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# Mapping and recontextualizing the evolution of the term *Latinx*: An environmental scanning in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

The term *Latinx* emerged recently as a gender-neutral label for Latino/a and Latin@. The purpose of this paper is to examine ways in which *Latinx* is used within the higher education context, and to provide an analysis of how the term can disrupt traditional notions of inclusivity and shape institutional understandings of intersectionality. Findings indicate a significant trend towards usage of *Latinx* in social media, and emerging use within higher education institutions. This paper is used to further the understandings of the use of the term *Latinx*, and to advocate for people that are living in the borderlands of gender.

## KEYWORDS

*Latinx*; intersectionality; gender; language; higher education

Populations in the United States that identify as having Latin American ancestry have used various labels to self-identify, including Latino, Hispanic, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, etc. In 2014, a new term—*Latinx*—began appearing on Internet and social media sites, causing confusion for those who did not know what it meant or how to pronounce it. Since then, the online presence of this term has continued to grow. According to Google Trends (2016), an analytics tool that tracks how often a particular search term is entered on the Google search engine, the number of times *Latinx* was used as a search term spiked in the U.S. in 2016. What is this nascent term and how is it being perceived and used in higher education? What significance does it hold for researchers who study this population? Is it simply a passing fad? These questions offer a starting point to examine the significance of an emerging label—one that focuses on the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States. (U.S. Census, 2015).

Empirical studies focusing on the creation and evolution of the term *Latinx* are nonexistent, although a search of the literature reveals that some scholars in the field of education have begun using the term in their research. For instance, using two database tools, ERIC and Education Research Complete, the authors conducted a search for peer-reviewed articles that contain the term *Latinx*, which yielded only nine results (all published before the summer of 2016, which is when the search was conducted). None of these articles focused specifically on the meaning and use of the term *Latinx*, but rather used the term as a label or descriptor of a population. Of the small number of scholars who used the term in peer-reviewed articles, only two offered a footnote to explain the term to their readers (see Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Monzo, 2016). The dearth of literature regarding the significance of this emerging label for a large segment of the U.S. population has created a knowledge gap within higher education.

The purpose of this article is to examine ways in which *Latinx* is used within the context of higher education and student affairs, and to provide an analysis of how the term can disrupt traditional notions of inclusivity and shape institutional understandings of intersectionality. The research questions that guide this study are: (1) How do higher education and student affairs stakeholders

use the term *Latinx*? And (2) How does the term *Latinx* disrupt traditional notions of inclusivity for communities of people in higher education settings? While recognizing the lack of research on the use of the term *Latinx* in a broader context, the authors focus specifically on how stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators, students) in the field of higher education and student affairs use the term *Latinx*. This article is one of the first to explore, map, and recontextualize the usage of the term *Latinx* within the fields of higher education and student affairs. The authors acknowledge the need for more research that examines the use of the term in K–12 educational settings and across disciplines. The authors further recognize that the term *Latinx* challenges the ideologies of language, culture, and gender, and is a way to recognize the importance of the intersectionality of social identities.

In this article, the authors provide a brief overview of pan-ethnic labels used for people of Latin American descent, as well as a definition of the term *Latinx* based on its current use in the literature, academic conferences, and in social media. Using environmental scanning as method, the authors analyze the use of the term within institutions of higher education and provide final conclusions regarding the future of this term and its impact within higher education environments. Throughout this article, the authors use the term “people of Latin American descent” to refer to the indigenous populations, citizens, and communities of people from Latin American countries and dependencies; the authors use *Latino*, *Latino/a*, *Latin@*, *Latinx*, or *Hispanic* when referencing studies or reports that used those categories.

### **Latino vs Hispanic**

As researchers who study the experience of students of Latin American descent in higher education, the authors are continually navigating the nomenclature used for this population. *Latino* and *Hispanic* are two traditional, yet often misunderstood, labels used in higher education research and practice. The term *Latino*, which traditionally encompassed both male and female genders according to the rules of the Spanish language, has evolved within the literature and in daily conversations as *Latin*, *Latino/a*, *Latin@*, and *Latinx*. The term *Hispanic* was first adopted by the U.S. government during the Nixon administration and was implemented in the U.S. Census in 1980 (Delgado-Romero, Manlove, Manlove, & Hernandez, 2006). *Hispanic* derives from the Latin word *Hispania*, which later became *España* (Spain). *Hispanic* refers to people who are from countries where the primary language is Spanish (e.g., Spain, Columbia, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Dominican Republic, among others) (Salinas, 2015). By contrast, the term *Latino* was adapted by the U.S. government to label individuals who identify as *mestizo* or *mulato* (mixed White, with Black and Native) people of Central or South America (Delgado-Romero et al., 2006). The term *Latino* refers to people from the Caribbean, as well as Mexico, and the countries that comprise Central and South America, even those countries that are not Spanish-speaking (Belize, Brazil, French Guiana, Guyana, and Suriname) (De Luca & Escoto, 2012). It is important to understand the historical similarities and differences between *Hispanic* and *Latino*, which have resulted in different meanings for these two terms. A key similarity between these pan-ethnic terms is that they both refer to a cultural and ethnic group, not a race. Indeed, people of Latin American descent comprise various races, depending on ancestry and context, as the social construction of race continues to change through time. Furthermore, a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center found that when it comes to self-identification, “most Hispanics prefer their family’s country of origin over pan-ethnic terms” (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco, 2012, p. 2).

### **The emergence of Latinx**

A comprehensive search of academic literature in the field of education, using common scholarly database tools (ERIC and EBSCOhost), indicates that historical research regarding the origins of the term *Latinx* does not yet exist. Various non-scholarly articles and opinion pieces provide some

insight regarding how and why the term emerged. Padilla (2016) states that *Latinx* first emerged in 2004 among “left-leaning and queer communities as a way to promote inclusivity in language” (para. 6). With the rise of social media, the term then “gained a foothold by mid-2015, and its use began spreading beyond LGBTQIA communities” (para. 6). Sharrön-Del Río and Aja (2015) argue that the term *Latinx* was “born out of a collective aim to move beyond the masculine-centric ‘Latino’ and the gender inclusive but binary embedded ‘Latin@’” (para. 1). While it may not be possible to pinpoint the exact time and place the term emerged, it appears to have been born out of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S. as a way to resist the gender binary.

## Methods

The authors conducted an environmental scan to gather data for this research study. Originally developed as an analytical tool for use in business organizations, environmental scanning is now commonly used in higher education as part of the strategic planning process (Lapin, 2004; Morrison, 1992; Ritchie, Patrick, Corbould, Harper, & Oddson, 2016). Environmental scanning is the systematic collection of information (events, trends, relationships) to improve an organization’s ability to adapt to its external environment (Choo, 2001). Lapin (2004) posits that environmental scanning’s purpose is to enable an organization to develop or change a strategic plan based on the trends noted. Ritchie et al. (2016) maintain that environmental scanning data collection incorporates the following: an appropriate combination of literature reviews, systematic reviews, scoping reviews, web searches, questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews with key informants to uncover the range of perspectives related to a research question, topic, or key term. Additionally, the analysis of data collected through environmental scanning allows researchers to: (1) detect changes in the external environment; (2) define the potential threats or opportunities and potential changes for the organization caused by these changes; (3) promote a future orientation in leadership in the organization; and (4) alert leadership to trends and emerging issues and their future direction (Lapin, 2004). Insights gained through environmental scanning, particularly uncovering trends and emerging issues related to those trends, made this method of data collection appropriate for this study.

The data collection process incorporated four forms of environmental scanning on the use of the term *Latinx*: (1) search of the literature; (2) examination of higher education websites; (3) examination of higher education conferences; and (4) review of social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). Although the authors did not conduct focus groups or interviews to analyze perspectives of people on the use of the term *Latinx*, they were able to analyze a range of perspectives of the term *Latinx* through myriad opinion pieces on various social media sites. The approach to environmental scanning is informed by Lapin’s (2004) method of *trend spotting* to detect “a behavior or change in the external environment and its likely future direction” (p. 106). In this case, the authors examined how behavior with the use of the term *Latinx* might impact the ways in which higher education environments acknowledge intersecting identities. Environmental scanning enables researchers to identify and analyze events, trends, and emerging understandings of the usage of *Latinx*. This method allowed the authors to document and recontextualize the evolution of the term *Latinx*.

## Review of the findings

### Academic journals

The search of the literature for this study, focusing on research articles that examined the use of the term “*Latinx*,” yielded no results. This search was completed by using library search engines from two different universities (Florida Atlantic University and University of Wisconsin–La Crosse). Conducting two academic engine searches allowed the authors to gain a broader range of literature as part of the environmental scan. Although the literature did not include any scholarship examining the term *Latinx*, a number of peer-reviewed articles included the term *Latinx* as part of the title or

within the article as a demographic descriptor or label. Out of nine articles, only two included a definition of *Latinx* as a way of informing the reader about the meaning of this label and how the author was using it. Johnston-Guerrero (2016) explains the term as: “Latinx (an inclusive, gender non-specific term replacing Latino/a)” (p. 44). Similar to Johnston-Guerrero, Monzo (2016) provides the following explanation for the use of the term:

I use the term Latinx (as well as Chicax) in order to be gender inclusive when referring to peoples of Latin American descent. However, traditional gender assignments (whether self-imposed or assigned) have an important impact on almost every aspect of people’s lives and thus I use the gendered forms, Latina and Latino, when referring to specific individual. (p. 164)

The remaining seven articles do not provide a definition or context for use of the term *Latinx*. This implies that the authors expected the reader to be familiar with the term.

By contrast, a search of the ProQuest Theses & Dissertations Global database using the search term *Latinx* for anything published between 2010 and the summer of 2016 yielded 52 results: 45 published in 2016, six published in 2015, one in 2014, and nothing between 2010 and 2013. Although none of the authors of the 52 research studies examined the emergence and use of the term *Latinx* as the central focus of their research, four of them used the term in their title as well as throughout their article. The majority of the authors did not include *Latinx* as part of their article’s title, but incorporated the term within their article as a demographic label. The authors of this study limited the search of dissertations and theses to the ProQuest database because it offers the most comprehensive collection of full-text dissertations and theses. They acknowledge that some relevant dissertations and theses may not be included in this database.

Similar to the results of the search of peer-reviewed articles, many of the 52 theses and dissertations included an explanation of the term *Latinx*. Some authors offered a brief definition for the reader either as a footnote or within the “definitions” or “methods” section of their paper: “Latinx (pronounced la-teen-ex) is a gender-neutral word for Latino/a, which is the commonly used word to distinguish genders” (Leek, 2016, p. 51). Others offered a more detailed and nuanced explanation of the term:

The term Latinx provides a social identifier that aims to neutralize the sex-gender binary inherent in the Spanish language and thus, the ethnic category formally known as Latino. It offers an alternative to a) the general and masculine-centric ethnic term “Latino”, b) the inherently gendered terms Latina/o, as well as c) the more recent gender inclusive but binary embedded term, Latin@. Its use elucidates the diversity of genders and sexualities of people who identify with Latinidad as an ethnic identity and is meant to connote inclusivity rather than exclusivity (not meant to be used exclusively as an identifier for gender-nonconforming or trans people of Latin American descent). (Haddock-Lazala, 2016, p. 1)

Still others provided their own positionality on the term *Latinx* in addition to a definition:

I purposefully use the term “Latin@/x” to encompass Latin@ identities beyond a gender binary. . . . Using Latin@ assumes that all students were cisgender, therefore I use Latin@/x instead. I also note, however, that my using Latinx as a White person could be contentious. Therefore, I cautiously proceed using Latin@/x, but recognize that terminology may evolve as the term Latinx is relatively new. (Kilgo, 2016, p. 64)

The newness of the term *Latinx* created a temporal dilemma for some scholars who completed their dissertations in 2015, just as the term was gaining credence. As Arce (2015) explained:

Latinx is a relatively new way of referring to Latina/o population in a way that does not conform to a gender binary. This term gained popularity during the final stages of me completing this project, so the rest of the dissertation refers to Latina/os. Nevertheless, it is a new alternative that more adequately captures transgender, gender queer populations. (p. v)

Gonzalez (2015) offers insight into a scholar’s struggle to balance inclusive, albeit emerging, terminology with the expediency of maintaining traditionally accepted terminology:

Variations on the theme have come to appear in scholarly literature and popular culture alike, including the more inclusive but grammatically clunky “Latina/o” and “Latin@” which add a second gender dimension but

err in their encouraging a gender binary. Much more recently the LGBTQ-friendly but largely unknown, “Latinx” (pronounced “Latinex”) has entered the Latino lexicon, a term that is inclusive of the continuum of gender identities as a whole, but whose existence raises the question of whether the gender-neutral English version, “Latin,” does not suffice, as it has greater currency and a deep history on the East Coast. Far from a question of simple semantics, the discussion of terminology adds a dimension of clarity, as it is my intention to discuss not only the lives of Latin-American men, but of Latin American people of all genders and ages. However, the census term “Latino” is preferred here, despite its decidedly patriarchal connotation, for its currency and widespread usage. This is carried out with hesitation and in hopes that readers can forgive the uninclusive language with the knowledge that better nomenclature is on the way. (p. 14)

Based on the analysis of the use of the term *Latinx* in theses and dissertations, three patterns emerged. First, although the term initially appeared in 2014, it has only been within the past year that scholars have begun to use it more consistently as a gender-inclusive alternative to “Latino,” “Latina/o,” and “Latin@.” Second, several scholars were compelled to offer a definition and/or positional statement to the reader regarding the use of the term *Latinx* in their thesis or dissertation. Third, the majority of scholars did not feel the need to define the term or explain their use of it. These findings are indicative of how and why current scholars are using the term *Latinx* and lead the authors to conclude that its use in higher education literature will continue to grow. Given the number of emerging scholars who used the term in their thesis or dissertation, it is reasonable to assume that these individuals will continue to incorporate the term *Latinx* into their research as they enter academia as faculty members or administrators. Thus, the term is more likely to become accepted and institutionalized within higher education.

### **Online media: News articles and blogs**

The Google search engine was used to collect online media documents, including news articles and blogs. As stated previously, and in accordance to the methods for this study, news articles and blogs were gathered to gain a deeper understanding of the events and trends regarding the use of the term *Latinx*. News articles and blogs have been a major source for the use of the term *Latinx* by scholars and activists. Through opinion pieces in news articles, scholars and activist have shared their standpoints on and definitions of the term *Latinx*. Many of these scholars and activists agree that the term *Latinx* has evolved and is being adopted as a genderless variant in efforts to be more inclusive of all gender identities (Armus, 2015; Logue, 2015; Princeton, n.d.; Ramirez & Blay, 2016; Sabate, 2015; van Horne, 2016). van Horne (2016) argues that the term “*Latinx* is practically the only explicitly ungendered term that has gained traction outside of academic circles” (para. 5). Other scholars, in efforts to expand on the understanding of the term *Latinx*, call attention to issues of intersectionality of language, culture, and gender (Padilla, 2016, Scharrón-Del Rio & Aja, 2015; Sosa, 2016). However, the term is not universally accepted or enthusiastically embraced by all scholars, activists, and people of Latin American descent. For example, Guerrero and Orbea (2015) argue against the use of the term *Latinx*. They claim that the term *Latinx* is becoming a buzzword, that the term is a blatant form of linguistic imperialism, that it is being used in the United States only, and that its use cannot be considered as “speaking Spanish.” In pointing to another issue, Scharrón-Del Río and Aja (2015) argue that much of the perspective taking on the term *Latinx* demonstrates a “reactionary response that fails to substantively consider intersecting areas of privilege and oppression” (para. 3). These arguments emphasize the importance of recognizing that the term *Latinx* has multiple, and often complex, implications for individuals, scholarship, advocacy, and policy that scholars and educators need to deconstruct.

The examination of online newspaper articles and blogs provided insight regarding the emergence and evolution of *Latinx*. The authors found evidence that college students began using the term to challenge the ideologies of language, culture, and gender, and as a way to recognize the importance of the intersectionality of social identities. For example, Armus (2015) notes that, in December 2014, a Mexican American student group at Columbia University changed their group name from Chicano

Caucus to *Chicanx* Caucus to be a gender-neutral student organization. Since the name of the *Chicanx* Caucus changed, the names of other programs and student organizations on campuses started to change (i.e., *Latinx* Heritage Month) (Armus, 2015; Logue, 2015). This appears to be the beginning of a national trend across colleges and universities in the United States. While the alteration of student organization names from *Latino* or *Latina* to *Latinx* has been a recent phenomenon, Logue (2015) notes the use of the word “x” first appeared in Puerto Rican psychological periodicals to challenge the gender binaries encoded in the Spanish language. For example, to challenge the masculine-centric nature of the Spanish language, authors use “*lxs estudiantes*” (the students), changing the word *los* (the) to *lxs*.

Spanish is a gendered language, which means that all nouns have a gender. In general, most nouns in Spanish that end in “o” tend to be masculine, and those that end in “a” tend to be feminine. Thus, the Spanish language “reinforces patriarchal and heterosexist norms” (Padilla, 2016, para. 3). To challenge the norms of a male-centric language, the term *Latino* evolved into *Latino/a* or *Latin@*—two terms that reinforce the gender binary of male/female. Adding the “X” to the end of *Latinx* and other words makes them gender neutral, and more inclusive for people of Latin American descent “whose gender identities fluctuate along different pints of the spectrum, from agender or nonbinary to gender non-conforming, genderqueer and genderfluid” (Reichard, 2015, para. 3). Thus, “*Latinx* is an attempt in Spanish to include non-binary people, those who are neither male nor female” (van Horne, 2016, para. 4).

While the “X” is viewed as part of a broader Latino movement that is concerned with issues of gender (van Horne, 2016), it is still misunderstood. Most scholars and activists used the “X” at the end of personal nouns to be gender neutral and more inclusive (i.e., *Latinx* and *Chicanx*) (see Logue, 2015; Padilla, 2016; van Horne, 2016; Vega, 2015). Others have used the “X” at the beginning of the word *Chicano/a*, replacing the “Ch” to embrace their indigenous roots (i.e., *Xicana/o*) (Becerril, 2015; Noriega, Romo, & Rivas, 2012; Sosa, 2016). Becerril (2015) maintains that the usage of “X” “rejects separatist nationalism and instead situates itself in the context of an international and global struggle for liberation, proudly declaring itself in solidarity with indigenous, *mestizx*, colonized and dispossessed people everywhere” (para. 2).

When documenting the use of the term *Latinx*, the authors found that the intersection of language and gender plays a significant role in how scholars and activists understand and reproduce the discourse, ideology, and gender identity of people of Latin American descent. The authors argue that the term *Latinx* has evolved as new form of liberation for people of Latin American descent who hold nonconforming gender identities; that it is inclusive in that it recognizes the intersectionality of sexuality, language, ethnicity, culture, geography, and phenotype; and it is often misused and underexamined for the intersecting areas of privilege and oppression.

### **Professional conferences**

As stated earlier, the term *Latinx* first began to appear on Internet and social media sites in 2014. Through environmental scanning, the authors found that, within higher education, the term *Latinx* started to emerge when college students began changing the names of their organizations (Armus, 2015; Logue, 2015). However, it was in 2016 that scholars and practitioners of higher education started to use the term *Latinx* in conference and association presentations. It is important to note that the authors did not attend every conference presentation that included the term *Latinx*. However, they were able to determine, based on their review of presentation titles and abstracts, that while the term *Latinx* was used in presentation descriptions, the term itself (meaning, use, evolution, etc.) was not the main focus or purpose of the presentations.

To ensure a more comprehensive environmental scan with a high level of timeliness, accuracy, credibility, and evidence of quality control, the authors examined conference presentations hosted by five major higher education and student affairs associations for the years 2015 and 2016. These

annual conferences include: Association for the Study of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), ACPA–College Student Educators International (ACPA), Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), NASPA–Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education (NASPA), and National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE). The authors found that, in 2015, there were no presentations in which *Latinx* was used in the title and/or in the abstract. In 2016, a total of 10 presentations used the term *Latinx* in the title and/or abstract: one at NASPA, four at NCORE, and five at ASHE.

The authors limited their analyses to five annual conferences that draw a large number of higher education professionals from the United States as well as internationally. It is important to acknowledge the likelihood that other conferences sponsored presentations with the term *Latinx* in the title. Similar to the authors' conclusion regarding the use of *Latinx* in academic publications, it is reasonable to assume that scholars, activists, and practitioners within higher education and student affairs will continue to incorporate the term *Latinx* into their conference presentations.

### **Social media sites**

The authors of this study included social media sites in their environmental scan of the term *Latinx* because “social media has become an important source of news that influences the examination of society and culture, and its interaction of race, law, power and privilege” (Beatty & Salinas, 2016, p. 6). Within higher education, social media has become an important tool for students, faculty, staff, and administrators to understand what works and does not work with regards to student engagement, student identity development, and identification of learning outcomes for students (Junco, 2014). Social media can be used to think through and develop promising practices within the field of higher education and student affairs, and to share new research discoveries.

Using Talkwalker (2016), a social media tracking tool, the authors were able to apply social media analytics to the environmental scan to measure the performance of tags (hashtags; #) in three social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Talkwalker tracked the mentions, engagements, potential reach to other social media users, sentiments (positive and negative), and gender usage of the term *Latinx*. It also tracked the top countries in which the term *Latinx* is being used in these platforms. In order to assure accuracy of the usage of the term *Latinx* in the three platforms, the authors focused the examination of the analytics on a six-month period, from June to November 2016. Data for that period remained fairly constant from week to week. For purposes of this study, the authors only report data from a seven-day period—November 15 to November 21, 2016—because it provided the most recent data on usage of the term *Latinx* and because the data from this seven-day period were consistent with the other weeks within the six months.

The authors found that, in the seven-day period, the term *Latinx* was mentioned over 9,000 times, 39% of which were positive sentiments and 28% of which were negative sentiments towards the term *Latinx*. From those 9,000 mentions of the term *Latinx*, those posted on social media reached over 11.9 million social media users, with 42,800 engaged in the post. Females (58.5%) outnumber males (41.5%) on the usage of the term *Latinx* in social media platforms. Although the term *Latinx* is mostly used in the United States, the authors were able to track the top countries that used the term: United States (87.5%), Canada (0.9%), United Kingdom (0.8%), Argentina (0.5%), Colombia (0.5%), Spain (0.4%), France (0.4%), Germany (0.4%), Philippines (0.4%), and other (8.3%).

As part of this analysis, the authors also documented the various forms of usage of tags (hashtags; #) for the term *Latinx* on social media. While the use of the term *Latinx* with a hashtag (#Latinx) was most common, the authors also found 49 additional ways in which social media users on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter tagged the term (see Appendix). These

various tags with the term *Latinx* provide insight into how social media users are utilizing the term to express and demonstrate their attitudes, lifestyles, hobbies, and actions, as well as how they celebrate accomplishments, challenge power and privilege, and build community and support for other communities of color. Based on the analysis of these three social media platforms, it is clear that the term *Latinx* is being used in a wide variety of ways to influence how social media users understand and make meaning of sexualities and gender and their interaction with society, culture, power, and privilege.

### **Higher education institutional websites**

The authors conducted an environmental scan of the websites of 34 U.S. colleges and universities to track the appearance of the term *Latinx* within the institutions' web pages to determine who was using it. The authors were particularly interested in determining how often the term was being used and whether it was becoming institutionalized as a label. Their sample included two types of institutions: research universities and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). The authors narrowed the list of 115 institutions classified as "doctorate institutions—highest research activity" (R1) on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.) to 14 institutions that participate in the Big 10 Conference. This list provided a sample of large, flagship institutions located mostly in the Midwest. The authors also examined the websites of a sample of 20 HSIs located in Florida, Texas, and California.

The findings yielded several insights about the use of the term *Latinx* in higher education. First, none of the institutions in this sample appeared to have replaced the more traditional terms *Latino*, *Latina/o*, or *Latin@* with the term *Latinx* as a matter of practice throughout their websites. Yet, in this sample, all but one of the research institutions' websites and half of the HSI's websites included at least one reference to the term *Latinx*. This leads to a second finding regarding who is using the term and how they are using it. The term appears most frequently on student-organization-sponsored events such as cultural activities, speakers, and film series. In a few cases, the term appeared as part of a promotion of an event focused on a discussion of the meaning of the term *Latinx*, as in an event advertised on the Ohio State University Ohio Union Activities Board (2016) webpage, titled: "It's Not a Typo: Using the Term Latinx." California State University (SCU), Chico, an HSI, offered a similar event sponsored by various diversity offices, titled "Hispanic, Latinx, Xicana... What's in a Name?" (CSU, Chico, 2016). It is clear that the purpose of these events is to educate the campus community about an emerging term—one that may be unfamiliar or confusing to the majority of the campus population.

Of the myriad Latino-based student organizations located on the campuses in the sample, only a handful used the term *Latinx*. Examples include the "LatinX Social Work Coalition" at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, "Political Latinxs United for Movement and Action in Society" (PLUMAS) at the University of Maryland–College Park, and "Latinx Badgers" (LxB) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. While most student organizations continue to use the more traditional *Latina/o* in their titles, it is clear, based on the titles of the numerous events and activities sponsored by Latino-based student organizations, that the term is gaining more widespread use.

In some cases, university departments sponsored events and activities that used the term *Latinx* in their title. For example, the University of Iowa Center for Diversity and Enrichment and the School of Social Work co-sponsored an annual conference: "The 18th Iowa Latinx Conference" (University of Iowa, 2016). This conference was previously titled "The Iowa Latino Conference"—the switch to the term *Latinx* in the conference title was made in 2016 (University of Iowa, 2015). Other department-sponsored events using the term *Latinx* in the sample institutions included graduation celebrations, heritage month activities, and cultural events.

While it was evident that some institutional departments, particularly diversity offices, sponsored or co-sponsored events with the term *Latinx* in the title, only three institutions in the sample used the term as part of the title of an official departmental unit or subunit. The Housing Department at Indiana University–Bloomington (2016) offers a learning community titled “Luis Davila Latinx Thematic Learning Community.” The Division of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland–College Park (2016) has a webpage titled “Latinx Student Involvement,” which includes links to pages, all using the term *Latinx*. Similarly, the Office of Student Life at Ohio State University (2016) devotes a bilingual webpage titled “Latinx” to providing information about counseling services. The ways in which these three institutions have embraced the term *Latinx*—going beyond simply sponsoring or co-sponsoring activities that use the term to incorporating it into titles of official departmental programs and webpages—may indicate the beginning of a trend towards institutionalization of the term.

Finally, the environmental scan of institutional websites revealed a phenomenon regarding the use of the term *Latinx* that cannot be ignored. There appeared to be a disconnect between faculty use of the term *Latinx* and institutional recognition of the term. Several of the universities in the sample had a Latino cultural center and/or a Latino studies program. The authors were particularly interested in whether these entities had changed their names to incorporate the term *Latinx*. None of them had made the change. Various titles were used for Latino studies programs, including Latina & Latino Studies, Latin American and Latino Studies, Latina/Latino Studies, Latina/o Studies, Chicano & Latino Studies, and Chican@ and Latin@ Studies. However, several faculty members working *within* those programs referred to their field as “Latinx studies” in their bios. Several faculty members had also used the term *Latinx* in the titles of their publications. This phenomenon might be viewed as a form of resistance by faculty members to the institutional use of traditional binary labels (Latina/o). At the very least, it is an indication of incongruence between how faculty members prefer to self-identify and how their institutional departments label them. The rise in the use of the term *Latinx* by both students and faculty members may push more departments and units to officially incorporate the term as part of their nomenclature.

### **Recontextualizing Latinx: Discussion and Implications**

The terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* have evolved in the United States and are now part of the traditional lexicon used to identify people of Latin American descent. Yet, it is also evident that the term *Latinx* has gained popularity within the past few years. As a recent phenomenon, *Latinx* is used mostly by students in college and universities. The term *Latinx* has not evolved within the general population; rather, it has gradually gained increased use in higher education scholarship with no standard or official definition. The authors define *Latinx* as an inclusive term that recognizes the intersectionality of sexuality, language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and phenotype. While there are various arguments for the use of *Latinx*, it has evolved as new form of liberation for those individuals who do not identify within the gender binary of masculinity or femininity, and it is used to represent the various intersections of gender as it is understood in different ways within different communities of people. The authors’ approach to examining and documenting the term *Latinx* is consistent with researchers who use Latino Critical Race Theory as a form of liberation for *Latinx* communities. Similar to Solorzano and Delgado’s (2001) work, the authors center the term *Latinx* with a liberatory lens which “offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (p. 315).

The authors recognize that people may avoid using the term *Latinx* due to transphobic and homophobic inner feelings towards individuals who do not identify within the male or female gender binary. Others might challenge the term based on a history of major terms/words being developed and used mainly by Western modernism culture to describe marginalized populations. For example, Scheurich and Young (1997) maintain that we are socialized and educated

in Western modernism's epistemologies (studies the theory of knowledge) that have delegitimized the ways of knowing for communities of people of color:

Consider who the major, influential philosophers, writers, politicians, corporate leaders, social scientists, educational leaders have been over the course of western modernism... They have virtually all been White. And it is they who have constructed the world we live in—named it, discussed it, explain it. It is they who have developed the ontological and axiological categories or competes like individuality, truth, education, free enterprise, good conduct, social welfare, etc. that we use to think (that thinks us?) and that we use to socialize and educate children. (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 8)

Therefore, people from majoritized and minoritized racial backgrounds, including people of Latin America descent, might not understand the term *Latinx*, due to a lack of knowledge of, or resistance to, the concept of intersectionality of sexuality, language, immigration, race, ethnicity, culture, and phenotype.

When people of Latin American descent experience oppression based on the layers of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, language, immigration, culture, and phenotype, they come to consciously recognize that they do not socially or institutionally fit in (Solorzano & Delgado, 2001). As a form of resistance, people from Latin America descent have developed new terminology to create awareness, resistance, and liberation. As the authors analyze the term *Latinx*, they understand that *Latinx* communities of people—oppressed people—have the “essential tool[s] to their own survival and liberation” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). The authors strongly believe that the term *Latinx* evolved as a form of liberation by communities of people as they have created “action and reflection... upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2010, p. 79). These communities of people who create liberation through action and reflection theorize their lived experiences and are “linked to processes of self-recovery” (hooks, 1991, p. 2).

Throughout this article, the authors make the case that the term *Latinx* has evolved as new form of liberation for those individuals who do not identify with the gender binary of masculinity or femininity, and that it is used to represent the various intersections of gender. In addition, the term *Latinx* is influenced by indigenous people's sexuality and gender roots, as in the case of Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca, Mexico, a Zapotec community where a community of people use a third gender role for biologically sexed men (Stephen, 2002). This third gender of individuals are not men or women; rather, they have a gender identity known as *Muxes* (Cobelo, 2016; Stephen, 2002). Cobelo (2016) explains that *Muxes* are “born biologically male and dress as women—but they consider themselves neither cross-dressers nor transgender. Instead, they are treated as ‘the third gender,’ and they identify neither as men nor as women” (para. 2). Furthermore, *Muxes* are “persons who appear to be predominantly male but display certain female characteristics” and fill a “third gender role between men and women, taking some characteristics of each” (Chiña, as cited in Stephen, 2002, p. 43). Similar to *Muxes*, *Latinx* can be rooted in the “indigenous gender systems that allow for more flexible models not attached to specific sexual identities” (Stephen, 2002, p. 44).

While most of society and many scholars have adopted the two-gender system (male and female), Stephen (2002) concludes from an ethnography study that indigenous people from the Americas had different gender system constructs:

The persistence of a third gender role among contemporary Zapotecs for bodies that are sexed as male suggests that state societies such as the Zapotec and the Mexica may have had overlapping gender systems that included not only elite gender complementarity but also other systems that allowed for three or more genders. Since it is often acknowledged that state societies such as the Mexica and the Zapotec incorporated other deities and religious ideas into local and regional cosmologies, it is not inconceivable that more than one system of structuring gender could have coexisted at the local level in Zapotec communities—one directed at elites and another more closely associated with commoners. (pp. 48–49)

It is evident, through the historical roots of sexuality and gender, that gender continues to be a category of social organization and the most significant classification and understanding of sexual

behavior (Stephan, 2002). Higher education scholars, practitioners, and activists must continue to create and promote an inclusive space for all genders and the intersections with sexuality, language, immigration, race, ethnicity, culture, and phenotype.

Finally, it is important to remember that using the term *Latinx* does not necessarily create inclusivity to all communities of people, as many people still have not seen or heard, agree with, or understand the term *Latinx*. Google Trends (2016) documents that the most related queries by users searching the term *Latinx* include: *Latinx* meaning; what is *Latinx*; *Latinx* definition, *Latinx* define; *Latinx* vs. Hispanic; *Latinx* pronunciation; *Latinx* origin; and *Latinx* diversity. It appears that the majority of the population in the United States and the world are not familiar with or do not understand the term *Latinx*. It is clear, from this environmental scan, that additional research is needed to contextualize the history, meaning, and usage of the term *Latinx*. The authors expect an increase in the usage of the term *Latinx* in scholarship and higher education settings. It is also expected that, by the time this article is published, the number of scholarly articles using the term *Latinx* will have increased exponentially.

As scholars and activists continue to engage in future research and practice within Latina/o/x communities, the authors encourage them to ask research participants how they self-identify, and include *Latinx* along with other choices (e.g., Latina, Latino, Hispanic). It is critical to ask individuals how they self-identify to avoid making assumptions regarding their gender identity. It is also important that scholars and activists avoid making assumptions about the participants' self-identification from the data. For example, if a study reports that six participants of a study self-identify as Latina and five as Latino, the term *Latinx* should not be used unless some of the participants self-identify as *Latinx*. To promote gender inclusivity, the term *Latina/o/x* should be used when the gender of the population is not known. Addressing the complexities and misunderstandings regarding the term *Latinx* is essential to creating an inclusive space for all in higher education. The goal of this study is to further the understandings of the use of the term *Latinx*, and to advocate for people who are living in the borderlands of gender.

## Conclusion

In an attempt to understand the ways that scholars and activist in higher education use, promote, engage, and deliver the term *Latinx*, the authors provide an overview of the evolution, history, and perspectives that communities of people have created about the term *Latinx*. Through a document analysis, the authors examined ways in which *Latinx* is used within the higher education context, and provided an analysis of how the use of *Latinx* can disrupt traditional notions of inclusivity and shape institutional understandings of intersectionality. While this article provides an understanding of how the term *Latinx* is used in the United States, mainly in higher education, there is the need for future research that continues to explore the sentiments regarding the term *Latinx* within all communities of people.

Through environmental scanning, the authors document the usage of the term *Latinx* in academic journals, online news articles and blogs, social media, and higher education institutions and conferences. From the data collected and analyzed, the authors conclude that the term *Latinx* challenges the ideologies of language, culture, and gender, and is a way to recognize the importance of the intersectionality of social identities. The authors believe that the term *Latinx* is a movement that will continue to gain popularity among higher education scholars, practitioners, activist, students, faculty, and staff, while promoting awareness and understanding of how concepts of sexualities and gender interact with society, culture, power, and privilege.

For educators, researchers, administrators, and students who are engaged in the process of examining and recontextualizing an emerging identity label, it is important to share your own positionalities and reflectivity on the term *Latinx*. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) explain positionality and reflectivity as:

a way of ensuring rigor... involves how critical reflection of how the researcher constructs knowledge from the research process—what sorts of factors influence the research’s construction of knowledge and how these influences are revealed in the planning, conduct, and writing up the research. (p. 275)

Positionality is a form of sharing personal narratives as they relate to one’s own social identities, personal biases, beliefs, and values. A deeper understanding and awareness of the complexities of the term *Latinx* require a willingness to consider one’s positionality and engage in reflectivity.

In addition, reading and engaging in critical conversations with colleagues and friends can help one to understand the importance and significance of the term *Latinx*. Through these conversations, one can be challenged, confront fears, and refute the stereotypes of social identities other than your own. The term *Latinx* is a meaningful and transformative word that promotes gender inclusivity, and thus a respect for basic human dignity. As institutions of higher education continue to seek excellence in diversity, multiculturalism and social justice, they must understand the significance of gender-inclusive language and its impact on the campus community.

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**Appendix Latinx hashtags categorized by general topic**

Education	Political Activism	Art/Literature	Children	Other
latinxgradcaps	latinxpride	latinxart	latinxdeafbabyweares	latinx
latinxgrad	latinxlivesmatter	latinxgirlbrujeria	latinxkidlit	latinxs
latinxgrads	latinxrebels	latinxplotdancestudios	latinxbarbie	latinxplot
latinxatcolumbialaw	latinxpower	latinxpress		latinxmas
latinxgradcap	latinxvote	latinxheritagemonth		latinxwhoyoga
latinxsatcolumbialaw	latinxforblacklives	latinxartist		latinxperience
	latinxempowerment	latinxartists		latinxco
		latinxplotdancestudio		latinxexcellence
		latinxpression		latinxtacy
		latinxwriters		latinxownedbusiness
				latinxspiritweek
				latinxbinary
				latinx16
				latinxplotfitnessstudio
				latinxo
				latinxxx
				latinxtlebarbershop
				latinxindc
				latinxlove
				latinxmagic
				latinxpinup
				latinxplosionar
				latinxplosion