fill gaps in a variety of ways and depending on the given day."

As scholars from different backgrounds, we know spaces that capture our entire being are limited within the academy. Therefore, we need to rely on our cultural values to persist and thrive. The shared norm of community is highlighted by collaborators like Yolanda when she said, "I make meaning of community through a familial lens", and Nancy, who shared, "being in community has always been central to my upbringing." Despite sharing different backgrounds, our shared pan-ethnic identity led to the development of a space, centered in the familial value of communal spaces facilitated through pláticas, that allowed for the sharing of personal needs.

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNAL SYNERGY

As a part of this paper, it is important to not only convey the challenges and obstacles that the collaborators had to overcome as a part of the pandemic, but to also convey how we grew in community with one another. A common theme shared amongst the #ScholarHomies is the notion that they practiced community in a way that is in contrast to what is considered appropriate inside academe. For the participants, this meant not practicing a rigid sense of competition centered in a homogenous approach to success; one where it is always important to convey an image of stability (McGee, 2020; Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). Ángel suggested that practicing community in this way is not easy. He shared, "we [first generation Latina/o/x scholars] often carry the burden of always being 'ok.' Pero [But], we were not ok and allowed ourselves this [space]." Like Ángel, Lazaro understood that practicing community in the academy often means not "being open and authentic about the challenges." Similarly, Nancy also found that the group allowed her to consider the academy, and its relationship to community, in a more genuine and authentic way. She shared, "to see others be just as vulnerable really humanized how to navigate the academy."

The kind of community centered in vulnerability that made the #ScholarHomies collective successful in their virtual spaces may not have been possible in a different space. Andréa shared, "rarely am I vulnerable, but this community allowed me to be vulnerable in ways I was unaware I could be, and that was, and is, the magic behind this group." In addition to her reflection regarding vulnerability, Andréa said, "the idea of community for me after connecting with these brilliant scholars has shifted entirely." She understands now that the communal space she was afforded through the #ScholarHomies was integral to her success throughout the pandemic. Andréa shared, "the voice, power, and strength of la comunidad

helped me survive." Beyond a space that centered survival for members of the group, the virtual space also made it possible to consider what it meant to thrive during the pandemic. Nancy shared, "it became a space to celebrate all of our wins, big or small. To celebrate how we were trying, no matter the outcome." To highlight how different from the norm these experiences were, Berenice shared,

> Finding that kind of community...is rarely found within academia. In a field where you are taught to network while also being in competition with every one, knowing that we have created a small community where we trust, build each other up and have each other's backs, is amazing.

Sergio explained the reason for why these experiences in the academy may not be readily available. He shared, "the academy teaches us to stay as far away as possible from vulnerability...our cultural intuition leaned into it and carved out a path to connect and trust one another." As a result of this different approach to community in the academy, Ángel said, "I have learned and grown so much in this space. It has modeled to me the ways we can create what we are seeking, and that is powerful." Both Sergio and Ángel had very similar thoughts on the importance of the space. Ángel shared, "It became a counter space for survival. It truly transformed how I view academia." Like Ángel, Sergio said, "this virtual space catapulted us into a profound counter space of love and resistance to the academy." Ultimately, the reason why the #ScholarHomies collective has been so successful in supporting one another through virtual spaces is rather simple. According to Yolanda, "we uplift each other when things get hard, and we genuinely care."

As noted through the emerged findings, our communal process provided a space to disrupt the conventional notion of being a scholar. We found a way to reject the narrative of academic solitude and individual gain. Additionally, our desire to collectively build spaces for us to exist did not just come about because of our need to succeed in our graduate programs but moreover because of the authentic cariño (affection/love) we had for one another in light of our distinct, yet intertwined, paths. It is not surprising that the access provided to us by remote connection offered a bridge to one another, thus reminding us how gatekeeping access is always a means to prohibit our collective survival and success. Individually we exist as the only one or one of few in our programs, but collectively, we are one of the many, we have momentum, support, and that is empowering.

Ángel González, House of Quetzal @agonzal6 · May 26

The sCHOLAr Homies rolled up today! Gracias for holding space to move our work along @LazCamacho @B_Sanchez06 @SerxioGonzalez @orozco333 @YolandaCatano @Nancy_Camarillo

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study shed light on how a group of Latinx/a/o graduate students and early postdoctoral scholars have experienced the multiple pandemics taking place during 2020 and 2021 and how they have built community for themselves. This idea of *comunidad* was central to how the #ScholarHomies made sense of the COVID pandemic and tried to persevere in their graduate and scholarly work.

The first two themes, *Responding to the Pandemic and Sowing and Growing the Seed of Comunidad*, highlighted how most of the #ScholarHomies felt unsupported by their programs while they were trying to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. While colleges and universities across the country quickly took action to try to provide support systems for their undergraduate student populations, specific initiatives to support graduate students were rarely talked about (Aguilar-Smith & Crossing, 2021).

While the lackluster response from institutions to support graduate students during this time is problematic, it is much more the case when we look at this lack of action from higher education and student affairs (HESA) programs. The purpose of HESA programs is to train future higher education and student affairs practitioners and administrators so that they may enter the field with the knowledge and skills to guide and support students from enrollment to graduation (Patton & Catching, 2009). Despite this, the #ScholarHomies who were enrolled in HESA programs when the pandemics hit spoke extensively about the lack of support and helpful socialization that they received from their programs, departments, and the larger institution. This left the #ScholarHomies, and other graduate students across all graduate programs, with the task of creating their own communities of support.

The findings from this study also show that an important way that graduate students of color have found support is through virtual communities. Scholars have begun to look deeper at the camaraderie that can develop within virtual spaces (Hernández, 2015). The #ScholarHomies were spread out from the west coast

to the Midwest to the east coast and took to Zoom rooms and twitter threads to build and strengthen their relationships as colleagues and friends. These virtual spaces have allowed us to engage in meaningful *pláticas* that sustained each of us both personally and professionally. While the #ScholarHomies have been able to create this community of support among us, the fact that we had to do this out of necessity and lack of support from their programs leaves much work for graduate programs and the academy at large to do.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTICE

These findings on the experiences of graduate students of color are significant for higher education generally and the field of higher education and student affairs specifically. We hope that this study and our recommendations below will produce innovative practices by informing those who lead graduate programs and their students to question if services exist or can be developed to ensure graduate students receive the support they need given current circumstances. We detail recommendations for institutions, HESA graduate programs, and other graduate students.

First, beyond trying to capitalize on the counterspaces that are created by graduate students, institutions of higher education should move toward truly recognizing and valuing these spaces (Yosso & Lopez, 2010). In essence, we reject traditional forms of graduate student socialization (Gardener, 2005; Moriña, 2017; Turner & Thompson, 1993) by reimagining participation and applying our familial capital (Yosso 2005), especially in times when we are experiencing high levels of stress due to the pandemic and other external factors. Although higher education institutions managed to pivot many services and support for students, they left out graduate students (Wallenstein, 2021). Furthermore, as per usual in these systems, responses are framed within the vernacular of "all" students in which "all" does not apply to us, Latinx/a/o graduate or undergraduate students, given the institutions' failure to ever recognize "all" of ourselves (Gonzalez et al., 2023). More needs to be done to examine how the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on minoritized students. This is especially the case for Latinx/a/o graduate students who lack institutional support with lack of specific graduate student resources.

Second, HESA graduate programs must recognize that they are not only training future student affairs practitioners and administrators, but that they also need to support their program's students and cultivate their development as our future colleagues. Therefore, there needs to exist holistic support and wrap around services for graduate students as they are pipelined into the academy. This can be especially difficult particularly for HESA programs because most graduate students tend to be employed, either as a graduate assistant, part-time, or full-time practitioner, while they are enrolled in their programs. HESA graduate programs should create structures that can help address some of the hardships that graduate students of color face within the academy and especially during a pandemic that is having an impact on people across the globe. Some of these supports can include providing additional financial support and guidance about how to progress through their programmatic requirements during times of turmoil.

Lastly, we hope that other graduate students of color, and Latinx/a/o students in particular, will hold their programs accountable for supporting them during their educational journey. We acknowledge that just having a faculty advisor does not suffice the need for guidance and support that graduate students of color need in order to be successful in the academy. For our peers who felt unsupported and alone, like we did, we hope that you seek out that comunidad both inside and outside of your program to help you in navigating the academy and developing as a scholar and practitioner. As you all continue in your respective journeys, remember that community is crucial for your overall success, beyond the accolades, but your well-being and self.

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