



Episode 10: Finding Community at a Predominantly White University

Celiana Lopez, Gisselle Cambron, and Yami Rodriguez are three students at Loyola University Chicago. Attending a predominantly white institution, or PWI, has presented challenges to all three girls, but Celiana, Gisselle, and Yami have found joy and community in Lambda Theta Alpha, their Latina sorority, and in programs meant to support first generation and low income students like Loyola's Achieving College Excellence program. In this episode, reporter Gina Castro meets the three friends and digs into what it's like to be a Latina at a PWI. A researcher from the Latino Policy Forum also unpacks new research about obstacles to Latinas' success in college.

Gina Castro: By 2050, Latinas will make up a quarter of all women in the U.S. regaining an education, participating in the labor market, accumulating wealth, and embracing entrepreneurship. This is 100 Latina Birthdays, an open-source podcast from LWC Studios about the health, wellness and lifetime outcomes of Latinas in the U.S. starting in utero.

Our narrative investigation and celebration of Latina Health and well-being is focused on Chicago, but has widespread, national implications. In this first season, we will chronicle Latina women and girls in the first two decades of their lives from birth to age 20.

I'm Gina Castro, an investigative reporter based in Humboldt Park, Chicago. My reporting centers communities of color, their stories of resilience, joy and life, despite systemic oppression.

A year ago, if you were to ask Celiana Lopez what her dream career was, in a heartbeat, she'd have said nursing.

Celiana Lopez: My whole life I've told myself, I'm going to be a nurse. I'm going to be a nurse, and I want to move here and this is what I want to do with my degree. I had this whole, I could have gave you a fifty-year layout of what I wanted to do with my degree.

Gina Castro: Celiana became a certified nursing assistant at 17, and then worked for a medical agency for about a year before starting her Bachelor of Science in Nursing at Loyola University Chicago, but she had a tough first semester. She failed her human anatomy and chemistry labs, and the program administrators dropped her from the nursing program just days before the start of second semester.

Celiana Lopez: I was not only livid at Loyola because of the fact that they had gave me no time to really change my major and figure everything out. Everything was just very confusing.

Gina Castro: Loyola's nursing program is rigorous. It requires first-year students to [take on 15 credit hours the first semester and 18 the next](#). That's nine credits or about three classes more than Loyola's minimum requirement for full-time students. Celiana had seven classes her first semester.

Celiana Lopez: It was a lot. It was a lot to learn and adjust myself to. I had a lot of my peers telling me, "Oh, I had previously learned this in high school," or "I took an AP class in human anatomy," or this and that. Hearing that was also very discouraging due to the fact that it's like, I didn't have those experiences.

Gina Castro: Latino college enrollment in the U.S. has surged in recent years. Almost 3.7 million Latinos enrolled in college in the U.S. in 2020 alone. In just one to two generations, or about 40 years, [Latino college enrollment](#) has jumped 456%. And for the past three decades, Latinas in the U.S. have [spearheaded](#) this rise in educational achievement. However, Latinas in the U.S. are still the [least likely](#) demographic to enroll in college and have a bachelor's degree. [Just 35 percent](#) of Latinas between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in college in 2021.

Some of that can be attributed to Latinas having [the second-highest](#) high school dropout rate of all women in the U.S. In Illinois, [more than half](#) of Latinas' education stops after high school graduation.

I met Celiana Lopez at her family home in Logan Square. It's a neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. [Since the 1960s](#), Logan Square has been a hub for Latino immigrants, but [growing gentrification](#) reduced the number of Latinos to [just over a third](#) of the population. It was a windy, rainy day in June. When I stepped inside her brick home, her two dogs, Stormy and Sunny, ran to greet me.

Celiana Lopez: Come on, come on, let's go. Let's go work, Stormy.

Gina Castro: The two pups love attention, and often interrupted my interview with Celiana and her mom, Melissa Jarena Lopez.

[in tape] Oh my goodness. They are so adorable. What kind of dogs are these?

Celiana Lopez: They're Cocker Spaniel Poodle mixes.

Gina Castro: [in tape] Adorable.

Celiana Lopez: So we got her, Sunny. You...

Gina Castro: Celiana is a lively and funny 19-year-old. She was wearing a comfy matching jogger set with her hair slicked back into a bun and a few curls framing her face.

Celiana graduated from Roberto Clemente High School in Spring 2022. It's a Chicago public school in Humboldt Park, a ten-minute drive south from Logan Square. Similar to Logan Square, Humboldt's Latino population peaked in the 60s. Today, Humboldt is known for having [the largest Puerto Rican population in the Midwest](#).

Celiana was in the International Baccalaureate, or IB, program in high school. It's intended to prepare students for college coursework, but Celiana's high school education was interrupted by the pandemic. Like the more than 200,000 [Chicago Public School teens](#) in 2020 and 2021, she spent half of her sophomore and all of her junior year attending class from her laptop in her bedroom.

Celiana Lopez: My junior year, I didn't really take any classes related to what I was taking my freshman year of college. We were online and quite honestly, majority of the time that I was online, this is going to sound so terrible, but I was sleeping just because it was a very hard adjustment. It's so easy to get distracted at home. It's so easy to be in class and then accidentally fall asleep in the comfort of your own house.

Gina Castro: Celiana says she was showing up to class, but not really staying engaged. She often relied on teaching herself the coursework after class to complete her assignments. She struggled to grasp the material she was learning in her IB program and her grades began to fall. In a 2022 Pew research study, 28 percent of Latino teens surveyed said they were [extremely or very worried](#) that the pandemic caused them to fall behind in school. When classes returned to in-person learning her senior year of high school, Celiana felt overwhelmed by the college enrollment process. She dropped the IB program and focused on improving her GPA for college applications.

Celiana Lopez: I like to say that my junior year I kind of was not there, was not present, and then my senior year I got to high school and everybody was like, "all right, time to apply to college. You got to do your FAFSA, you got to do this, apply to scholarships".

Gina Castro: When she was finally sitting in a college classroom, Celiana felt like she was miles behind her classmates.

Lack of access to rigorous classes in high school is one of the six key obstacles [the Latino Policy Forum says](#) are preventing Latinos from completing college in Illinois. [The Latino Policy Forum](#) is a nonprofit that advocates for housing, education, and immigration policies that benefit the Latino community in Illinois. As the Latino Policy Forum studied education across different ages, researchers kept coming across the same issue. Latinos have the lowest educational attainment in Illinois. This impacts Latinos' lifetime earnings and their health.

College graduates have a longer life expectancy and [are more likely](#) to have health insurance than non-college graduates. Latinas with a bachelor's degree made over 23,000 dollars more than Latinas with only a high school diploma, [according to 2016 data](#) from the National Women's Law Center and The Labor Council for Latin American Advancement. A degree means Latinas can have more in the bank to put towards a house and to finance their own children's education.

So the Latino Policy Forum set out to produce the first ever [Illinois Latino College Landscape study](#).

Gudelia Lopez: There's lots of studies that have been done, but this is a nice way to put everything together to provide a solid picture of what's happening to Latinos in Illinois, how we compare to national information.

Gina Castro: Gudelia Lopez is the founder of a consulting firm that reviews educational programs. She's one of the leaders of the Latino Policy Forum [study](#).

Gudelia Lopez: But then also, thinking about what is it that's necessary? What policies, what practices are necessary for more Latino students to prepare well for college, enroll in, persist, and complete college?

Gina Castro: For Latinas in Illinois, it's almost an even split between the percentage of Latinas who finish college and Latinas who complete a portion of college. In 2018, 18% of Latinas received a four-year degree and 18% of Latinas had some college, but no degree, according to [the Illinois Board of Higher Education](#).

Gudelia and the team identified [six key obstacles](#) holding Latino students back from completing college. One, a lack of access to rigorous classes to prepare students for college. Two, a shortage of high school counseling and support for college enrollment. Three, a lack of Latino teachers and counselors. Four, difficulty navigating college environments. Five, trouble understanding college financing, and six, pressures from family and community.

In the early 2000s, Gudelia was the assistant director of research for the Department of Post-Secondary for Chicago Public Schools. Her CPS department found that Latinos were lagging in immediate college enrollment, meaning not many Latinos were enrolling in college the summer after high school.

Gudelia Lopez: I set up this system that looked at what was happening to our graduates as they were leaving Chicago public schools, whether or not they were enrolling in college, where they were enrolling, were they enrolling in two-year institutions or four-year institutions? And in 2004, we saw clearly the Latinos were the furthest behind all of the other racial ethnic groups.

Gina Castro: Since then, the percentage of Latino CPS students enrolling in college has grown substantially. By 2019, the percentage of Latinos enrolled in college reached

nearly 70%, though it decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gudelia says her work is based on her own experience as a Chicago Public School student. She grew up in Pilsen and graduated from Benito Juarez High School in 1989.

Gudelia Lopez: I went to a neighborhood high school and the counselors there were very supportive of me. I had really good grades. I was a strong student, but I knew that other students who were in my classes were not getting the same support.

Gina Castro: Gudelia earned her PhD at the University of Chicago with research that focused on what happens in that key transition between high school and college. A major obstacle for high school seniors entering college is understanding the cost of tuition. All students applying to college have to complete [the FAFSA](#), or Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and then interpret a different financial aid for each of the colleges they've applied to.

This can be a tricky process for any 18-year-old. It's even more challenging when the process isn't in your native language or if no one in your family has been through this before.

Gudelia Lopez: If you do not have a parent who has gone to college, if you do not have that navigational capital to understand that letter, the financial award letter, you are trying to compare different things, when not knowing it. It's not a clear message. It's not like tuition is on every letter. You don't have a good sense of what the entire cost of attending college is.

Gina Castro: Gudelia says, this is why so many Latinos choose to go to a two-year college instead of a four-year institution.

Gudelia Lopez: We know that financing college is a huge barrier, but it's also something that we can address by making some changes to how we share information about the financial aid packages they receive.

Gina Castro: In her 2001 dissertation, Gudelia found that Mexican-American high school seniors in Chicago were often missing the institutional knowledge and guidance about the college selection and application process. This difficulty in navigating the college landscape is something that continues to hold Latinos back 20 years later, so Gudelia found.

Gudelia Lopez: I think the thing for me that surprised me is how little things have changed from the time when I was in school, that some of the same issues that were coming up for me and my peers are still the same issues that are cropping up for students today, and I do recognize that there's a lot that has been done. We know a lot more than we did a number of years ago, but I still, I think that was the thing that gave me pause, that some of these things that students were

talking about in the focus groups were the same issues that I came up against when I started college.

Gina Castro: At Loyola, Celiana had difficulty navigating the expectations and resources at her college. For example, she didn't know that failing a class could end her time in the nursing program because she wasn't aware of Loyola's mandatory one-credit class called University 101.

This first-year seminar helps prepare students for life on campus, from understanding grades and course requirements for their degree to how to access resources on and off campus. The seminars are specific to a student's major, and so, Celiana would have learned that failing two labs would result in her removal from the nursing program.

Celiana Lopez: I didn't receive an email, I didn't receive anything about it, so I had no idea that I had to be at that. After this had happened, I had reached out to some of the people pretty much explaining my circumstance and they were just kind of like, "Yeah, you didn't know that you couldn't do this, this, and that, and that would happen?" And then it was kind of like, "What do you mean, you knew this and I didn't?" That was a slap to my face of, I wasn't even addressed on it the correct way, so that definitely took me for a turn and I was just very upset about that. There was a lot of anger within the fact that I was told nothing and it wasn't necessarily their fault 100% because of the fact that if I would have been a little bit more social in my classes, I would've probably made it to that seminar, but it's the fact that I didn't even get the notification. I didn't know anything that was happening.

Gina Castro: After some back and forth, the nursing program readmitted her, but Celiana changed her mind.

Celiana Lopez: I got back in, and then I decided nursing was no longer what I wanted to do. You could be a senior in your last semester and if you fail one course in that last semester, you get dropped permanently from the program and you do not get your degree. My goal, obviously, was not to fail another course, but things happen. You know what I mean? You can't anticipate when you're going to be sick or you can't anticipate when you're going to accidentally miss an assignment, and for me, it was just, I didn't like the fact that there wasn't security within that.

Gina Castro: Celiana took into account how much she and her family are investing in her career. Her two scholarships don't fully cover the cost of tuition and housing. She pays the difference with loans and help from her parents.

Tuition for the nursing program is over \$25,000 a semester or \$205,520 for all four years, and that doesn't include housing and living expenses. According to Latino advocacy group, [UnidosUS](#), [almost half of Latinos](#) in 2016 had a zero [Expected Family Contribution](#), which is the fastest determination of how much a

student and their family can contribute to their education in any given year.

Celiana is thinking, she can't afford to rack up student loan debt and be unsure she'll earn the degree she's paying for. Private, non-profit, four-year universities like Loyola are significantly more expensive than public universities.

In the 2021 to 2022 school year, the difference in one year's tuition between the two was about \$29,000 for first year full-time students as reported by [the National Center for Education Statistics](#), and [a fall 2020 report](#) from UnidosUS shows that Latino students prefer the more affordable option. About 21% of the students enrolled in public four-year colleges versus 14% in private, nonprofit four-year institutions like Loyola, but interestingly, Latinos [graduate at higher rates](#) from the private non-profit colleges.

Private non-profit colleges [in Illinois](#) and [the U.S.](#) have a higher graduation rate than public universities for all other racial groups. The experts I spoke to had varying explanations for this. Some said these institutions pay more attention to their students than public schools contributing to the student's success. Another explanation is that these universities give more financial aid, perhaps helping more students make it to graduation.

By spring semester of her first year, Celiana was feeling lost.

Celiana Lopez: I kind of went through this whole dilemma of, okay, well what am I going to do in my life?

Gina Castro: She began thinking about another career.

Celiana Lopez: I've always had a passion for teaching and I know that for a fact, as much as I've had a passion for nursing.

Gina Castro: Teaching was part of her original plan. She had hoped to eventually teach nursing, and her work study job was tutoring students on Chicago's West Side, but Celiana is still weighing her options. Her new major at Loyola is criminal justice.

When it comes to Celiana's decision to try pre-law, she might be trying to break a mold. Low-income, Black, Latino, and Native American students [are underrepresented](#) in the college majors that pay the most money. For example, according to the American Bar Association, [just 5% of Latinos are lawyers](#), despite Latinos making up [about 19%](#) of the U.S. population, but Celiana still wants to do something she loves.

Celiana Lopez: If I do not find a passion within criminal justice and pre-law, I will be taking a gap year out of my choice, and then I will be most likely transferring to another school to get an education degree.

- Gina Castro: Celiana worries about becoming a teacher when the profession is so undervalued and underpaid.
- Celiana Lopez: That's always been my barrier within that degree. I think if I were going into education, I would be settling, but not settling for something that I don't want to do, more of something that I'm passionate about, but I know and it's very rewarding, but won't afford the lifestyle I want.
- Gina Castro: She has witnessed teachers in her school district protest for [higher salaries](#) and [smaller class sizes](#). In 2019, Celiana's first year of high school, Chicago public school teachers arranged [an 11-day strike](#), the longest teacher strike in the city since the 80s. She's still thinking about paying her student loans after college. First year Chicago public school teachers [start out](#) with a nearly 62,000 dollar salary. The average salary for a lawyer in Chicago is [92,000 dollars](#).
- On average, Latinas [earned less](#) in 2021 than men and women in any other demographic group in the U.S. Latinas have to work [almost an entire extra year](#), full-time, to make what Non-Hispanic white men make in a year. Their poverty rate is the second highest in the U.S., and it increased between 2019 and 2020 [to nearly 19%](#). That's more than two times the poverty rate of Non-Hispanic white women. A college degree for Latinas means [economic security](#) and social mobility. Take the COVID-19 pandemic. The unemployment rate for high school graduates was [more than two times](#) the unemployment rate for those with bachelor's degrees between February and May of 2020.
- More Latinas [dropped out of the labor force entirely](#) than any other demographic group in the first year of the pandemic. For example, a startling 700,000 Latinas lost their jobs in the hospitality and leisure industries in just two months of 2020. Before the pandemic, the Latina labor force was projected to grow to 29 percent by 2029. That's nine times more than white Non-Hispanic women.
- Starting college is an adjustment. Many students are experiencing living away from their parents for the first time, managing finances, cooking dinner, but in addition to all of that, Celiana had difficulty feeling like she belonged among her peers. Whether a student feels they belong on campus or not can determine if the student finishes college. A [2019 University of Phoenix study](#) surveyed about 2,000 Latino college students to identify what they needed to stay in college. The study found that a sense of belonging on campus is one of the most significant predictors of a student persisting in college.
- It took Celiana some time to get used to being in the numerical minority in the classrooms at Loyola.
- Celiana Lopez: Bonding was very hard, and it wasn't necessarily that I couldn't do it because I'm a very social person, but there are so many differences and barriers between you and other people that if you grow up around people who have been through

the same experiences as you, and then you meet people completely different, it's just like, okay, how do I talk to you? Where do we even find a common ground of something to talk about?

Gina Castro: Things eventually got a bit easier.

Celiana Lopez: I feel like my second semester I was able to communicate a little bit better because I had a better understanding of everyone else's experiences, but it's still a little difficult.

Festival chant: Yo soy Boricua, pa'que tu lo sepas!

Gina Castro: The [Puerto Rican People's Day Parade](#) is one of Chicago's largest summer events. The clip you heard a moment ago is a [common](#) Puerto Rican saying. "Yo soy Boricua, pa'que tu lo sepas": I'm Puerto Rican and you should know it! In 2023, the parade ran for [its 45th year](#) in the historically Puerto Rican neighborhood, Humboldt Park. Two [nearly 60 feet tall](#) Puerto Rican flags mark the beginning and end of the parade route. Thousands of Boricuas [flooded Division Street](#) to [see floats](#) from groups like the Puerto Rican Bar Association of Illinois dancing to salsa music.

If you live in Humboldt like me, then you know the celebration starts days before the parade. As soon as Chicago's summer heat seeps in, cars start driving around the neighborhood with Puerto Rican flags flapping out the window and cheerfully honking at other boricuas they spot on the road.

Celiana and I are both Puerto Rican, so we kept running into each other during the parade. We met up the day after the parade at the carnival.

Celiana Lopez: I've been going since I was a kid. I don't know, it's a must. I love coming in. I usually come with friends.

Gina Castro: This year, Celiana brought a classmate.

Isabel Correa: Hi, my name is Isabel Correa and I am a student at Loyola and I'm 19 years old.

Gina Castro: Isabel is from [Dyer, Indiana](#), a small southeastern suburb about an hour from Chicago. Its small population of about 16,000 residents is 78 percent Non-Hispanic white. Isabel, however, is Puerto Rican like Celiana. She was wearing a large Puerto Rican flag tied around her neck like a cape.

Isabel Correa: I've never been to anything like this. It's really fun, especially because I'm half Puerto Rican and I'm half Mexican. You don't get this in Indiana or the way I grew up. I grew up around white people, just white, white, white Indiana, just Indiana, and I would've wished that I could live somewhere around here. It's actually like a mini Puerto Rico. I literally will come out here just to drive, just to

breathe the air. It sounds goofy, but I'm just, I don't know, call me goofy. I like the air over here.

Gina Castro: Humboldt's Puerto Rican community established the high school Celiana graduated from. It's even named after [a beloved Puerto Rican Major League Baseball player and humanitarian, Roberto Clemente Community Academy](#) students are two-thirds Latino, and nearly one in five staff members are Latino. This reflects the large Latino population [in Humboldt](#), which is over 50%. In Chicago as a whole, there are nearly as many Latinos as non-Hispanic white people, trailing by just 4%. Clemente Community Academy had a float in the Puerto Rican People's Day Parade.

Celiana and Isabel met in their first semester of nursing school. In their whole freshman year of college, they say they each had only two teachers who were people of color, but attending a [predominantly white](#) institution wasn't new for Isabel, so she said transitioning to Loyola's majority white classrooms didn't impact her as much as it did Celiana.

Isabel Correa: Most of my classes, I would look around and be like, I'm one of three minorities in this room, but that didn't affect my education or anything like that. Everybody was pretty nice.

Gina Castro: For Celiana, the transition didn't feel so seamless.

Celiana Lopez: Honestly, I'm still kind of indecisive on how to feel about it. My first semester, I had a really hard time adjusting because of the fact that I had very different experiences in life than others around me.

Gina Castro: In the focus groups, Gudelia, the researcher, led for the Illinois Latino College Landscape [study](#), a common thread was a sense of otherness on college campuses. Three of the groups she talked to were students in college and most were Latinas in four year colleges.

Gudelia Lopez: We had students talk about racism that they experienced on campus, feeling of otherness, feeling different because the schools they were attending were predominantly white. Even those students that were attending schools that are Hispanic serving institutions, which means they enroll a significant percentage of the student body. I think it's 25 percent minimum. They still had this sense of not belonging on college campuses.

Gina Castro: A [predominantly white institution or PWI](#) describes a high school, college, or workplace attended by majority white people. [Hispanic Serving Institutions](#), on the other hand, are colleges with at least one-fourth of full-time undergraduates who identify as Latino. There are [572](#) Hispanic Serving Institutions in 28 states and Puerto Rico. Many Latinas turn to Hispanic Serving Institutions, or HSIs. According to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, [nearly two-thirds of Hispanic students](#) in the U.S. go to HSIs, which make up 16% of

higher ed establishments.

At the high school level, there's also a shortage of Latino teachers and guidance counselors. Almost [one in four](#) Chicago Public School teachers identify as Latino. There are two times more Latino students in the school district than Latino teachers.

The Latino Policy Forum found that having more Latino teachers in high school, and Latino faculty and advisors in college, supports Latino student educational attainment.

According to the non-profit [Latinos for Education](#), Latino teachers bring culturally informed approaches to the classroom that [support Latino students and Black students'](#) academic persistence. They reduce these students' suspensions in high school, making them more likely to graduate.

Gisselle Cambron is a first-generation college student. Her mom and dad immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico. Giselle's mom owns a cleaning business and her dad works in construction. One of the first hurdles she faced was also getting comfortable at a predominantly white institution.

Gisselle Cambron: It was a hard transition. You don't see a lot of people like you, and I am majoring in bio. Not a lot of Hispanics or Latinos want to go into biology, so not seeing people that look like you in a classroom or in an auditorium kind of just makes you want to sit in the back and not be noticed.

Gina Castro: Gisselle grew up in the [Belmont Cragin](#) neighborhood, a Latino community on the northwest side of Chicago. It's home to the city's oldest Latino theater company, [Aguijon Theater](#). Founded in 1989, Aguijon was one of the first theaters in Chicago to offer performances in Spanish.

Gisselle graduated third in her class with a 4.2 GPA from [Charles A. Prosser Career Academy](#), a Chicago public school. Prosser has a 98 percent non-white enrollment. Gisselle felt out of place during her first year at Loyola.

Gisselle Cambron: At Prosser, we were very diverse. We were, actually, most of us were Hispanic or Latinos, so going from that environment to going to a PWI was just like, oh my God, what am I doing here?

Gina Castro: It got so overwhelming that Gisselle reached out to her high school counselor.

Gisselle Cambron: I called him one day and I was like, "I can't. I don't know what I'm doing here. It's kind of just a struggle," and he talked me down. He was like, "They didn't just give you a petty spot. You deserve to go there. You got really good scholarships because of your grades, because of who you are. Don't let anybody minimize who you are over there," and that kind of really helped. He's always been in my corner telling me, "You got this. You belong there." And having that support

from someone that has known me for such a long time really, really helps, and same with my parents. They always tell me, they're like, "Yes, it's different, but again, they didn't just give you that spot because they needed to fill the spot. They gave it to you because you were an outstanding student who deserves to be there."

Gina Castro: Family support is [especially important](#) for Latino college students. Latino Policy Forum researchers consistently saw evidence of the integral role family played in helping Latinos enroll in college and complete their degrees. A [UnidosUS focus group from 2021](#) found that Latino families, especially the ones who moved to the U.S. a generation ago, highly value education, and according to a 2020 report, [seven out of every 10 Latino students](#) are the first in their family to enroll in college. This combination leaves Latina first-generation college students coping with pressure to succeed often without the familial know-how of how to do so.

So high school counselors are important support systems, too, says Latino Policy Forum. And sometimes these teachers continue to be resources to their students once they're in college. Like the high school counselor Gisselle called, Adan Figueroa. Adan says Giselle isn't the only Prosser graduate that calls him about not belonging at college.

Adan Figueroa: I'd say that wasn't the first conversation I had. Not specifically with her, but with students in general, I think that it is hard for them to go to a school that's predominantly Latino, where it's 80%, where they're the majority, and then go to a school where they're legit, one of two kids in the classroom.

Gina Castro: Adan has been a guidance counselor at Prosser for six years. He logged into our video interview from his office at the high school. Just behind him, he had a framed art print of Frida Kahlo with sunglasses and a Hello Kitty bow on her head. Adan knew he wanted to be a high school guidance counselor since his own senior year of high school at [Foreman College and Career Academy](#).

Adan Figueroa: For me, it's a lot of reaffirming a lot of the stuff that I had to learn.

Gina Castro: Foreman, like Prosser, is a majority Latino school in Belmont Cragin. In 2019, its graduation rate of [52%](#) was about 30% lower than Chicago Public Schools' average graduation rate.

Adan Figueroa: When I was in high school, I wasn't getting pulled for college support. Legit. I would have to do a lot of stuff on my own. If I wanted to apply to schools, I would have to do it on my own time.

Gina Castro: Since then, Adam dedicated his career to getting more Latinos and immigrant students into college. While getting his Master's degree from DePaul University, he mentored incoming freshmen who were students of color. Time and time

again, Adan saw students drop out of DePaul because of financial issues and not feeling like they fit in on campus.

Adan Figueroa: Getting into these schools isn't the hard part. Surviving those schools, I think is the harder part because again, you might be one of two or three people that look like you, act like you, talk like you in those classrooms.

Gina Castro: I met Gisselle at a cafe just south of Belmont Cragin. It was a hot sunny day in the summer between her first and second year at Loyola. Gisselle says that in her whole first year at Loyola, she didn't have one teacher of color.

Gisselle Cambron: It's kind of downing because it's like, you don't really connect with them at the same level that you would've. It's kind of just like, you see your teachers, and then you see that your classmates are exactly the same, and then you're kind of just there, which kind of puts you down even more because you're like, damn, I don't even have a teacher that looks like me at a, what's supposed to be a very diverse school according to their lingo, but I liked all my teachers. They were all pretty chill. They were all pretty understanding, but it was kind of just another hit in the brick of why you want, it's like, I use it as motivation as to why I want to be up there one day or I want to be in a room full of people that look like me.

Gina Castro: We asked, and Loyola [told us in an email](#) that it does not publish the demographic breakdowns of faculty and students for each academic program. Loyola did share that 22% of its full-time faculty in the Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing identify as people of color. Loyola launched the Collaboration, Access, Resources, and Excellence pathway program or CARE program in July 2021. That aims to support the success, well-being, and belonging of students of color in the nursing program. The Care Pathway program has 62 students and offers scholarships, mentors, and biweekly seminars.

The Latino Policy Forum found that [there is a shortage](#) of Latino faculty and guidance counselors in K-12 schools in Illinois. This shortage permeates college campuses, too. White people made up [nearly 75 percent of college faculty](#) in 2020. Faculty of color can have a positive impact on Latino retention in college because they're more likely to understand the challenges Latinos face in college and offer solutions, but Gudelia says it's more than just having fellow students who, in Gisselle's words, look like you.

Gudelia Lopez: And one of the key things in the literature that indicates that students would belong more is if they saw others like them in leadership positions, as staff members, as faculty members, and we know that there's not a lot of faculty members and staff who are Latino at our institution, and that is one thing that could help.

Gina Castro: Back at the cafe, Gisselle talked about having just come back to Chicago from a three-week solo vacation to Mexico. She hadn't visited in six years.

- Gisselle Cambron: Yeah, no, I love it. I love Michoacán more because it's more of like farm-y vibes, what they call a rancho. I want to say I'm a city girl, but I can do both. Yeah, I can do both.
- Gina Castro: Gisselle's family in Mexico inspired her to pursue a career in medicine.
- Gisselle Cambron: There's a lot of medical issues that run in my family. One of my uncles passed away when he was young because he had some type of, they don't really talk about it, so I don't know the technical term of it, but he had a disease that was just life-threatening and there wasn't really much of an opportunity for him to grow up and to get into his adult life, so that kind of really stuck with me, and then there's a lot of diabetes, cholesterol, type two diabetes type one diabetes, and that runs in the family. Cancer runs in the family. Just being able to understand what all of that actually means and being able to be like, you know what? This can help diffuse it or this help manage it or control it, and to be able to help my family, that's kind of what drove me to it.
- Gina Castro: Gisselle often brings up the lack of Latinos in her biology program and on the healthcare career track in general. [Just nine percent](#) of all healthcare practitioners and technicians are Hispanic, according to the Pew Research Center. [Just over five percent](#) of the U.S.'s registered nurses, Isabel's degree and what Celiana had planned to study, are Latino, according to a 2020 research article in Hispanic Healthcare International.
- The healthcare industry is one of the [most stable](#), and nurses can [sometimes](#) make six figures. I asked Gisselle why she thought few Latinos are in the biology major. She thinks many Latinos are reluctant to go into healthcare careers because of [the cost](#) of getting all the required degrees.
- Gisselle Cambron: I would say first of all, financially-wise because if you think about it in the long run, yeah, you can get scholarships, but those scholarships don't really go out to Hispanics or Latinos, so it's kind of like knowing that afterwards, if you want to go on to medical field or go into grad school for medical school, that's going to cost you.
- Gina Castro: Loyola was at the top of Gisselle's list of colleges because it's known for its medical school and because she wanted to stay in Chicago. Her older sister studied in Ohio.
- Gisselle Cambron: Initially, I wanted to. I wanted to go all the way to Boston, but then I went to go visit the school out there and I really wasn't connecting with it. I didn't like it, and I knew that I was going to get really homesick, and I knew that, that was going to affect my grades as well, so then I started looking at Chicago area, what schools were the best, and then Loyola has a great medical program and they offered me really good financial aid, so it was kind of like a win-win on both situations.

Gina Castro: Gisselle's family moved out to a house in Maywood, just about four miles west of the Chicago border the summer before her first year of college. She lives at home with her parents and commutes up to 40 minutes to and from Loyola. After scholarships, Gisselle pays [around \\$4,000](#) a semester. Her parents cover both hers and her sister's tuition. The Latino policy Forum and the Illinois Governor's office researched how Illinois high school seniors determine which college is the right fit. Research from both found that proximity to home is a major decision factor for Latino students.

Students like Gisselle and Celiana have to juggle the priority of staying close to their families, and the reality of which colleges give them the most financial aid or scholarships. Financial circumstances and feeling like they fit in remain major obstacles to their success once they're there.

[Loyola University](#) is on the north side of Chicago, along the coast of Lake Michigan. The chilly wind from the lake howled as I walked to the Sullivan Center for Student and Career Services. The Sullivan Center is where [Loyola's Achieving College Excellence, or ACE](#), program is located. ACE gives select low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities access to mentorship, tutoring in a lounge just for ACE students. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Post-Secondary Education funds this program, [known nationally as TRIO](#), at select colleges. In its 2020 report on Latinos in higher education, UnidosUS concluded that access to institutional support like federally funded TRIO and the College Assistance Migrant Program [are crucial](#) for Latinos to succeed in college.

Lissette Amon: Hi, my name is Lissette Amon, she/her pronouns, and I am one of the two academic advisors for the TRIO program at Loyola, Achieving College Excellence.

Gina Castro: Lissette was in the ACE program herself while an undergrad at Loyola. She graduated in 2021.

Lissette Amon: It was definitely challenging in a variety of different aspects. I think coming in as a first-gen student and also an immigrant, I migrated from Ecuador to the U.S. when I was younger, when I was seven. My parents had a whole different understanding of higher ed and whatnot, and even then, they themselves never completed any two-year or four-year degrees, so it was challenging coming in.

Gina Castro: She earned a Master's degree in Higher Education Administration Policy from Northwestern University, where her research focused on first-generation students' sense of belonging across six institutions in Illinois, including Loyola and DePaul universities. She starts her PhD program at Loyola in 2024. A lot of what she describes echoes what Celiana and Gisselle talked about experiencing as first-year students at Loyola just a few years after Lissette.

- Lissette Amon: Academically, there was definitely a gap, learning gap. I, thankfully, was able to go to a college prep for high school, but even then, I felt like I wasn't fully prepared for the level of college academics and expectations.
- Gina Castro: But Lissette says her academic success was possible in large part because of the support of ACE.
- Lissette Amon: It helped me feel like I was welcomed here and accepted and that there was a space for me on campus, even though I had imposter syndrome or the imposter phenomenon, and I think without ACE, I don't know if I would've completed the four years or if it would've taken longer or what would've happened.
- Gina Castro: [At ACE](#), Lissette is one of three employees and the only person of color. The ACE program selects 40 students from each incoming freshman class of about 3,000. Students in Loyola's ACE program have high retention rates. From 2016 to 2022, nearly three quarters of its ACE students received a four-year degree.
- ACE was one of the first ways Gisselle got to build friendships with classmates. Her guidance counselor, Adan, recommended she join ACE since his previous students really benefited from it. Gisselle's application was selected and she attended ACE's own specific student orientation week for the cohort of 40 new students.
- Gisselle Cambron: It was really nice because you get to connect with the people that you're going to be with for literally the next four years, so being able to come to class and be like, oh, I know that person, or I saw that person and just be already kind of in a friend group you can say, so it was really sweet just to have somebody there.
- Gina Castro: The ACE lounge comes in handy for Gisselle, especially since she's a commuter. She's able to pop by and talk to Lissette or Jen, the other ACE counselor, on the same day she has a question, rather than having to book an appointment with one of the university-wide first year advisors. Gisselle appreciates having support from a guidance counselor like Lissette. The two of them have a lot in common.
- Gisselle Cambron: You get that different connection with somebody that you know has been through similar stuff to you. It's kind of just a deeper connection that I have with her.
- Gina Castro: The ACE lounge offers comfy couches, a microwave, and free printing. It's become a space that's helped her feel like she belongs at Loyola. Many of the students in her cohort are Latinos, she said.
- Gisselle Cambron: That's the thing. In your other classes, obviously, you go to a class that's like, let's say my bio class, you don't see people of color, and then you walk into the ACE lounge and then you see yourself, so it's kind of like, that perspective.

- Gina Castro: Lissette, Gisselle, and Celiana are all members of a Latina sorority on campus. [Lambda Theta Alpha](#), the nation's first Latina sorority. Gisselle says they joined for one main reason.
- Gisselle Cambron: Well, first of all, Latinas.
- Gina Castro: There are chapters of LTA at 150 college campuses across the country, with [539 active undergraduate members](#). At Loyola, four active members help create a special community where students like Gisselle and Celiana can feel like they belong on campus. It's also where they met Yami.
- Yami Rodriguez: Hi, nice to meet you. My name is Yami Rodriguez. I am a sister of Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority Incorporated, the Dedicated and True Delta Nu Chapter at Loyola University of Chicago. I joined fall 2021 and I am line 15. I currently serve as the chapter orientation advisor and the chapter recruitment and retention advisor.
- Gina Castro: 22-year-old Yami is in the final stretch of her time at Loyola. She graduates from the nursing program in the fall. COVID-19 [shut down in-person](#) learning right when she was beginning college. She spent the second half of her freshman year and all of her sophomore year juggling her coursework from her bedroom, at home with her family.
- Yami Rodriguez: It was definitely a struggle. I think one of the things that made it really hard was living at home. It was like, I would be doing my homework, then it'd be like, "Oh, come do this and this. Come do that and this. You didn't do this for your siblings." I'd be like, "I have other things to do. I'm at home, but I'm technically in school," and I feel like that was really hard for a lot of parents to understand that you weren't just lazing around all day, you were actually going to school.
- Gina Castro: Yami has three brothers. She says in her Mexican family. That means she has a lot of responsibilities, and this made it hard to prioritize her schoolwork.
- [in tape] So, you do all the cooking, food shopping.
- Yami Rodriguez: Yeah.
- Gina Castro: [in tape] Cleaning.
- Yami Rodriguez: Cleaning, laundry, yard work, and we have a huge yard, so all of that, and I'm signing, now that my mom, she doesn't speak English, so signing up my little brother for school, for programs, things like that.
- Gina Castro: When Yami returned to campus junior year, it was like starting over. She met many of her classmates for the first time in person. Returning to campus also meant having to commute over an hour. On top of helping manage the family business, and taking care of the household and her brothers. Junior year also

marks the start of the nursing program's most rigorous coursework. It was during this time that Yami realized just how different her student experience was compared to many of her Loyola classmates.

Yami Rodriguez: Coming right into school after being in lockdown for a year and a half, there was a class that I really struggled with. I ended up not being able to pass that class, and I remember going to my professor and telling him, "I just don't have the time and resources to invest myself fully in this class as much as I wish I could, and his response was, "Well, just don't go to work." I was like, "Dude, what do you mean? I have to pay my tuition in order to sit in your class. I can't just not go to work." I can't even miss one day of work without feeling guilty that I'm not going and pulling my weight for my family.

Gina Castro: [Familismo is a Latino cultural value](#) that emphasizes strong family ties, getting along with and prioritizing your immediate and extended family often over your own needs. This can involve spending a lot of time with family seeking their advice in decision-making, and sometimes even putting family above oneself.

Some researchers have found that these strong family ties provide a really important support system for recent immigrants to the U.S., and this family support [can be beneficial](#) to students' mental health and success in college, but it can also mean Latino college students like Yami are approaching their young adulthood with a different set of priorities and commitments than their non-Latino counterparts. In Lambda Theta Alpha, Yami met other students she could relate to. LTA hosted a fair to highlight Latinas in healthcare, where Yami spoke about being in the nursing program. The sorority celebrates [National Immigrants Day](#) and [Día de Los Muertos](#) on campus.

Yami Rodriguez: Recently, we did a agua frescas fundraiser. It was so fun and it was actually so meaningful because we had different students coming up to us that were like, "I've never seen something like this on campus. It really makes me miss my community and my home, coming to Loyola and seeing that there's an agua frescas fundraiser going on. I love horchata," and I was like, "Me too. I love horchata, but I'm glad that you could feel welcome and find a place on campus that you feel like you're being seen."

Gina Castro: With the community she found in LTA and the concrete support of the counselors and resources at ACE, Gisselle has begun to feel like she belongs at her university.

Gisselle Cambron: I think the hardest part was just understanding that just because there wasn't people like me at Loyola doesn't mean that I was alone at Loyola because there are people like me, you just have to find them.

Yami Rodriguez: Hi.

Lissette Amon: Hey Yami, how are you?

Yami Rodriguez: I just got back from class, so I'm recording from my room. My laptop is charging. Unfortunately, she was put through it today at school, so.

Lisette Amon: Oh, Giselle just came.

Gisselle Cambron: Hi.

Lisette Amon: How's the school year been going for you?

Gisselle Cambron: It's going. It's going.

Lisette Amon: It's going. That's what I was going to say, too.

Gisselle Cambron: We're in the fifth week of school right now, right?

Lisette Amon: Fifth.

Gisselle Cambron: Sixth?

Lisette Amon: Fifth?

Gisselle Cambron: Fifth, I don't know. I think it's the fifth week and we have 15 in total, so 10 weeks left of school. Midterms are kind of coming up on us so, crazy, crazy, crazy. I'm going to text Celi real quick to see what's going on.

Celiana Lopez: Hey guys, sorry. I was trying to figure this out because-

Gina Castro: Celiana and Gisselle made it through summer melt, and that's just one thing these sisters are celebrating this afternoon. Celiana turned 20 and two days before that, Yami celebrated her twenty-third birthday, and come October, they'll be celebrating Gisselle's. It's the start of Celiana and Gisselle's sophomore year, and they have a lot on their plate. Celiana is taking extra credits to make up for the classes she failed last year. This time around, she feels confident in her new career path. She says sitting in her law classes feels right.

Celiana Lopez: I'm really happy with the choice that I made and excited to see where it takes me because I don't necessarily know what I want to do with my degree yet, but I know that I like what I'm doing, and so that's all that matters.

Gina Castro: Gisselle is thinking about switching her major from biology to public health. She thinks it'll help take some of the pressure off of her. Her mind is still set on becoming a pediatrician. She's planning to take the MCAT for medical school next year. Yami can already see her dream of becoming a nurse in reach. Yesterday, she learned to insert an IV and come December, she'll graduate from Loyola. Her leaving is bittersweet for the rest of LTA. Either Gisselle or Celiana will have to fill Yami's shoes as president next spring semester.

- Yami Rodriguez: I'm not going to be with them next semester. I mean, I'll still be there, but not undergraduate wise, so I hope that they have fun in our sisterhood and really get to enjoy it, and I hope one of y'all really enjoys it because one of y'all going to have to be president next semester, so keep that in mind.
- Gina Castro: Celiana and Gisselle aren't quite sure how they'll shoulder the responsibility of leading LTA on top of everything else, but they do know they can rely on each other to get it done.
- Gisselle Cambron: I know that we're all working hard and we're all working towards something that's bigger than us for ourselves, and I kind of just wish that we all get there. We know that we're putting in the work and one day. One day we're going to get there, guys.
- Gina Castro: For right now, stress and grades aren't on their minds. They're busy basking in the love and support of their Latina sisters visualizing the day each of them makes it across the stage at graduation.
- All three girls: Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. You.
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