

Ethnic Identity of Hispanic Students

Introduction & Theoretical Framework

Understanding ethnic identity and helping students to develop an appreciation for their own and others ethnic identity is of utmost importance within our ever-changing agriculture landscape. Ethnic identity is a dynamic and complex construct involving exploration and commitment that develops over time (Phinney, 1998, 2003). This identity formation is a crucial aspect of personal development and social integration, influencing various outcomes such as psychological well-being, academic performance, and social relationships (Umana-Taylor et al., 2014). For example, students who belong to underrepresented minority groups more often feel dislocated and culturally isolated in predominantly white institutions, which have adverse impacts on feelings of belonging and academic success exhibited by them (Tinto, 1993). Research indicates that a strong ethnic identity promotes higher self-esteem, better coping abilities, and increased mastery (Smith & Silva, 2011).

The social identity theory (SIT) guided this study. This theory focuses on a sense of belonging to a group and the attitudes & feelings that accompany a sense of group membership (Taejel & Turner, 1986). Based on social identity theory, it would be expected that ethnic identity would include ethnic attitudes and a sense of group belonging. The university setting, with its multicultural environment and opportunities for intercultural engagement, plays a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing ethnic identity (Helms, 1990). Students are likely to form relationships with students with like attributes rather than those who are different due to the need for a sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine student ethnic identity based upon *ethnic identity search* and *affirmation belonging commitment* within Agriculture courses at [UNIVERSITY].

Methods

This non-experimental, descriptive study focused on post-secondary students enrolled in agriculture courses at [UNIVERSITY]. This convenience sample of participants were selected based upon the criteria that they were enrolled in an undergraduate agricultural science course. After IRB approval, the researchers used the SurveyMonkey online survey tool to email all students in the [COURSE] sections during the Fall 2024 semester. Following an agreement for student participation, all students who elected to participate completed an online version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM).

The MEIM (Phinney, 1992) was designed to measure an individual's underlying sense of ethnic identity. The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) is a questionnaire to assess the way people think, feel, and behave with respect to their ethnic origin. It is comprised of two factors: a developmental-cognitive component (*ethnic identity search*) and an affective component (*affirmation, belonging and commitment*) (Phinney, 1992). The first factor involves discovering personal meanings of ethnic identity through active participation, searching, and exploration. The second factor relates to feelings of belonging to and identifying with one's ethnic background. The MEIM allows students to rate their sense of ethnic identity by selecting

how much they agree or disagree with each statement using a 4-point Likert scale, with lower scores indicating more agreement and a higher ethnic identity.

A total of 82 students participated in this study, resulting in a response rate of 76%. The majority of participants were Hispanic (71%) and an AGSC major. Over half (61%) identified as female. Data was entered and analyzed using SPSS version 26 on measures of central tendency and correlations. The MEIM has been used in dozens of studies and has consistently shown acceptable reliability, typically with alphas coefficients above .80 across a wide range of ethnic groups and ages. For this study, the Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient was an .89., where inter-reliability scores were .87 for Ethnic Identity Search and .91 for Belonging, Affirmation & Commitment.

Findings

This study sought to determine student ethnic identity based upon *ethnic identity search* and *affirmation belonging commitment*. The overall mean score on the MEIM was a 3.14. The construct scores are presented in Table one.

Table One

Construct Summary Mean Scores (n = 82)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Ethnic Identity Search	2.93	0.54	3
Affirmation Belonging Commitment	3.29	0.48	3

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to determine student ethnic identity based upon two constructs, *ethnic identity search* (EIS) and *affirmation belonging commitment* (ABC). The population of the study was undergraduate students majoring in agriculture at [UNIVERSITY]. This was part of a larger study investigating students' ethnic identity and sense of belonging to the university as a whole.

Of the specific questions asked in the study, the highest level of agreement was found related to the statement, "*I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group*". The lowest level of agreement was related to question "*I am happy that I am a member of the ethnic group I belong to*". It was found that students had a higher sense of agreement with statements related to *ethnic identity search* as compared to *affirmation, belonging & commitment*. The researchers found that students disagreed with statements related to their sense of membership within their specific ethnic groups. These findings suggest students did not agree that they spent much time searching and developing their ethnic identity.

Future studies are encouraged to compare the findings of agriculture majors with non-agriculture peers. It is recommended that future researchers compare such findings with both minorities serving (HSI, HBCU, etc) and other institutions. As the demographics of our universities change, we must ensure that students feel a strong sense of belonging and identity within the learning environment. These practices will lead to stronger retention and ultimately better prepared students.

References

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