

JCSCORE

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity

The Journal of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON MEXICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY OF SOUTH TEXAS

Reyna M. Flores
The University of Texas at Austin¹

Jackie Pedota¹

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity
Volume 9, Issue 1 | 2023

Copyright and Open Access

© 2023 Reyna M. Flores, Jackie Pedota



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). Permission of the authors is required for distribution and for all derivative works, including compilations and translations. Quoting small sections of text is allowed as long as there is appropriate attribution and the article is used for non-commercial purposes.

The *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* (ISSN 2642-2387) is published by the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), a production of the University of Oklahoma, in partnership with the University of Oklahoma Libraries.

COVID-19 Impacts on Mexican American College Student Experiences in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas

Reyna M. Flores
The University of Texas at Austin¹

Jackie Pedota¹

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated many communities and exacerbated existing inequities, particularly for Mexican American communities along the South Texas border. During this tumultuous time, many Mexican American college students balanced coursework, work, and familial responsibilities in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), a Texas borderland region disproportionately affected by the spread of COVID-19 when compared to Texas overall. This qualitative study uses narrative analysis to examine oral history interviews of 11 college students from the RGV to understand how COVID-19 shaped their experiences throughout the 2020-2021 academic year and how they leveraged region-specific cultural assets to navigate their multiple roles during this historic time. The authors draw from *Borderland Cultural Wealth* (Yamamura et al., 2010) to posit a college retention framework by examining how 11 college students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic to inform policy and practices. Findings suggest that Mexican American students leveraged their RGV cultural assets to navigate health disparities, secure income for themselves and their families, and prioritize familial responsibilities while completing virtual coursework during the pandemic. This study contributes to the research that challenges RGV student deficits and illuminates the importance of cultural assets of Mexican American communities in the RGV. We provide future research recommendations and considerations for asset-based college retention policies and practices in higher education.

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately harmed communities of color, especially the racially and ethnically minoritized population (Clark et al., 2020; Liu & Modir, 2020). One of the communities most impacted was the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), the southernmost borderland region of Texas, which is approximately 91.4% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2020) and of the Hispanic population in the United States, the largest subgroup is those of Mexican origin (Noe-Bustamante et al.,

2019). We use the term Hispanic to refer to groups of people as designated by the U.S. federal government and the Census to account for individuals from Spanish-speaking countries or whose origins stem from Latin America (Salinas & Lozano, 2022).

Commonly referred to as the RGV or the Valley, it is represented by four counties, Cameron County, Hidalgo County, Starr County, and Willacy County. The RGV had a disproportionately high number of COVID-19 cases and deaths (9%) compared to the state of Texas (3%) in April 2021 (Blackburn & Sierra, 2021). In addition to public health impact, COVID-19 disrupted education along the border (Contreras Aguirre, 2022) and, thus, brings an urgent need to examine Mexican American RGV college student experiences during the pandemic.

In this paper, we use the term Mexican American when referring to all student interviewees from the RGV because they self-identified as of Mexican descent and primarily grew up on the U.S. side of the border (Hernández & Morán, 2021). In addition, some scholars (e.g., Contreras Aguirre, 2022) have focused on exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped college outcomes and experiences for students in borderland regions. However, scholars have yet to explore the RGV border region in this way, and there is a need to uncover how Mexican American RGV students navigated the pandemic to ensure college retention.

Limited research focuses on the experiences of Mexican American college students within the RGV region, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Working-class students in Texas were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (García-Louis et al., 2022; Errisuriz et al., 2022). With an increasing Mexican American population in the RGV (Ryabov & Merino, 2017), this study provides insight into the

experiences of working-class Mexican American college students during a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The Valley experienced higher rates of unemployment (10.7%) and poverty (25%) during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the state of Texas overall (5.9% unemployment and 13.4% poverty), which are factors linked to low educational attainment in the region (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021a; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021b; Yamamura et al., 2010). Furthermore, about 14% of RGV residents have obtained a bachelor's degree compared to the 30% of Texas residents (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Though the RGV has grown in population for many decades, it continues to have high health inequities, high poverty and unemployment rates, and low educational attainment, contributing to its high COVID-19 impact (Blackburn & Sierra, 2021; Ryabov & Merino, 2017). Therefore, it is vital to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college retention in the RGV.

Through a narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), this study uses oral histories from a national COVID-19 oral history project to understand how Mexican American college students in the RGV responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020-2021 academic year. This study is among few within higher education to qualitatively explore the experiences of Mexican American students in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic (Errisuriz et al., 2022; García-Louis et al., 2022) and the only study to date to highlight the RGV region in COVID-19 higher education research. Thus, this study focuses on two research questions: How did the COVID-19 pandemic shape Mexican American college student experiences in the RGV during the 2020-2021 academic year? And how did Mexican American college students in the

RGV balance coursework and family responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic? To identify effective college retention strategies mentioned within students' interviews, we drew on concepts from the Borderland Cultural Wealth framework (Yamamura et al., 2010): build upon assets, multi-dimensional college identity, and community emphasis. Findings revealed how Mexican American RGV students relied on their cultural assets to navigate health disparities, financial responsibilities, and college hindrances during the COVID-19 pandemic.

College Retention for Mexican American College Students in the Rio Grande Valley

Scholars revealed the importance of cultural assets and influences in college choice and college-going beliefs for Mexican American RGV students (Ozuna et al., 2016). However, a few scholars have connected RGV cultural assets with college retention (Alvarez et al., 2021). For example, Kirk and Watt (2018) revealed that cultural influence and capital supported RGV students' persistence at a technical college. Similarly, Vela et al. (2017) revealed that the importance of culture in life satisfaction is positively related to Mexican American college students' development in the Valley. RGV cultural assets were also addressed when developing the Borderland Cultural Wealth framework to challenge the deficits in the Valley to focus on cultural wealth to improve college readiness efforts (Yamamura et al., 2010). Other scholars addressed college retention, focusing on programs like the College Assistance Migrant Program to acknowledge that RGV Mexican American students have college retention gaps due to systemic educational barriers that predate the COVID-19 pandemic (Kirk & Watt, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated some of these existing systemic barriers that

impact students along the U.S.-Mexico border, such as health disparities and poverty (Contreras Aguirre, 2022). Thus, scholars must examine how these additional challenges have shaped Mexican American college student experiences in the RGV.

Impact of COVID-19 on Minoritized College Student Experiences

Little is known about the educational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students as research is still ongoing, yet published studies to date show adverse effects on student experiences and mental health. Most published studies exploring the COVID-19 experiences of college students focus on student mental health and often use surveys and secondary data for quantitative analysis (e.g., Errisuriz et al., 2022). For example, leveraging survey data from 237 undergraduate and graduate students, Perz et al. (2020) found that one of the primary predictors of COVID-19 distress was knowing someone with COVID-19. Given how the pandemic has largely impacted minoritized communities (Clark et al., 2020; Liu & Modir, 2020), minoritized students are more likely to know someone affected by COVID-19 and thus likely to experience increased stress levels based on Perz et al.'s (2020) survey findings. Added stress and anxiety ultimately influenced students' ability to focus and stay engaged in academic work during the pandemic (Chesser et al., 2020). Despite an overall increase in uncertainty and stress for college student populations, some researchers found that students from different ethnic and racial groups fared better in managing stress caused by the pandemic when compared to non-minoritized students (Bono et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Bono et al. (2020) and Liu et al. (2020) found that minoritized student populations used their social support networks during traumatic events to cope with crises and mitigate distress.

The impacts of COVID-19 were disparate, and students from minoritized backgrounds, particularly working-class students, were affected by economic hardship exacerbated by the pandemic (Contreras Aguirre, 2022; García-Louis et al., 2022). Many college students and their families lost employment because of pandemic-related work restrictions (Aucejo et al., 2020; Contreras Aguirre, 2022). In addition to the loss of wages, many minoritized working-class students at the onset of COVID-19 could not access institutional resources, such as food pantries, that they rely on to meet their basic needs (Karpman et al., 2020). Students relied on these institutional resources to feed themselves and depended on resources like food pantries to feed their families during the pandemic as well (García-Louis et al., 2022). Given these COVID-19 impacts and pre-pandemic educational attainment gaps, there should be urgency for university administrators and researchers to understand minoritized student experiences during COVID-19, especially within border regions like the RGV, that remain understudied and among the most impacted by the spread of COVID-19 (Blackburn & Sierra, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

In our analysis, we use the Borderland Cultural Wealth (BCW) hybrid framework (Yamamura et al., 2010), which employs an asset-based approach, to highlight RGV cultural assets college students used to navigate life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The BCW framework was developed to explore the collective responsibility of college readiness on the U.S.-Mexico border, which we adapted to examine college retention (Table 1). BCW integrates Chicana feminist borderland epistemology (Anzaldúa, 1987; Martínez, 1996; Calderón et al., 2012) and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005). BCW uses the Chicana feminist lens to acknowledge the role of respeto

(respect), buenos ejemplos (exemplary models), and confianza (mutual trust) in Latina/o’s social relationships (Yamamura et al., 2010), which we adapted to respeto, buenos ejemplos, and protección (protection) for Mexican Americans in the Valley due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The BCW framework also identifies cultural assets using the CCW model (Yosso, 2005), which examines six forms of cultural capital that Students of Color experience in college: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance.

Table 1 provides an overview of the three adapted BCW concepts to understand RGV student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the BCW framework provides a lens to identify assets overlooked or undervalued for college student retention to understand community assets embedded within the RGV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, BCW seeks to uncover how students navigated multiple identities (e.g., student, employee, familial role) during the pandemic. Last, the BCW framework recognizes students' responsibility for their community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing BCW concepts, this study highlights how RGV cultural assets support Mexican American students' college retention and how institutions can benefit from leveraging these concepts.

Table 1: *Borderland Cultural Wealth Framework for College Retention*

Original (Yamamura et al., 2010)	Adapted (COVID-19 pandemic)
Build upon assets: Overlooked or unacknowledged wealth that students, families, and communities possess.	Build upon assets: Students acknowledged their borderland cultural wealth to access healthcare.
Multi-dimensional college-going identity: Attends to multiple identities of race, class, gender, etc.	Multi-dimensional college identity: Students navigated multiple identities while exhibiting buenos ejemplos.
Community emphasis: Multiple stakeholders.	Community emphasis: Students recognized their role in respeto and protección for their family and community.

Methods

In this narrative study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we draw from oral history interviews that were initially collected as part of a multi-institutional national oral history project led by the Voces Oral History Center at the University of Texas at Austin. This national project, titled *Voces of a Pandemic*, was established to capture and archive the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Hispanic population and offers researchers, journalists, and the general public a nuanced understanding of historical events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (The University of Texas at Austin, 2023). Oral histories are rich, publicly accessible qualitative data, and provide a deep and detailed exploration of individual experiences during historical events like a global pandemic (Conway, 2012).

In the project, many faculty collaborators conducted oral history interviews and some integrated interview collections as part of their courses to include student contributions within the project archive. Since our study focuses on the RGV, we specifically sourced oral histories from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), one of the partner institutions that contributed to this large-scale project. The UTRGV oral history interviews were collected by college students enrolled in undergraduate English literary studies courses during the 2020-2021 academic year. Before conducting interviews, these students received guidance and training from their instructor and the Voces Oral History Center staff on the interview process and protocol.

Study Sample

We explored the UTRGV archive, publicly accessible qualitative data, to find region-specific oral histories from Mexican American college students taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. After filtering the UTRGV archive using the above criteria, our

final sample consisted of 11 students attending institutions in the Valley, including a community college (South Texas College; STC), a technical college (Texas State Technical College; TSTC), and a four-year (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; UTRGV). Students' names and demographic information gathered through the pre-interview survey are presented in Table 2 and details their institution, county, self-reported ethnicity, and interview date, which assists in creating a historically accurate public archive and situates their narrative amidst the spread of COVID-19 over time. While students did not disclose their socio-economic status, we interpreted their narratives and drew connections between their experiences and working-class categorization (Bettencourt, 2021). We did not have the authority to definitively label students as working-class. Nevertheless, we found it essential to note employment status and financial impacts disclosed to illuminate the connections between working-class identity and students' lived experiences during a global pandemic that impacted many economically. Additionally, while many of the students referred to themselves as Hispanic, the authors chose to refer to the student interviewees as Mexican American as a form of reclamation to disrupt the internalized racism and long-standing effects of historical racial violence that still pressure RGV residents to associate with an acculturative White, Americanized Hispanic identity (Hernández & Morán González, 2021).

Data Analysis

In our narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we used an iterative process, starting with first inductively coding the interviews using Bernauer's (2015) oral coding approach. We then deductively coded the interviews by applying descriptive

codes and codes drawn from the BCW framework. Lastly, we employed Saldaña’s (2016) thematic analysis to group codes into themes. The 11 interviews were transcribed using an integrated automated software.

Table 2: *RGV Student Interviewee Demographics During the 2020-2021 Academic Year at the Date of Interview*

Name	Institution	Date of Interview	Employment Status and/or Financial Impacts	County	Self-Reported Ethnicity
Emmily Zuniga	TSTC	11/11/2020	Working full-time, didn't have sufficient funds to get COVID tested	Cameron	Mexican American
Abigail Villarreal	STC	11/12/2020	Laid off once the pandemic happened	Hidalgo	Latina
Steve Cardenas	UTRGV	11/12/2020	Worked in retail	Hidalgo	Hispanic
Taylean Zuniga	UTRGV	11/14/2020	Unexpected funeral expenses	Hidalgo	Hispanic
Melissa Palomo	UTRGV	11/15/2020	Full-time student and full-time essential store employee	Hidalgo	Chicana/Latina
Jose Garcia	UTRGV	11/15/2020	Worked in door installation, laid off due to COVID	Hidalgo	Hispanic
Amanda Garza	UTRGV	11/15/2020	Furloughed from both jobs during the quarantine then later terminated from one	Hidalgo	No Pre-interview Available
Blanca Vega	UTRGV	11/16/2020	Unable to work since the pandemic started	Hidalgo	Hispanic
Abril Hernandez	UTRGV	04/08/2021	Essential worker in retail	Hidalgo	Hispanic
Marcela Galindo	UTRGV	04/08/2021	Mom lost job and dad had to continually go to work	Hidalgo	Hispanic/Latina
Jose Rios	UTRGV	04/11/2021	Former welder/wife was a teacher	Hidalgo	No Pre-interview Available

For the first round of coding, we inductively coded the 11 interviews by listening and viewing the interview recordings to become familiar with the data and journal our initial thoughts, ideas, or themes (Bernauer, 2015). We were in constant communication

with each other during and after the first round of coding and debriefed prior to the second round of coding. During the second round of coding, we applied descriptive codes within Dedoose (qualitative data analysis software) that we refined from the first round of coding. These descriptive codes allowed us to summarize what a section of the transcript was generally about (Saldaña, 2016). For example, we applied descriptive codes such as "coursework" and "employment" to sentences or paragraphs whenever students described specific experiences or instances related to those topics.

During this second round, we also applied deductive codes drawn from the BCW framework (Yamamura et al., 2010) to ensure an asset-based approach for examining and interpreting RGV college student experiences during COVID-19. After several meetings, the authors agreed to develop a codebook of 15 BCW codes (e.g., collective responsibility, respect, family) to apply to the transcripts within Dedoose. The BCW codes were valuable to the researchers in pinpointing specific strengths and cultural assets amidst the many students' stories within the transcripts that focused on struggles and precarity during this tumultuous time. After integrating the deductive BCW codes, we employed thematic analysis within Dedoose to refine codes, identify categories across codes, group these categories into themes, and clearly define and name the themes (Saldaña, 2016). In addition, we leveraged the code co-occurrence table within Dedoose to identify excerpts where the descriptive and BCW codes intersected and were most prominent.

Findings

Three themes emerged from our data analysis using the BCW framework: 1)
Leveraging cultural assets to protect family and community during the COVID-19

pandemic, 2) Prioritizing familial financial responsibility over coursework, and 3) Failing to acknowledge cultural assets created classroom hindrances. First, the narrative of this study reveals how most RGV Mexican American students used their cultural assets to protect their family and community while navigating disparities in order to access healthcare during COVID-19. In the findings, we share how despite the COVID-19 public health crisis, students prioritized familial financial responsibility to ensure consistent income. Last, we demonstrate how students leveraged cultural capital to balance familial responsibilities with virtual coursework and how many prioritized their family during this tumultuous time.

Leveraging Cultural Assets to Protect Family and Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic

It is apparent that the spread of the COVID-19 virus devastated the RGV during the 2020-2021 academic year, and many of the Mexican American students leveraged their cultural assets to navigate health disparities. They did so by leveraging their connections to communities in Mexico, serving as buenos ejemplos to protect their families, and using the assets of their transnational identities. Of the students interviewed, 10 out of 11 had someone in their family or extended family test positive for COVID-19, with five of them contracting the virus themselves. For example, Jose Garcia, a UTRGV student, contracted COVID-19 with his entire household. Jose's account of overcoming the COVID-19 virus further showed how difficult it is for some in the RGV to access healthcare in Texas and how common it is for RGV students to use their transnational capital to cross the U.S.-Mexico border for medication. Jose shared: "we didn't really take any medication, but for my mom, she actually got really bad. So,

we had to go get medications from Mexico because it was the only ones that work”. Even with insurance, one student still chose to travel across the border to access healthcare in Mexico, either due to convenience, habit, or affordability.

Despite the spread of COVID-19 among family and friends, all 11 student interviewees shared that they took the pandemic very seriously, considered necessary precautions, and quarantined when necessary. Many of the students interviewed prioritized the health and overall well-being of others during the pandemic, recognizing their role in the protección of their families and communities. Students considered those more vulnerable, such as elders, family members with other underlying health issues, and those without access to healthcare or federal financial assistance. For example, Emmily Zuniga, a TSTC student, shared in her interview how she had to take the COVID-19 pandemic seriously to protect her younger brother, who has an underlying health condition:

So nobody in my family actually got COVID-19. After I got sick, it was just myself that got affected just because, like I said, I did do a lot of self-quarantine. I didn't let anybody in my room, especially my little brother, because my little brother does have, he has a kidney that's failing. So he was very prone to get sick. So I tried, I tried to stay away as much as I can, away from my family. Just to protect mainly him, just to protect my brother.

In this way, Emily and other students served as buenos ejemplos to their family members and community during the COVID-19 pandemic to promote a broader culture of protección and care.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing inequities within healthcare in the RGV, and many students in the RGV were forced to tackle these inequities themselves while balancing coursework. Melissa Palomo, a UTRGV student, leveraged her linguistic capital to serve as a translator and intermediary between her

dad and medical professionals who did not speak Spanish. In Melissa Palomo's interview, she describes the unsettling experience she and her father went through in the emergency room (E.R.):

When we went to the emergency room to take my dad so he can get checked, the doctors and nurses didn't speak Spanish. So they were like rude and would give [my parents] attitude because they wouldn't like, understand what they would tell each other... myself and my siblings would help my parents out by calling and translating what they're trying to say, like back and forth. And I mean, the treatment at the beginning was very harsh. It was very upsetting and very, like nerve-wracking because you know, they are taking care of one of your family members. And it's like, if you can't communicate well enough with them, then it's just, I don't know, it was very stressful.

This story highlights the racism and discrimination in the RGV healthcare system by way of linguistic bias and illuminates how students in the RGV drew from their cultural assets and transnational identities to navigate these challenges.

Using the BCW framework allowed us to recognize students' multi-dimensional identities and cultural assets they used during COVID-19 while also illuminating the literal and figurative border students crossed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The RGV college students in this study took it upon themselves to provide protección for their families and community, given what some students described as an insufficient government and institutional response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their interviews, students noted that some faculty successfully responded to COVID-19 impacts by providing flexibility in assignments and changes in course policies to mitigate any academic or retention challenges. Thus, colleges and universities in the borderland regions must support students and their families to address health disparities during a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, as the inability to access healthcare could impact college retention.

Prioritizing Familial Financial Responsibility over Coursework

Employment status and financial impacts heavily shaped the experiences of the RGV college students interviewed and posed additional challenges when balancing coursework and familial responsibilities during the 2020-2021 academic year. Familial capital was central for Mexican American college students in this study as they deprioritized college responsibilities and viewed familial financial needs as the priority. While continuing to work in person during the COVID-19 pandemic because of financial obligations, many of the RGV college students and their families acted with caution to not contract the virus while working. However, some students did end up contracting the virus, which they perceived was due to their work environment. Emmily Zuniga and Marcela Galindo had parents and siblings who were essential workers, and they could not stop working in person. They had to continue working to provide for their families. Marcela, a UTRGV student, shared her experience during her interview:

My dad still had a job. So, he had to continually go to work because he didn't get any days off... one of my dad's coworkers had already gotten tested. Because he was actually the one, he, his coworker went to work, and he had it. So, he kind of spread it to everybody else, and then my dad came home and spread it to my mom and my older brother.

It was a privilege for those in the RGV from middle- to upper-class backgrounds who could work from home or stay at home during the time when some companies shut down. However, unfortunately, this was not the case for the 11 student interviewees and families, who had to continue working to prioritize financial obligations during a highly transmissible pandemic.

Of the 11 students interviewed, 10 were employed in some capacity prior to the onset of the pandemic. For example, a UTRGV student, Amanda Garza, held two jobs

to support herself and her family. While some of the students were able to continue working regular hours, others experienced impacts. Some student interviewees lost their jobs or had their hours reduced in addition to their family members experiencing job loss, creating additional stressors to navigate while completing coursework. This was especially significant for Blanca Vega, another UTRGV student who is also a wife and mother who typically contributed some of her earnings to support her family. Blanca explained how the pandemic created financial challenges:

We have not been able to work since this whole pandemic started. So, we haven't had a stable job since March... It's affected our income because usually I would use that money as extra just in case we run into a problem. But since I haven't been able to work, I haven't been getting that paycheck. That gives us a little boost.

Before the pandemic, Blanca illustrated respeto to her family by working to ensure her family's financial needs, and COVID-19 impacted her ability to support her family financially, which caused stress that took away focus from her college coursework.

Utilizing the BCW framework allowed us to recognize that working-class Mexican American students expressed respeto for their families and prioritized familial responsibilities over college demands. Many students shared the lack of sufficient federal and institutional financial support during the pandemic in their interviews. One student, Abril Hernandez, discussed the emergency aid she received because of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, only Abril Hernandez was explicit about receiving emergency funding, and it is uncertain how many students within the RGV were eligible or aware of the emergency aid. It is also uncertain if the amount of emergency aid received was sufficient since many RGV college students needed to contribute to family expenses aside from sustaining themselves. This makes

institutional funding important to consider for improving retention for many Mexican American students, and funding allocations should consider students' families since students often contribute to family expenses.

Failing to Acknowledge Cultural Assets created Classroom Hindrances

Aside from the financial challenges, students expressed difficulty in transitioning from in-person to virtual learning during the 2020-2021 academic year, yet they utilized their cultural assets to overcome some of these difficulties. For working-class Mexican American students in this study, faculty and institutional leaders failed to account for students' cultural assets when implementing practice and policy changes during COVID-19, and these students experienced many frustrations and challenges engaging in coursework. While students expressed respeto toward their families during COVID-19, faculty, and institutions did not offer the same to students. Two of the students interviewed shared how taking 15 credit hours, about five college courses, during the onset of the pandemic made their college experience and life, in general, more stressful. Blanca Vega and Taylean Zuniga discussed how difficult it was to manage the online transition for their five courses at UTRGV on top of additional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both students also shared the additional responsibility of managing their coursework virtually while caring for children at home. Although one institution in our sample did extend some flexibility in dropping courses or altering course grading during the spring 2020 semester (The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, n.d.), the push by institutional leaders to graduate on time could negatively impact students, especially when they are balancing familial responsibilities and COVID-19 impacts.

Given the additional challenges posed by the public health crisis and economic downturn, it took much work for RGV college students to prioritize virtual coursework when they had family at home with them needing support. For example, Steve Cardenas, a UTRGV student, ranked virtual classes as secondary during the COVID-19 pandemic, as he had more important concerns to address during this time. As a result, Steve had to shift his priorities to support his family rather than primarily concerning himself with his coursework:

Well, not much, besides the fact that, you know, a few college professors are just as strict if not stricter, you know, assignments and tasks and due dates and attendance. Like if we're not going through something very serious. I know, there's times when I have to go somewhere, I need to drop off my dad somewhere, my mom somewhere. I need to help, you know, go run an errand with my dad... And the professors don't really like it when I tell them, 'Oh, look, I had something to do.' So, one thing that I don't understand is why they are being as strict as if the world was perfectly fine, you know?

Steve and other RGV college students like Amanda Garza and Melissa Palomo were understandably frustrated by the lack of flexibility, grace, understanding, and empathy extended by faculty during the pandemic. Through this interview excerpt, it is clear that Steve's professors likely did not understand Steve's *respeto* towards his family, where Steve felt it was imperative to put family first, and his family expected him to do so. Moreover, the professors should have altered pedagogy and course expectations amidst transitioning to online teaching to ensure equity accordingly.

Additionally, all 11 student interviewees lived at home with other family members during the pandemic at the time of their interview. This presented unique college impacts for students in the RGV as courses shifted online. Virtual learning from home was only sometimes conducive to students who lived in a large household or students like Jose Rios, Taylean Zuniga, and Blanca Vega, who all had children at home taking

classes virtually. Jose, a UTRGV student, recounted how tough it was for him to balance his roles as a student, husband, and parent all under the same roof during the beginning of the pandemic:

It was difficult because everybody was here in the house, my wife, she was working here. And my three kids, all of them were in school in virtual classes... it's hard to concentrate when you're studying. And when your kid goes over here, and he or she wants help with their homework, or with I mean, their WiFi, or their iPads not connected or something. So, there's a lot of distractions... Yes, I mean, it's difficult because compared to being in a home by yourself, or in school by yourself, where you can concentrate better and different from being here, and everybody's here in the house, a lot of noise and everything.

Jose described his reality as a student parent in the RGV and how the COVID-19 pandemic created additional barriers when completing coursework within his household. Mexican American college students from the RGV in our study, like Jose, exhibited *respeto* for their families by prioritizing their family members at home during COVID-19 despite coursework expectations. Unfortunately, faculty and university leaders failed to acknowledge students' familial capital and how central families are to their daily lives, especially during times of disaster or crisis.

University faculty members and administrators should account for the importance of family members in students' educational experiences. Doing so can lead to less stressful classroom experiences and likely better student retention efforts. In addition, by highlighting cultural assets during disastrous events, administrators and scholars can consider BCW assets, such as family and community, as strengths and not deficits that detract from students' ability to complete coursework or successfully graduate. For instance, family is often a strong driving force for Mexican American students to enroll in college and graduate. However, these Mexican American students' narratives show that

failing to acknowledge cultural assets in the classroom through structural changes can negatively impact students' academic experiences.

Implications and Recommendations

We leverage students' stories and experiences to provide implications and recommendations for scholars and practitioners within higher education to improve RGV college student retention. This study's findings highlighted how students navigated the pandemic during the 2020-2021 academic year using their RGV cultural assets. Colleges and universities can affirm these identities while building upon the assets present within these communities to improve college student retention in the RGV. One way to do this is by intentionally including RGV college students' families and communities within the college experience, a fundamental tenet of BCW. In addition, it is vital to validate and mobilize the knowledge and values Mexican American students bring to institutions (Garcia et al., 2019; Alvarez et al., 2021).

Another example is to creatively integrate oral history activities throughout course curricula in any discipline that centralizes the RGV community's narratives, which are also the basis of evaluation, giving rise to this study. Additionally, family and community were significant parts of all the students' interviews, illustrating family and community as central to student life, well-being, and retention within the RGV during COVID-19. Future research needs to continue to use or build upon borderland frameworks that highlight cultural assets. Often educators and administrators solely focus on parent and family engagement across K-12 settings, yet this study revealed how family and community were also an asset to RGV college students. Thus, we strongly advocate that colleges and universities identify ways to provide families with institutional

resources and include families in programming to strengthen students' sense of community and support, further promoting college student retention in the RGV.

Changes to Higher Education Aid Policy

All 11 students in the study sample shared their stories of job loss, financial struggle, dependence on consistent and timely income, and job loss experienced by many members of their families. While only Abril Hernandez discussed receiving emergency aid, it is uncertain how much federal and institutional financial support students in this study received. To better support students dealing with employment loss or familial financial impacts, colleges and universities should alter emergency aid policies to account for familial financial impacts, not just an individual student's loss of employment or financial struggles. Institutional leaders must recognize that students prioritize familial financial responsibility, and they should adapt aid policies accordingly (Yamamura et al., 2010). These considerations and recommendations are important as many of the working-class Mexican American RGV college students in this study expressed a financial responsibility to their families.

Implications for College Practices

Throughout the RGV college students' narratives explored in this study, it is apparent that students utilized cultural assets, like leveraging their linguistic capital and transnational identity to translate for their family, as they navigated challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, there is a need to validate forms of cultural capital and multi-dimensional identities, especially ethnic and transnational identities prevalent within the RGV, and promote better understandings of identities in educational spaces to increase student agency, resiliency, and self-empowerment (Bono et al., 2020;

Wadsworth et al., 2018). The BCW framework informs the need to empower students' cultural assets and multi-dimensional identities (e.g., parent, daughter, sibling, grandchild) by encouraging institutional leaders, practitioners, and faculty to intentionally include students' salient social identities within formalized programming, initiatives, and curricula. For example, institutions should consider having an office with staff to work with minoritized groups of students like those from the RGV or student parents. These minoritized groups often rely on informal affinity groups with limited time and financial resources for guidance. However, we urge universities to create formal institutionalized support through offices and designated staff members focusing on specific retention efforts that leverage cultural assets.

Future Borderland Research

This study highlights the utility of the BCW framework as a lens for researchers to identify undervalued or overlooked assets of Mexican American students living along the borderland region of the Valley. When considering retention efforts for Mexican American college students from the RGV, institutional leaders need to focus on students' multi-dimensional identities and familial, and community ties (Núñez, 2014), especially during major transitions like virtual learning experienced during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings suggest cultural importance during tumultuous times like the COVID-19 pandemic was a factor in RGV college retention as family served as a strong driving force for these students while many other college students felt isolated and hopeless (Errisuriz et al., 2022). Students leaned into their cultural assets, like their linguistic capital and transnational identities, to protect their families and communities while creating a broader culture of care during a dark, tumultuous

time. This study can also serve more interdisciplinary scholars by emphasizing the importance of historically, socially, politically, and geographically contextualizing border narratives. We encourage researchers who study communities from the border or those who conduct research along the border to continue to use and build upon borderland theories like the BCW framework while reflecting on where a theory might fall short or when theories might need additional contextualization to bound analysis to the specific space and place.

Acknowledgments/Credits

The authors acknowledge and thank Dr. Diana Noreen Rivera, Associate Professor at UTRGV, for her support in building and navigating the UTRGV Voces of a Pandemic archive. We also thank Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez and her team at The University of Texas at Austin Voces Oral History Center, who made this opportunity for RGV community engagement and preservation in the virtual classroom possible. The authors are also appreciative of the dedication and work of Ms. Leslie Torres, a student intern with UTRGV Voces of a Pandemic in 2021 who transcribed dozens of interviews, several of which informed this paper. Lastly, the authors are grateful for every students' and storytellers' effort that populates the UTRGV Voces of a Pandemic digital collection. Your stories are a bedrock for aims to create a better future.

References

- Alvarez, S., Martinez, J.L., Salamanca, A., Salamanca, E., & Reyna, R. C. (2021). Cosecha voices: Migrant farmworker students, pedagogy, voice, and self-determination. *Harvard Educational Review*, 91(3), 319-340.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Aucejo, F., French, J., Araya, M. P. U., & Zafar, B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on student experiences and expectations: Evidence from a survey. *Journal of Public Economics*, 191, 104271–104271. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104271>
- Bernauer, J. (2015). Opening the ears that science closed: Transforming qualitative data using oral coding. *Qualitative Report*, 20(4), 406–415. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2117>
- Bettencourt, G. M. (2021). “I belong because it wasn’t made for me”: Understanding working-class students’ sense of belonging on campus. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 92(5), 760–783. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2021.1872288>
- Blackburn, C. C., & Sierra, L. A. (2021). Anti-immigrant rhetoric, deteriorating health access, and COVID-19 in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas. *Health Security*, 19(S1), S-50. <https://doi.org/10.1089/hs.2021.0005>
- Bono, G., Reil, K., & Hescox, J. (2020). Stress and well-being in college students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Can grit and gratitude help? *International Journal of Well-being*, 10(3), 39-57. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v10i3.1331>

- Calderón, D., Bernal, D. D., Huber, L. P., Malagón, M., & Vélez, V. N. (2012). A Chicana feminist epistemology revisited: Cultivating ideas a generation later. *Harvard Educational Review*, 82(4), 513-539.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.82.4.1518621577461p68>
- Chesser, A., Drassen Ham, A., & Keene Woods, N. (2020). Assessment of COVID-19 knowledge among university students: Implications for future risk communication strategies. *Health Education & Behavior*, 47(4), 540–543.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120931420>
- Clark, E., Fredricks, K., Woc-Colburn, L., Bottazzi, M. E., & Weatherhead, J. (2020). Disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrant communities in the United States. *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases*, 14(7), e0008484.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0008484>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Contreras Aguirre, H. C. (2022). The journey of Latina STEM undergraduate students in the borderlands in times of COVID-19. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2022.2080681>
- Conway, M. (2012). Oral history interviews: Advantages and challenges of employing oral history interviewing as part of a research project. In F. Darling-Wolf (Ed.), *Research Methods in Media Studies*. (pp. 155-178). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Errisuriz, V. L., Villatoro, A. P., & McDaniel, M. D. (2022). Contextualizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experiences and outcomes of Latinx college students in Texas. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 21(3), 319-334
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2022.2052294>
- García-Louis, C., Hernandez, M., & Aldana-Ramirez, M. (2022). Latinx community college students and the (in) opportunities brought by COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2022.2039152>
- Garcia, G. A., Núñez, A.-M., & Sansone, V. A. (2019). Toward a multi-dimensional conceptual framework for understanding “servingness” in Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A synthesis of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 745–784. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319864591>
- Hernández, S., & Morán González, J. (2021). *Reverberations of Racial Violence: Critical Reflections on the History of the Border*. University of Texas Press.
- Karpman, M., Zuckerman, S., Gonzalez, D., & Kenney, G. M. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is straining families’ abilities to afford basic needs low-income and Hispanic families the hardest hit. URBAN Institute, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
- Kirk, R., & Watt, K. M. (2018). Networks for success: Preparing Mexican American AVID college students for credentials, completion, and the workforce. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, 17(3), 257–271.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1337575>
- Liu, C. H., Zhang, E., Wong, G. T. F., Hyun, S., & Hahm, H. C. (2020). Factors associated with depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptomatology during the COVID-19 pandemic: Clinical implications for U.S. young adult mental health.

- Psychiatry Research*, 290, 113172.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113172>
- Liu, S. R., & Modir, S. (2020). The outbreak that was always here: Racial trauma in the context of COVID-19 and implications for mental health providers. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(5), 439–442.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000784>
- Martínez, T. A. (1996). Toward a Chicana feminist epistemological standpoint: Theory at the intersection of race, class, and gender. *Race, Gender & Class*, 107-128.
- Noe-Bustamante, L., Flores, A., & Shah, S. (2019, September 16). *Facts about Hispanics of Mexican origin in the United States, 2017*. Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/u-s-hispanics-facts-on-mexican-origin-latinos/>
- Núñez, A. M. (2014). Advancing an intersectionality framework in higher education: Power and Latino postsecondary opportunity. In M.B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 33-92). Springer, Dordrecht.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6_2
- Ozuna, T. G., Saenz, V. B., Ballysingh, T. A., & Yamamura, E. K. (2016). Increasing Latina/o student success: Examining culturally responsive college readiness in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. *Journal of School Leadership*, 26(1), 154–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461602600106>
- Perz, C. A., Lang, B. A., & Harrington, R. (2020). Validation of the fear of COVID-19 scale in a U.S. college sample. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00356-3>
- Ryabov, I., & Merino, S. (2017). Recent demographic change in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas: The importance of domestic migration. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 32(2), 211–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2016.1195704>
- Salinas, C. & Lozano, A. (2022). History and evolution of the term Latinx. In E. G. Murillo, D. Delgado Bernal, S. Morales, L. Urrieta, E. Ruiz Bybee, J. Sánchez Muñoz, V. B. Saenz, D. Villanueva, M. Machado-Casas, & K. Espinoza (Eds.), *Handbook of Latinos and Education (second edition)*, (pp. 249-263). Rutledge.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (third edition). SAGE.
- The University of Texas at Austin. (2023). *Voces of a Pandemic*. Voces Oral History Center. <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/voces-pandemic>
- United States Census Bureau. (2020). *QuickFacts: Willacy County, Texas; Starr County, Texas; Hidalgo County, Texas; Cameron County, Texas; Texas*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/willacycountytexas,starrcountytexas,hidalgocountytexas,cameroncountytexas,TX/PST045219>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021a). County Employment and Wages in Texas – Third Quarter 2020. https://www.bls.gov/regions/southwest/news-release/countyemploymentandwages_texas.htm
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021b). Local Area Unemployment Statistics Map. https://data.bls.gov/lausmap/showMap.jsp;jsessionid=52B65C965BAA836F78690006C5FD3C16._t3_08v
- Vela, J. C., Sparrow, G. S., Ikononopoulos, J., Gonzalez, S. L., & Rodriguez, B. (2017). The role of character strengths and family importance on Mexican American

- college students' life satisfaction. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 16(3), 273–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192716628958>
- Wadsworth, M. E., Ahlkvist, J. A., McDonald, A., & Tilghman-Osborne, E. M. (2018). Future directions in research and intervention with youths in poverty. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 47, 1023–1038. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2018.1485108>
- Yamamura, E. K., Martinez, M. A., & Saenz, V. B. (2010). Moving beyond high school expectations: Examining stakeholders' responsibility for increasing Latina/o students' college readiness. *High School Journal*, 93(3), 126–148.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>