Mentorship Across Cultures: Latino Graduate Experiences in Agriculture at a U.S. Land-Grant University

Introduction

Mentorship is a foundational component of graduate education, yet Latino students in U.S. agricultural programs often navigate academic environments without the cultural, institutional, or social knowledge necessary to fully access available opportunities (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Moschetti et al., 2017). Prior research highlights that Latino students frequently lack the social capital needed to interpret expectations, ask questions, or engage confidently in academic spaces, placing them at a structural disadvantage (Núñez, 2009). As agricultural sciences increasingly emphasize global learning and cross-cultural collaboration (Adebayo & Sunderman, 2023; Osula et al., 2019), understanding how intercultural mentorship shapes Latino graduate students' experiences is essential to improving retention, academic success, and equitable access to professional networks. This study addresses this need by examining how intercultural mentoring relationships develop and function. Specifically, it aims to (1) examine the process of developing relationships through intercultural mentorship, (2) understand the benefits of intercultural mentorship, (3) understand the challenges of intercultural mentorship, and (4) describe the impact of intercultural mentorship.

Conceptual Framework

The study is grounded in Social Capital Theory (SCT), conceptualizing mentorship as a relational process through which students gain access to information, networks, and institutional resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) and Putnam's (2000) distinctions between bonding and bridging social capital, the framework positions intercultural mentorship as a mechanism that can both strengthen internal support systems and expand students' access to broader academic and professional opportunities (Claridge, 2018). The study also integrates cultural dimensions theory, including Hall's high- and low-context communication styles (Hall, 1976), monochronic and polychronic time orientations (Hall, 1983), and Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). These cultural constructs illuminate how communication styles, expectations of hierarchy, time management, and risk tolerance shape the dynamics of intercultural mentoring relationships (Torrens et al., 2017).

Methods

This qualitative instrumental case study employed a constructivist paradigm to explore the lived experiences of Latino graduate students in agricultural and life sciences programs at a large U.S. land-grant university (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ten participants[P] were purposefully selected based on criteria including Latin American origin, enrollment in a graduate program for at least one semester, and having a U.S.-born advisor identified as a mentor (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit perspectives aligned with the study's four objectives. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and in person, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Open coding was used to identify initial categories, followed by pattern coding to develop broader themes (Saldaña, 2016). Two researchers independently coded the data and met to reach consensus on intercoder reliability. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation, reflexive memoing, detailed documentation, and adherence to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Findings for Objective 1 revealed that relationships began through formal academic structures such as internships, rotations, or advisor assignments, and evolved from initial formality toward trust, collaboration, and increased autonomy. As one student explained, *"At first, you're afraid… you just say 'yes, doctor', but after a year I gained a lot of confidence"* (P1). Another noted the shift from hierarchy to collegiality: *"Over time, it became a collaboration… we discuss ideas as equals"* (P3).

For Objective 2, participants described benefits including cultural validation, increased confidence, intellectual and methodological growth, and expanded competencies in leadership, communication, and academic navigation. One student shared, *"He taught me to embrace my accent… my Latin perspective helps the lab"* (P1). Others highlighted professional growth: *"I can now handle an entire research project, from budgeting to execution"* (P4), and *"She introduced me to many people in the field and taught me how to approach them"* (P5).

Objective 3, highlighted challenges related to communication styles, hierarchical expectations, linguistic fatigue, differing perceptions of time, and occasional feelings of isolation or misinterpretation rooted in cultural differences. Language barriers affected confidence: *"I was afraid to speak or make grammatical mistakes"* (P3). Students also described cultural differences in punctuality and expectations for autonomy: *"In my country, you expect your boss to tell you exactly what to do… here, the mentor expects you to be the driving force"* (P6). Misunderstandings emerged from low-context communication: *"I would arrive asking about his family, and he just wanted to see my charts"* (P10).

Finally, Objective 4 demonstrated that intercultural mentorship shaped students' academic motivation, strengthened research foundations, expanded access to financial and material resources, and broadened professional networks. Students described gaining confidence in their research abilities, *"She trusts my criteria completely"* (P9), and expressed a desire to mentor others: *"I want to give the same support I received"* (P5).

Conclusions

Intercultural mentorship significantly shaped Latino graduate students' academic and professional development. Relationships that began through formal structures evolved into trusting partnerships that fostered intellectual growth, cultural validation, and increased confidence. Despite cultural and communication challenges, participants gained stronger research foundations, greater autonomy, and expanded access to networks and resources. Intercultural mentorship functioned as a mechanism for building social capital and supporting students' academic advancement.

Implications and Recommendations

Graduate programs should intentionally cultivate intercultural mentorship by providing mentors with training in cultural communication, power dynamics, and implicit expectations. Structured onboarding, clear communication norms, and opportunities for reciprocal cultural learning can strengthen relationships. Research recommendations include longitudinal studies to examine long-term outcomes, comparative studies of intercultural and intracultural mentorship, and mentor-focused research to understand faculty perspectives and training needs. The transferability of these findings is limited by the study's single-institution context and cross-sectional design; long-term academic persistence and career progression cannot be inferred without longitudinal research.

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