ANDRÉS CASTRO SAMAYOA

By Pearl Lo

Andrés Castro Samayoa exudes a quiet, dignified air that accentuates his passion for working with under-resourced populations. He is interested in how Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) can serve as points of departures for what we, as higher education professionals, can learn to implement in our own institutions. Andrés strongly believes that there is so much to be learned about MSIs in the higher education landscape and has centered his research on fostering more equitable and identity-inclusive environments for students from under-resourced populations.

Andrés knew early on that he was interested in serving under-resourced populations. As an undergraduate at Harvard University, he studied Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. He worked at their Women's Center before expanding further to a focus of identity-based resource centers on campuses. When Castro Samayoa arrived at the University of Pennsylvania, Marybeth Gasman served as his doctoral advisor. Andrés credits Gasman with engaging his passion for MSIs because she proposed the idea of creating a Center for Minority Serving Institutions at Penn during his first year as a Ph.D. student.

Through the Center, Andrés realized how important it is to have institutions that not only recognize but celebrate different minoritized populations. It is so incredibly important to center MSIs because we cannot rely on predominantly White institutions (PWIs), that have a history of benefitting from exploiting Black and brown bodies. MSIs provide a unique landscape where students of color's voices can be heard, met with respect, and shared with an intention to best support them.

Andrés acknowledges some of the challenges that MSIs, and really all institutions of learning, face. While discussing some of his current research, he notes that the language that is meant to serve certain populations can actually do a disservice to these students. For example, he references Hispanic students and how they are constantly referred to as "high risk." By labeling these students as people that need to be fixed through programming or advising, the onus is placed on the student when they do not "succeed" based on standardized measures of success. Instead, Andrés suggests that institutions should be conscious of how they are lacking the resources to truly serve these students, which emphasizes a greater systemic issue at hand.

Castro Samayoa adds that a broader challenge relates to MSI funding or lack thereof. He gives the example of job cuts of people within administration at the U.S. Department of Education and how this delays the support for MSIs. Possibly because of this lack of funding, MSIs are not centered in the country as institutions that are "prestigious" in scholarship. Andrés notes that there is a disconnect in the thinking surrounding MSIs because their outcomes are dismissed in the traditional metrics of success, when their metrics are clearly not on an equal playing field. These challenges are clear and evident, but Andrés is steadfast in his belief that MSIs have the largest potential for growth and benefitting under-resourced populations.

While MSIs are shown to increase upward social mobility for students of color, Andrés is careful to note that the benefits of attending MSIs are not just financial. MSIs are unique in their ability to support under-resourced students by sustaining a culture that is reflective of students' identities. Feeling as though one belongs or is validated seems like it should be a given at all institutions. However, this is not the case for many students of color at PWIs. Andrés explains that students at MSIs like Paul Quinn College are so successful because they "don't need to justify themselves or their existence and that's what

[he] refers to as culturally-sustaining practices within these institutions." MSIs have the ability to increase racial pride and awareness and affect how students perceive themselves. Succinctly, Castro Samayoa affirms that MSIs cultivate spaces for students who can finally experience a sense of belonging in a non-toxic environment for racially minoritized students.

Andrés shared very important factors on why MSIs are essential, but asked how then are we to get students to attend these beneficial institutions? Castro Samayoa has an interesting view and believes that the students who want to attend these institutions are already present. However, they face educational, financial, and other systemic barriers that make it increasingly difficult to attend. Andrés emphasizes that again, the onus cannot be placed on the students. Institutions have to recognize that there is a systemic problem in the country that disadvantages some students while prioritizing others. There is no clear-cut solution to this issue, but there needs to be strides in better preparing all students for college and also helping them to develop skills that will promote their ability to thrive once at the institution.

Castro Samayoa produces rigorous research and credits a great deal of this passion to his own personal identity. He believes that it is so important to actively discuss and write about one's history because one should not conform to ideas of empirical objectivity. People are shaped by their daily experiences, which are valid and shape who they are. For Andrés specifically, personal identity is important because he comes from El Salvador where the construction of racial and ethnic categories is very different than in the U.S. Coming to the U.S., he learned that racism is such a powerful and oppressive force. While racism is present in El Salvador, his experience in the U.S. was unique and prompted him to expand his knowledge on it.

Castro Samayoa adds that his intersectionality with being from El Salvador and queer has also affected his research interests. Andrés is interested in examining how individuals who identify with multiple marginalized identities can navigate these identities in racialized environments. Since he is a person who identifies with multiple marginalized communities, Andrés feels a strong desire to serve students who identify similarly.

Lastly, Andrés notes that institutions can always do more to serve their students. While many institutions, faculty, and staff speak on the importance of intersectionality, they have a difficult time enacting these practices. Simply having different resource centers on campus is not enough because it can cause students to feel the need to choose between different identities. But all students have such diverse and varying needs. In his explanation, Andrés again states the importance of not placing the onus on the students. He shares that a way to foster a better sense of belonging for under-resourced students is to create spaces that are intersectional and collaborative where multiple identities are celebrated. Andrés Castro Samayoa notes that there is no one solution to any of the issues in higher education today, but he emphasizes the need for institutions to step up to create supportive, equitable environments for students to thrive.

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.

RUTGERS
Graduate School of Education

Center for
MSIs