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So close, and yet so far: cross-racial interactions among undergraduate students in two neighboring borderland communities

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This article discusses two studies on the extent and nature of cross-racial interactions (CRIs) among undergraduate students from two neighboring US–Mexico borderland communities. Of the four participating higher education institutions, two were adjacent to the US–Mexico borderline, while the other two were 45 miles away from the borderline. One study relied on survey responses from over 900 students, while the other relied on focus group data from over 30 students. The participating students were from two universities and two community colleges. Although the students shared some common experiences and attitudes, there were some marked and important differences among them. These differences made a compelling argument for localizing what diversity means and customizing efforts to foster CRIs on college campuses.

Keywords: higher education; cross-racial interactions; US–Mexico border; focus group research

A significant amount of research has been done in the last two decades that suggests that when college and university students interact across racial differences on their campuses, they are likely to experience both academic and social gains. Essentially, these scholars argue that meaningful cross-racial interactions (CRIs) position students to experience the sort of disequilibrium that spurs cognitive development. As faculty members teaching at universities in the US–Mexico borderlands, we wondered about the extent and nature of these interactions among students at colleges and universities like ours. The CRIs were of special concern for us as a diverse team of researchers: two of us are Hispanic and three are White; two of us were raised in the US–Mexico borderlands; two of us live adjacent to the US–Mexico border, while the rest live about 45 miles away from the borderline.

In pursuit of answers, we conducted two studies, one quantitative and one qualitative, at four campuses located in the US–Mexico borderlands. For the purposes of our studies, the US–Mexico borderland encompasses the US states of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. For the quantitative study, we developed, distributed, compiled, and analyzed a questionnaire in which over 900 students...
participated. For the qualitative study, we conducted focus groups with 35 students from the same four borderlands institutions. In this article, we provide our analysis from both the questionnaire and focus group data.

Two notes about terminology: first, we understand that any discussion of identity issues is fraught with complications. Which terms do we use: Hispanic? Latino/a? Mexican-American? Mexican? Chicano/a? White? European-American? Caucasian? or Anglo? People from different regions of the country or sectors of a community or from different generations or political orientations may choose one term or another. Conversations with students in focus groups confirmed the complexity of identity terminology: some students were clear about their choices; others were more ambivalent; and still others clearly employed different terms at different moments – depending on audience and circumstances. As a result, we, too, will shift our terminology based on circumstance. In situations where students or scholars use a specific term, we will use their term of choice. Otherwise, we will use the broader terms, “Hispanic” and “White,” the terms used by the institutions we studied. Second, we understand that “race” and “ethnicity” have been, and in some arenas, continue to be considered separate features of identity. Many Hispanics are, for example, institutionally classified as racially white and ethnically Hispanic. Initially, to make sure we captured both distinctions, we discussed our study as an examination of cross-racial/cross-ethnic interactions. However, we have come to consider other scholarly discussions from the last decade that have made the argument that a number of ethnic groups, although classified as “White,” have been racialized as “other” and subject to racial oppression (Haney Lopez, 2000; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2007). We, too, have chosen to use the terms “race” and “cross-racial” to describe the interactions across diverse ethnic populations even if those ethnic groups, including Hispanics, have historically been considered White. This decision will also align us with the vast majority of scholarly literature on CRIs, little of which makes the distinction between race and ethnicity.

Research setting

The phrase, “so close, and yet so far,” can be used to describe the social, economic, political, linguistic, cultural, and even relational differences between the neighboring nations of the USA and Mexico. And, as you will note in our work, the same can be said of the college students we studied. There are any number of reasons to be interested in borderlands populations. One seems particularly important. First, we live in a country where the demographics are shifting. The numbers of racial and ethnic minorities are increasing. The nation may have something to learn from a region that has lived with such cultural differences for centuries. Knowing how to best work with diversity is even more critical for today’s college students who will be tomorrow’s professionals and community members. Projections are clear: they will live in a more diverse US society than any generation before them.

The students we studied were from four institutions located in the US–Mexico borderlands – one university and one community college situated within five miles north of the border and one university and one community college approximately 45 miles north of the border. Before analyzing the data, we believed that 45 miles did not constitute much of a difference. That is, we believed that students at all four institutions would report relatively similar experiences and attitudes regarding CRIs. In some ways, they did. In other ways, they did not. As we analyzed the data, we
discovered marked and important differences between these two groups of students. Evidently, we committed the oversight of viewing the US–Mexico borderlands as a monolithic unit of analysis (Ganster & Lorey, 2008). And, while the borderlands as a whole do possess some qualities that are distinct from the national norms of the USA and Mexico (Ganster & Lorey, 2008; Martinez, 1994; Staudt & Spener, 1998), there are important differences within the region as well. Scholars have posited that the region can be further subdivided; characteristics of the border vary, and sometimes significantly, from place to place within the borderlands (Paredes, 1978; Staudt & Spener, 1998). In 1997, Marmolejo and León-García presented a classification system that organized these differences into what they called three zones of influence. The first, Zone 1, is the region that includes cities and counties that are adjacent to the US–Mexico borderline. These communities have “strong ties to the other side,” and feel the greatest border influence in terms of economic circumstances, cultural conventions, labor flow, and environmental conditions (Ganster, 1997, p. 3). As one moves from Zone 1 into Zone 2 and then Zone 3, the impact of key border cultural phenomena lessens. Differences in the occurrence of three phenomena can serve as illustration. One of the ways in which the Zone 1 community has demonstrated a stronger tie to Mexico is the percentage of its members, age five and above, who speak Spanish at home. Zone 1 residents who speak Spanish as the primary language when at home averaged nearly 73% from 2006 to 2010; this was higher than the nearly 50% average of Zone 2 community residents who, during these years, spoke Spanish at home (US Census Bureau, 2010a, 2010b). Also different is the percentage of Hispanics between the two communities. While the Zone 1 community was comprised of an average of 82% Hispanics in 2010, the Zone 2 community was comprised of an average of 66% (US Census Bureau, 2010c, 2010d). A third difference is in the percentage of foreign-born residents. While the Zone 1 community averaged over 27% (the majority of whom were Mexican), the Zone 2 community averaged over 19% (US Census Bureau, 2010a, 2010b). Therefore, the “border zones” framework effectively articulates key social, cultural, and economic differences among communities located within the US–Mexico borderlands and so, during the course of the study, we used the same terminology. When discussing the two institutions located within five miles of the border, we will use the term “Zone 1”; when discussing the two institutions located 45 miles north of the border, we will use the term “Zone 2.”

In addition to distance from the border, the colleges also differed in size and composition. The two institutions in Zone 1 were similar in size: between 22,000 and 25,000 students. Demographics, reported on institutional websites, revealed a minority of White students, 9% at one institution and 8% at the other, and a majority of Hispanic students, 76% at one and 86% at the other. In contrast, the size and demographics of the two institutions from Zone 2 were markedly different. One of the Zone 2 institutions had approximately 18,500 students, of which 42% were White and 40% Hispanic. The other Zone 2 institution had 8800 students, of which 25% were White and 61% were Hispanic. However, while the two universities are research universities, all four institutions have very strong ties to their surrounding communities.

When we began the project, we understood that each of the four institutions had sizeable Hispanic student populations. What we did not realize initially was the tremendous difference between these populations: 76% and 86% (Zone 1 institutions) and 40% and 61% (Zone 2 institutions). During the course of our focus group
interviews, we found that the numerical variations were also reflected in student experiences and attitudes relative to CRIs. We have come from hardly noticing the differences between these student populations (and their experiences and attitudes) to believing that these differences should shape how institutions think about diversity. Specifically, both faculty and administrators should “think locally” – that is, look to their institution’s student population as a necessary resource – when they develop and implement strategies and programs for encouraging the sort of CRIs that researchers suggest benefit college students.

Literature review
This project began when our research team came across the 2002 article, “Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes” by Patricia Gurin, Eric L. Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, and Gerald Gurin. What seemed particularly striking to us was its expansion of the reasons for college and university faculty and administrators to attend to diversity issues on their campuses. We have, for some time, understood several key rationales for diversity initiatives: one, to rectify generations of exclusion from higher education for a number of minority populations (Chang, 1999); and two, to prepare students to enter a more diverse workforce and a more global economy (Bowen, 1999; Hopkins & Hopkins, 1999; Milem, 2003). In their work, Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) provide yet another reason: to support student learning. Their findings suggest that when an institution provides students with opportunities to engage in genuine interactions with diverse peers, it provides fertile ground for students’ cognitive and social development. We should note that for our research, we define diversity in the same three ways that other researchers have: (a) structural diversity, the “numerical representations of diverse groups on campus” (Gurin et al., 2002, pp. 332–333); (b) curricular or classroom diversity which is the diversity-centered activity organized by campuses; and (c) interactional diversity, the informal discussions that students have in and out of class (Antonio, 1998; Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Gurin et al., 2002).

As we immersed ourselves in the scholarly literature, we found an established network of researchers working on the relationship between diversity, in general, and CRIs, in particular, and student intellectual and social development (Alimo, Kelly, & Clark, 2002; Antonio, 2001; Chang, 1999; Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006; Gurin, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 1999; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Milem, 2003; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parenta, 2001). A number of these studies, analyzing longitudinal survey data, describe more specifically the cognitive and social skills that students gain from diversity on their campuses. Gurin et al. (2002), for example, showed that classroom diversity and informal interactional diversity positively affect students’ ability to actively think and intellectually engage, while encouraging the development of leadership skills needed for a diverse democracy. Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2002) found that increasing student diversity created additional opportunities for CRIs, which then contributed to student development including enhanced academic achievement and skill development as well as increased educational satisfaction. Chang et al. (2006) demonstrated that students with higher levels of CRIs experienced larger gains relative to openness to diversity, problem-solving and critical thinking skills as well as both social and intellectual self-confidence.
While these studies found positive correlations between educational outcomes and students’ self-reported experiences with diverse peers in single-institution studies and/or nationally distributed surveys, a few studies employed other methodological approaches that have also shown that CRIs support students’ academic and social development. Pascarella (2001) used an objective standardized measure of critical thinking skills and found that diversity experiences produced statistically significant differences in critical thinking in students tested at the end of both their first and third years. In addition, using random assignment of students into different treatment groups, Antonio et al. (2004) discovered that the inclusion of racial and opinion minorities in interaction exercises encouraged the development of integrative complexity, or “the degree to which cognitive style involves the differentiation and integration of multiple perspectives and dimensions” (p. 508). And finally, in a qualitative study, Marin (2000) found that racial and ethnic diversity, including “interaction across race and ethnicities in all types of disciplines and not just those in which race and ethnicity are related to and incorporated into the syllabus,” enhanced the educational possibilities of the classroom (p. 67).

In more recent years, a number of scholars have continued to produce findings that support the relationship between diverse interactions and cognitive and social gains in college students (Denson & Chang, 2009; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2009). At the same time, others have published work that challenges some of the most prominent studies in this field. Several appear in Diversity and Educational Benefits (2010), a collection edited by Herzog. In his notes to the collection, Herzog identifies two challenges to the literature: one, that the studies that have dominated the field have primarily dealt with race (and not a “multitude of sociodemographics and personal identity attributes”) (p. 3); and two, that this research has largely relied on student survey data (rather than on more objective measures). Studies in this collection illustrate Herzog’s point. Several show identity factors other than race that also impact students’ college experiences (Chatman, 2010; Padgett et al., 2010). Others illustrate ways in which more objective measures can be used in diversity research (Bowman, 2010; Herzog, 2010a). The book closes with a call for researchers to reexamine the conceptual and analytic frameworks that shape their inquiries into diversity on college and university campuses.

While the main thrust of this collection is to challenge previous research, several articles do, in fact, corroborate previous findings. Herzog (2010b) found that taking a diversity course during the first year was associated with a slight increase in first-year GPA. He also found that non-Asian minority presence on campus positively correlated with the persistence of fellow non-Asian minorities on campus. Padgett et al. (2010) discovered a small but noticeable effect of the quality of interactions with diverse peers on student learning.

These studies have been foundational for our understanding of the ways in which CRIs contribute to student development. Still, our fundamental questions remain: To what extent do students who attend colleges and universities in the US–Mexico borderlands engage in these sorts of interactions with diverse peers and what is the nature of these interactions? And, for these questions, there were no answers in the literature. Generally speaking, studies explored student responses either from single, nonborder institutions, and/or from more nationally distributed populations. In our review of the research, we found no study that specifically considered student populations in borderlands institutions. Given the growing number
of Hispanics attending college (Morphew, 2009) – and a significant number of them attending schools in the borderlands – this appears to be a needed exploration.

Furthermore, the significance of this body of literature cannot be underestimated. However, the majority of these studies conducted statistical analyses of survey data. While these analyses have effectively prompted faculty, administrators, legislators, and judges to reconsider the value of diverse student populations on US university and college campuses, they do not include student voices. We believe that when students are given the opportunity to talk about their perceptions and experiences, they provide additional layers to the discussion already in progress.

**Research method**

To address the questions of the extent and nature of CRIs, we developed and administered a questionnaire. To complement our data on the nature of these interactions, we relied on focus groups to allow students to explain what CRIs meant and did not mean to them. In particular, we believed that focus groups would allow us to more fully explore student experiences and attitudes about CRIs. With a spotlight on student interactions, we utilized a focus-group approach because, “the hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group” (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). We were particularly interested in the ways in which focus group methods would allow us to understand the multiple perspectives students hold and to encourage talk about a topic (race) that some students might not be comfortable discussing individually with researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In addition, the group interview format allowed us to explore what students had to say about these and related topics as they interacted and heard from other students both in their own and other racial groups. These conversations proved interesting in their own right. In addition, they further illuminated the survey data collected for the larger project by providing the more in-depth understanding of experiences that focus groups aim to uncover.

For both the questionnaire and the focus groups, the students who were asked to participate in the study were enrolled in second-semester or sophomore-level general education writing courses (course designation depended on the institution). We chose this selection process based on two assumptions: one, that students in these classes had attended their schools long enough to have had interactions with other students but not so long that these interactions had become unnoticeable in the routine of college life; and two, that, as all students were required to complete two semesters of writing courses, these courses would contain a somewhat representative cross-section of the student body.

The research took place in 2007 and 2008. For the questionnaire, we randomly selected 30% of the targeted courses because there were many sections. We contacted the instructors of the selected sections via electronic mail to ask them for permission to administer the questionnaire during their class times. We obtained the instructors’ email addresses from each of the institutions’ websites. As an incentive, we offered $25.00 gift cards to an online bookstore to those instructors who allowed us to survey their students. A total of 915 students completed the questionnaire (608 from Zone 1 institutions, 307 from Zone 2 institutions). Once we had all the questionnaire data, we used SPSS to run both descriptive and inferential statistics. We ran descriptive statistics to gain a profile of our questionnaire...
participants and we ran t-tests to test our hypotheses for which we set an alpha level of .05.

For the focus groups, we went back to the same set of courses and asked instructors if they would allow us to invite their students to participate in a series of focus groups. We conducted four focus groups at the Zone 2 institutions in the spring and summer of 2007 and three at the Zone 1 institutions in the summer of 2008. A minimum of two researchers were present for each of the focus groups. One of the Hispanic researchers always facilitated the group. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour and 15 minutes. The facilitator concluded the focus group by having students complete a form with demographic information and by providing them with an incentive of a $25.00 gift card to a bookstore. Following the focus groups, a research assistant transcribed the recordings.

Our qualitative analysis proceeded in several phases. Phase I consisted of analyzing the focus group transcripts from the two Zone 2 institutions. In conversation with each other after reading transcripts individually, we developed a list of prevalent concepts related to our focus on CRIs that could be used for coding the data. Employing these categories as a starting place, a research assistant coded transcripts from all four focus groups conducted at the Zone 2 institutions. We then reviewed the coded transcripts to condense categories into themes and to verify the representativeness of the themes emerging from the Zone 2 institutions’ transcripts. We also used this analysis to revise the interview questions that we used with the second set of focus groups.

In fall of 2008, we proceeded to Phase II of analysis, using focus group data collected at two Zone 1 institutions. At that point, we reconsidered the themes we employed in Phase I and used them as a foundation for the next phase of coding. For that phase, two of us reviewed the Zone 1 institutions’ transcripts, attentive to the ways in which they supported the themes that had emerged in the earlier discussions but also noting the ways in which these discussions diverged. We revised our themes again in response to the information in this new set of transcripts and to more finely focus our analysis on students’ experiences with CRIs. One researcher revisited the Zone 1 transcripts to determine the representativeness of the revised themes. After verification, she re-coded all of the transcripts and arrived at a set of propositions that represented students’ experiences with CRIs at Zone 1 and Zone 2 institutions. Finally, a research assistant audited the findings to ensure the validity of the researcher’s analysis.

**Findings**

*Questionnaire findings*

First, as mentioned previously, to gain a profile of our questionnaire participants, we ran frequency distributions. Of the 12 demographics analyzed, there were eight that appeared to show stark differences between Zone 1 and Zone 2 students. These eight included racial identification, primary language spoken with family, primary language spoken with friends, primary ethnic group in high school, location of city residence before attending college, current enrollment status, location of employment, and country of citizenship. The first difference to emerge between Zone 1 students and Zone 2 students was their racial identification. The most pronounced racial difference between Zone 1 students and Zone 2 students was in the percentage of students who identified as Hispanic compared to those who
identified as White. There were a substantially greater percentage of Hispanic students in the Zone 1 institutions (77.9%) compared to the Zone 2 institutions (40.3%). Concurrently, there was a substantially greater percentage of White students in the Zone 2 institutions (34.3%) as opposed to the Zone 1 institutions (7.3%).

Paralleling the difference in racial identification, Zone 1 and Zone 2 students also differed in language used with family and language used with friends. Zone 1 students were almost as likely to use Spanish when speaking with family (46%) as they were to use English when speaking with family (50%). In contrast, Zone 2 students predominantly used English with their families (84%) and only a small percentage used Spanish with their families (13%). This pattern was repeated when students responded to the question regarding the language spoken with friends. While with friends, over three-quarters of the Zone 1 students spoke English (77%); and almost all of the Zone 2 students spoke English with friends (91%). Nearly a quarter of Zone 1 students used Spanish with friends (21%), while very few Zone 2 students used Spanish with friends (4%).

While previous studies on CRIs have been conducted in institutions located in majority White communities and with students who were primarily from White majority communities, in the current study, quite different patterns emerged, both in comparison to previous studies and between the two zones. More Zone 1 students attended a high school where the largest racial/ethnic group was Hispanic: 84% for Zone 1 students compared to 57% for Zone 2 students. And almost three times as many Zone 1 students reported that they had lived in the same city before college as when in college (66%) compared to Zone 2 students (26%).

Students from the two zones also differed in the amount of time on campus. This was assessed through enrollment status (part-time defined as 1–11 credit hours, full-time defined as 12 or more credit hours), and location of employment (on-campus or off-campus). Zone 1 students appeared to have less time on campus as they were less likely to attend college full-time (78% compared to 93% in Zone 2) and less likely to work on campus (8% compared to 18% in Zone 2).

Finally, in terms of the students’ citizenship, while the majority of both student groups reported US citizenship, a higher percentage of Zone 1 students reported Mexican citizenship (7.6% compared to 2.2% in Zone 2), joint US and Mexican citizenship (8.6% compared to 2.2% in Zone 2), and citizenship of other countries than did Zone 2 students (6.7% compared to 2.9%).

While the differences were noteworthy, there were four characteristics of Zone 1 and Zone 2 students that were similar. In terms of gender, age range, hours of employment, and years of college, the majority of both groups were female (57% of Zone 1 students; 53% of Zone 2 students), between the ages of 18 and 20 (72% of Zone 1 students; 64% of Zone 2 students), not working (37% of Zone 1 students; 35% of Zone 2 students), and had completed 1–2 years of college at the time of this study (41% of Zone 1 and Zone 2 students).

Results of tested hypotheses

We had originally developed our quantitative research questions based on our review of the literature. Our first intention was to group students from all four institutions for analysis so that we could gain an understanding of CRIs at borderlands institutions. After we reviewed the frequency distributions and our focus group data,
however, we realized that it would be inaccurate to group all these students together to reflect experiences in the borderlands. Specifically, the profile of the questionnaire participants and the focus group participant voices helped us to understand that Zone 1 and Zone 2 experiences were not the same. Thus, within our original research questions, we developed hypotheses based on the pattern of experiences reflected in our questionnaire profile and focus groups. The following are the results of the tested hypotheses related to our qualitative data. The direction of each of our hypotheses was because of the greater numerical representation of diverse groups in Zone 2.

Our first quantitative research question was how Zone 1 students compared with Zone 2 students regarding the extent of their CRIs in college. We hypothesized that Zone 2 students interacted cross-racially to a greater extent than Zone 1 students. Using a four-point Likert-type scale as our questionnaire measurement tool, we tested our hypotheses that Zone 2 students would socialize on and off-campus and be in each other’s dorms, apartments, or homes to a greater extent than Zone 1 students.

Our second quantitative research question was how Zone 1 students compared with Zone 2 students in terms of the extent that they socialized and studied cross-racially/ethnically before and since attending college. Again, we hypothesized that Zone 2 students had socialized and studied more cross-racially before and since attending college compared to Zone 1 students because of the greater numerical representation of diverse groups in both school settings.

Our third quantitative research question was how the nature of the CRIs differed between Zone 1 students and Zone 2 students. We hypothesized that Zone 2 students had more positive and negative interactions studying and socializing cross-racially. We also hypothesized that Zone 2 students would have more positive and negative interactions in which they learned something from cross-racial peers.

The results of testing these hypotheses confirmed most hypotheses. The only area in which Zone 2 students did not score significantly higher than Zone 1 students was in the degree each group had witnessed cross-racial conflict (both groups reported that they rarely witnessed this; see Appendix 1). Thus, Zone 2 students were statistically significantly more likely to socialize and study cross-racially both in high school and in college. They were also more likely to have experienced more positive as well as negative CRIs when socializing and when studying with others, and similarly reported more positive and negative interactions in which they learned something from cross-racial peers.

**Qualitative findings**

We begin our presentation of focus group findings with a description of students from both communities. We then move to students’ responses from Zone 1 institutions, and finally, to the voices of students who attended Zone 2 institutions.

**Student profile of focus group participants**

To contextualize students’ voices, we thought it important to first understand some of the demographics of these students. In terms of demographics, 19 participants were from Zone 1 institutions and 16 participants were from Zone 2 institutions. Most attended college full time (73% of Zone 1 students; 87% of Zone 2 students).
Students in both groups represented a range of majors. Zone 1 focus group participants were more female (63%) and Zone 2 participants were slightly more male (51%). Finally, almost three-quarters of Zone 1 participants identified as Hispanic and slightly less than a quarter identified as White; one student identified as African-American and one as Asian. Just half of Zone 2 participants identified as Hispanic, a quarter identified as White, and a quarter identified as having two or more races for their racial background.

Beyond demographic categories, students in both groups self-identified by race in multiple ways. For example, a Zone 2 student described himself as, “Hispanic, well White that grew up in Hispanic culture,” referencing his experience growing up in the Zone 1 community before moving to attend the Zone 2 school. Another Zone 2 student stated, “Mine’s hard. I guess whenever I have to say, I declare myself as ‘Hispanic,’ but I am Mexican, either way you put it. I’m also Hispanic, but I’d also say that I’m also Indian, because my Great-Grandma was Indian.” A Zone 1 student said, “I usually answer White, even though my mom is half Mexican. I still consider myself White because my dad’s full White, so I just consider myself White.” Another Zone 1 student said, “I usually say Hispanic/Mexican American, and when people start asking me, ‘Well, you’re pretty light skinned,’ I have to explain that it’s from Spaniard. I don’t go into detail other than that. I’m pretty proud to be Mexican.” Overall, a majority of students described settling on one or two terms to describe themselves, such as “Hispanic” and “Mexican American,” while acknowledging multiple heritages, demonstrating their awareness of making choices around racial identities depending on whom they were describing themselves to and for what purposes.

In addition to their demographic profiles, students articulated themes associated with what it meant to live in the borderlands. Many spoke of living in the borderlands for most of their lives. In the Zone 1 group, several students spoke of living in Mexico and commuting to school in the USA. One student explained, “I can live in [his home city in Mexico], have my background in [that city], and have the opportunity of growing from the college in the USA.” Zone 1 and Zone 2 students also spoke of finding the borderlands a comfortable place to live. For some, it was comfortable because it was similar to their previous experiences living in Mexico. One student noted, “The same people I used to know over there in [city in Mexico] – they’re living here. So, this part here is like an extension of [that city].” Other students spoke of the borderlands as being an area where different racial and ethnic groups are accepted, in contrast to their experiences in other areas. For example, one student told a story of not being served in a restaurant in a nonborderlands city because she is African-American. She said that in the borderlands, “I don’t get that here. I see everybody just chillin’. But, once you get out of areas like [the border city], or once you get into other areas, you see a lot more racism.” Interestingly, a few students attending Zone 2 schools felt that the Zone 2 community was more accepting of difference than the Zone 1 community. As one Hispanic student explained, “I found [the Zone 2 community] to be very equal. You don’t feel the discrimination. In [the Zone 1 community], I’m from [the Zone 1 community] you feel the discrimination.” In another instance, a Hispanic female student from a Zone 2 institution explained that if she were attending a Zone 1 institution, she would:

see a lot people from [Mexican city] going to school there. Usually the people that are from Mexico and go to school over here (the US), it’s because they have money ...
So they have a little attitude like, “Don’t look at me. I’m better than you,” even if they’re Mexicans like you are. But at [the Zone 2 institution], you don’t really see that. You don’t see people from over there coming all the way over here.

More than economic differences, another Zone 2 student explained that, “it is you’re just not Mexican enough because you’re Hispanic. And from them, coming from Mexico, being well off, you already have points off because you were born in the USA. You’re less than them.”

Experiences and attitudes of Zone 1 students

In contrast to students attending Zone 2 institutions, students at Zone 1 institutions (who mainly identified as Hispanic) responded much the same as had White students described in the articles about CRIs in predominately White institutions (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004). Coming into this research, we predicted that Zone 1 students would have greater CRIs because previous research has suggested that the closer one is to the US–Mexico borderline, the greater the cross-cultural interactions and influences from Mexico (Fox, 1999). It was, therefore, surprising to us that most of the students we talked with at Zone 1 institutions did not report having CRIs. The few who did have CRIs either consciously sought them out or had them because there were limited numbers of students of their own race with whom to interact. Some Zone 1 students offered language differences as an explanation for the low number of CRIs, and, interestingly, many of these students were most vocal about ways in which those in the institution could increase CRIs. Finally, as with Zone 2 students, Zone 1 students also described how they had or might benefit from CRIs. The difference, of course, was that Zone 1 students were less likely to have CRIs from which to benefit.

For the majority of Zone 1 students we spoke to, CRIs were neither typical nor sought out. As one student, who identified first as Hispanic or Latino and then as Mexican-American, stated, “Here, at [the student’s institution] since it’s mostly Mexican-Americans, I guess we take culture for granted. Sometimes we don’t try to make new friends or we don’t speak to other people.” Another student noted that, “I’ve seen Hispanic people only talk to Hispanic people from the beginning … I haven’t seen very often that a White [student] is very close friends with a Hispanic or African American or anything.” A Latino student in another group offered a similar perspective: “There’s more Latinos than any other race here. Every person I’ve met has been a Mexican, Hispanic.” Another student who used the term Hispanic to describe herself discussed the similarities between interacting with students at her Zone 1 institution and interacting with people in Mexico: “I feel like I was in Mexico [when she came to her current school]. It’s a lot of Mexicans with whom I can interact. So, I feel very good here.”

While the numerical majority racial group reported having fewer CRIs, there was a small number of students who actively sought them out. At the Zone 1 institutions, these were the exception, not the rule. For example, one Hispanic student said, “I used to hang out with just Hispanics, but now I’m trying to know more people from other [cultures], like Whites, African Americans, so that I get to know more about those cultures.” A Mexican-American student also talked about having more CRIs because she was in a cross-racial relationship with an international student:
I’m always trying to associate myself with different people from different backgrounds. It’s happened more so in the past few months because of my boyfriend [who is White and from Eastern Europe]. They’re all athletes, so everybody comes from all over the world. I like associating myself with those people, because it gives me a different perspective on things.

As has been shown in other previous research and for students in Zone 2 institutions in our studies, Zone 1 students who were from racial groups in the numerical minority on campus also described having CRIs. As one White student explained, “I’m probably the only White girl I know.” Another White student spoke about having a diverse group of friends and noted that she enjoyed the diversity in the city where she attended the Zone 1 institution, referring to it as a “melting pot.” A third White student also spoke of having numerous CRIs:

I’m always with different ethnicities here at school, at work, hanging out with my friends. I really don’t feel that there’s a problem with it. Here at school, it’s mostly Mexican Americans, Hispanics. I’m always in a group with them, talking with them, going over homework, studying for a test.

An African-American student echoed these perspectives as she discussed the novelty of being in a place where she has to interact with people from different racial and ethnic groups on a daily basis:

It’s a lot different being on this campus because I’m coming from New York, where New York is predominantly African American – in the area where I lived at … But I haven’t had a bad experience. But it’s just weird for me, being here. Because I feel like there’s only a little bit of African Americans that are here.

One explanation for the limited number of CRIs at Zone 1 institutions was posited by students who mentioned language usage as a barrier to cross-racial communication. Several White students spoke about the difficulty of not knowing Spanish in a Zone 1 institution and how the inability to communicate in Spanish limited their capacity to have CRIs. For example, one White student said:

I want to hold a conversation with somebody, but they don’t want to talk to me because I don’t understand. I just feel like it’s not fair to me because I’m at the same school, I’m studying to get a degree, but they’re not really trying to interact with other students.

Another White student discussed his difficulty with not speaking Spanish when he first moved to the area and how over time, this difficulty had lessened:

Instantly, everybody just automatically assumes you know how to speak Spanish, and you can’t. I can’t speak Spanish. I can understand a lot more now that I live out here, but it’s hard at first. You’re like, “I don’t know what you said.” But then you kind of adapt, so it’s not that bad.

Finally, students in Zone 1 institutions told us about the role that instructors could or should play in facilitating more CRIs within classes. Again, as the previous research on CRIs has suggested, key locations for CRIs are both in the informal spaces on campus as well as in classrooms. Zone 1 students suggested that faculty
could purposely increase the number of CRIs. For example, after talking about how students tend to stay in their own racial groups, a student who identified as Caucasian – from Mexico – noted that teams or groups can be a way to integrate students in the classroom:

Yeah, but sometimes something happens because of team groups, that just the professor says, “Well, we have got to make these groups.” You’ll make your team with people that are around you, and this is how you break this wall of races inside the classroom.

Another student discussed how groups in the classroom that form over a longer period of time allow students from different racial backgrounds to get to know each other and that these experiences can carry on outside of campus as well. One Hispanic student agreed that professors could do more to facilitate CRIs:

Once in a while, you are grouped up with someone of a different ethnicity. It would help if professors would do that – if they would kind of be selective. Make their own groups on their own time, and then just come and say so there’s more interaction.

It is important to note that several students reported that the only time they had CRIs was in groups formed in class.

For those students who had them, CRIs were beneficial in several ways. Students discussed learning how to be comfortable with students from other races and gaining a new perspective from students with different racial or ethnic backgrounds, often noting that such interactions helped to open their minds. Two students, one White and one Hispanic, spoke about having learned to challenge stereotypes about other races by becoming friends with people of different races. A White student felt that having CRIs in college classes could then carry over to relationships outside of college. Speaking of the benefits of this, he said, “It can help your life and help you build a better person.” A few students also remarked on the importance of having CRIs for preparing for life after college. To illustrate, one Hispanic student said:

When we leave town, we’re going to have to incorporate ourselves with a lot of different groups of different people. And the university is the place to begin that. How are you going to be in the real world, in the business world? I think this is a good place to start learning different cultures, so when you get out there, you know how to handle things.

Experiences and attitudes of Zone 2 students

When we began analyzing focus group responses from the Zone 2 institutions, we found that they had somewhat of a balance in their student body racial composition. Because students from several racial groups were present in larger numbers, students had more opportunities to have CRIs. These students, like students in previous studies in schools with diverse student body composition, reported a full range of experiences as a result of those CRIs: some were positive; some were negative; and some were negative but presented students with learning opportunities. Several students reported that they engaged in CRIs but in the reporting, minimized the saliency of race in the interaction.

A number of students, in describing their CRIs, spoke of them positively. Participants at the Zone 2 institutions generally saw their schools as safe spaces for
CRIs, and most of them discussed having positive CRIs. One White student, for example, said, “I don’t think there really is much racism on campus. People don’t really look at people’s races, for the most part.” A Hispanic student agreed, “School is a pretty comfortable place to be at and not worry about your race or anything.” Another student comment confirmed previous research on the role of higher education in providing opportunities for CRIs that may not have been accessible to these students before college. For example, one student who described herself as “mixed” (West Indian, Black, Hispanic) said, “Coming here opened my eyes to all kinds of races and mixes. It was welcomed as a new experience. It hasn’t been a negative one – it’s actually been a really positive one.”

A few students reported experiences that they considered negative. One student, who used both “Mexican” and “Hispanic” as identifiers, reported learning, from a series of CRIs both before and during college, that “White girls are mean.” She relayed an experience she had in a class for a particular major where a White girl would not let her answer questions and was often telling her she was doing the work the wrong way. Discussing the experience, she said, “I stopped going to class because of that one girl. Because I failed the class, I have to retake it. But, I changed my major, because I didn’t want to take that from other people.” Another student in the focus group, a White male, corroborated this student’s experience by describing the experiences of a friend, also Hispanic and female, in that same major. As another example, the student who had earlier identified as “mixed,” who in all subsequent answers described herself as Black, reported that generally she saw the campus as supportive of cross-racial friendships, though she did experience periodic negative CRIs. She reported she was stared at in many situations on campus because of her race and this bothered her. Some students who identified as White also reported negative experiences in relation to race. One student described being teased for being the only White student in a Chicano studies class, saying “That was kind of awkward because I was the only White girl in the entire class. So, the teacher kind of picked on me the whole time, but it was all in good fun.”

While we heard about a few negative experiences on campuses, we also listened to students describe what they learned from these experiences. When asked about the importance of CRIs, students noted that they valued what they had learned from both the positive and the negative experiences. They described learning to be comfortable with people from other racial groups and deciding not to be friends or hang out with people they saw as ignorant or racist. Students also mentioned learning to appreciate differences, changing their own stereotypical views, and learning to be open-minded. A White student who grew up in the Midwest described feeling her race did matter primarily because it was the first time she had experienced being a numerical minority. This student said, “And so when I came into the classes, I noticed right away for the first time in my life in a college setting I was a minority. And I found it to be entertaining actually. I enjoyed it.” Another illustration of what benefits can result from CRIs was told to us by a student who self-identified at times as Mexican and at times Hispanic. This student noted being surprised by how many White people there were at the Zone 2 institution she attended. “But when I first got here – I wasn’t being racist – I was amazed there were so many White people. I was! I was like, ‘Oh my God!’” This student also noted how her attitude about White people had changed through her interactions with them: “Then I came, and I was in shock and I was intimidated. Usually, White people look down on Hispanics – well, that was my experience. But, now I’m like ‘Whatever,’ and I talk
Students also described having CRIs, but often downplayed race as an important aspect in determining friendships and relationships. While they had CRIs and friendships, they did not see race as a salient component of their decision about whom to interact with on campus. One illustration was provided by a student who identified as biracial – White/Mexican or Hispanic. She stated, “If someone’s nice to me and they want to come up and talk to me or I can have a nice conversation with them, it doesn’t matter to me what their ethnic or racial background is.” Another student who identified as Mexican or Hispanic echoed this sentiment by saying:

When I make friends, like they said, I don’t really point out races ... I have friends that are different than I am, and it’s never made a difference. I think it’s important that you hang out with different people, different cultures, so you don’t say something dumb to offend them. But other than that, I’m really happy to make different friends.

One student, more racially politicized than most Zone 2 students, provided a very different perspective on CRIs. This student, who used both “Mexican-American” and “Latino” as identifiers, reported engaging in CRIs, but he also questioned the value of CRIs with White students. He said, for example:

I mean, there are [White] kids, yes, who understand us and we understand them. But we’re not going to really get to know how that other person feels when they’re with their family or when they are with their friends, because it’s just a different culture, a different way of living and thinking.

**Summary**

Our perceptions of previous research had led us to believe that we would find more CRIs on campuses closer to the US–Mexico borderline because previous research suggested that the closer one gets to the border, the more opportunities there are for interactions across difference (Fox, 1999). Instead, what we found was that those institutions closer to the US–Mexico border had fewer CRIs. Understandably, then, in echoing findings from previous research, students in Zone 2 institutions (institutions with more structural diversity) reported having more CRIs. Students in Zone 1 institutions also echoed previous research findings, but the findings they mirrored were the findings about CRIs at predominately White institutions. The Zone 1 institutions were not diverse. They were predominately Hispanic, as was the community in which they were located. Zone 1 students reported having few CRIs and a few of them told us that they consciously chose not to engage with others of a different race. As was true in schools with a predominately White student body, students in the racial minority groups at these institutions also reported having CRIs. This makes sense given the numerical majority of Hispanics on these campuses. And finally, noteworthy are the comments from Zone 1 students about the role that classroom instructors could and should play in increasing the number of CRIs. On their own, they would avoid such interactions, but if required to work together by their instructors, they would have CRIs and thus experience the benefits, which they seemed to sense as demonstrated by their comments about what value CRIs might
Discussion

Our findings from Zone 1 and Zone 2 institutions suggest that previous research on CRIs made sense only when we moved away from our constructed notions of who is minority and who is majority. We typically use these words to connote the racial make-up of the country. In the USA, people who self-identify as White are both the numerical majority and the group that is most dominant in power positions within influential institutions – governments, schools, and businesses, among others. Thus, we have come to understand the word “majority” as a synonym for “White,” and the word “minority” as a synonym for any other racial group (i.e. Hispanic, Black, Native American, Asian, etc.). When we first read the research about the cognitive benefits of CRIs for college students, we read the studies through the problematic lens of our racialized understanding of “minority,” “majority,” and “diversity.” Diversity in the student body must mean more students of color. Since greater diversity often corresponded to more CRIs, then colleges that had the most students of color should have the most CRIs. And, those institutions closest to the borderline would mean greater opportunity for interactions across differences. What we failed to see was the impact of the proximity of the border itself. The Zone 1 institutions not only have more students of color, they are predominately comprised of students of color, and the community in which they reside is comprised predominately of people of color. The findings of the previous research make perfect sense regarding Zone 1 student experiences of CRIs if we remove the connotations we had unconsciously imposed upon them. We saw that the students’ experiences were similar to those described in previous research done on predominately White campuses if we looked at each school in terms of student body diversity. Diversity was present when the student body comprised more or less similar percentages of two or more racial groups, and lack of diversity was present when the student body predominately reflected just one race. We had focused on the word “White,” when we should have focused on the word “predominately.”

Implications and conclusions

So, what are the implications of this refocusing? For us, there are four main implications. First, the implications are that institutions of higher education need to localize their understanding of who their student body is. Overall, our study continues to confirm the importance of student body diversity. It would seem that understanding the contours of student populations at colleges and universities in border states must happen at a local level rather than a regional or national level. We have learned, for example, that we must understand each institution as unique. We studied four borderlands institutions that did not automatically create the student body diversity that is necessary for CRIs to routinely occur. What stood out to us was the number of Zone 1 students in our focus groups who told us that they did not regularly think about CRIs. As noted earlier, many Hispanic students in the Zone 1 institutions reported only socializing with other Hispanic students, and not commonly seeking out CRIs. We came to understand that these findings are related to the unique position of Hispanic students in Zone 1 institutions as the numerical
majority. While our findings indicate that opportunities exist for interactions at borderland institutions, especially those in Zone 2, farther from the border, such cross-racial opportunities cannot be taken for granted.

The second implication is that determined action is needed from faculty and administrators so that opportunities for CRIs increase. The literature has been very clear; CRIs can be socially and cognitively productive for students. The literature is also clear that CRIs are more frequent in student bodies that are racially diverse. Purposely fostering more CRI opportunities would serve students at institutions with one racially predominate group in the student body. In our study, these would be the institutions closest to the US–Mexico border. Students themselves told us how faculty could play a role in expanding opportunities for CRIs. For faculty, this may mean more consciously employing pedagogical practices that allow for or require CRIs, such as forming cross-racial groups that meet throughout the term to work on class projects. Additionally, college and university administrators could encourage programs, such as student exchanges, where students from Hispanic-majority institutions and regions have the opportunity to attend other schools where the student body is made up of a wider range of racial and ethnic groups.

A third implication suggests that what counts as diversity should be explored more fully. In addition to taking purposeful action to increase CRIs, we might also consider other avenues for creating environments where students can benefit from interacting across differences. Rather than an exclusive focus on race, we posit that attending more fully to within-group differences may also lead to student cognitive growth. This expanded attention would also serve to challenge the notion that any racial group is a monolith of similarity. Areas of difference within groups may include socioeconomic status, language use, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, some students in our focus groups spoke to the ways in which linguistic differences may be equally as important as racial differences in shaping their interactions on campus. Other researchers have pointed to this expanded notion of difference (Antonio et al., 2004; Herzog, 2010b; Marin, 2000; Pascarella, 2001). We speculate that differences such as these might also provide the discontinuity that is necessary for cognitive development as a result of other types of interactions with students who are different from them. Future studies are needed to more fully explore this possibility by attending to differences within racial groups.

Finally, our findings also lead us to a larger and perhaps more philosophical consideration. In future research, it will be necessary for us to turn to additional areas of scholarship to help us think about race in larger historical and social contexts. In what ways have historical phenomena and public discourses shaped our views and expectations of certain student populations? And, how have those views and expectations shaped institutional structures? And, how have these institutional structures enabled or inhibited student development?

Despite our experience as researchers and faculty at US–Mexico borderlands institutions, our findings challenged our own notions of diversity. Students’ perceptions required us to ask, what do we mean by diversity? We assumed that all borderlands institutions would have a racially diverse student body. We now believe this reflects an unthoughtful, if common, assumption that diversity is largely shaped by the number of students of color attending a largely White institution. In this way of thinking, a high percentage of Hispanic students would always represent diversity. Clearly, our findings disrupt this assumption. As long as this assumption is allowed to go unchecked, we may be incorrectly assuming that students attending
colleges and universities with student bodies that are predominately Hispanic are receiving the same cognitive and social benefits as the findings suggest occur when the student body is racially diverse. While borderlands institutions will continue to be defined largely as places of racial diversity, as indeed, many of them are, those of us who work and research within institutions located at various distances from the border can continue to challenge static notions of racial diversity and open up spaces for fostering student interactions across additional axes of difference.

Notes on contributors
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Eduardo C. Arellano is an associate professor of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the University of Texas at El Paso. His research has centered on the academic and social benefits of cross-racial interactions among college students, US-Mexico higher education collaboration, and professional competency studies involving university preparation programs.

Robin L. Dankovich is a research associate and doctoral student at the University of Texas of El Paso studying Higher Education Administration. Her research interests are institutional climate, collaboration of interdisciplinary teams and between-college effects on student achievement.

References


### Appendix 1. Summary table of results of tested hypotheses

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