

Title: Bridging Cultures: Brazilian Graduate Students Negotiating Identity in U.S. Higher Education

Research Overview

This study explores how Brazilian graduate students at a U.S. predominantly White institution navigate identity across cultural contexts when categorized as Latino. Drawing on interview data, it shows how forms, scholarships, and interactions shape belonging and self-identification. It highlights Brazilians as an understudied subgroup within the broader Latino category.

Purpose of Study

The study addresses a gap in higher education research by focusing on Brazilians as an understudied subgroup within the pan-ethnic label Latino and by examining how self-identification emerges as a negotiated process rather than a fixed status (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, 2012). Recent research on international students also shows that students who enter U.S. universities from other national contexts often encounter racialization in ways that reshape how they understand identity, belonging, and institutional classification (Schut, 2021; Yao et al., 2023). While Brazilian students are often grouped within broader Latin American populations, such institutional recognition does not always align with their own understandings of race, ethnicity, and belonging.

The purpose of the study is twofold. First, it explores how Brazilian graduate students at a PWI describe and make sense of their identities and experiences as Brazilians while navigating externally assigned ethnoracial categories. Second, it examines how academic and social environments influence their self-identification processes, through application forms, scholarship, and campus interactions that make the Latino label visible, institutionally relevant, or strategically useful. In doing so, the paper contributes to research on Latino identity by disaggregating a broad pan-ethnic category and showing how identity negotiation varies within it (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Ferdman & Gallegos, 2012; Renn, 2003). This study argues that Brazilian students are not passive recipients of institutional labels, rather, they interpret, accept, resist, or strategically use those labels depending on context.

Research Methods

This study uses an exploratory phenomenological case study design to investigate identity negotiation among Brazilian graduate students enrolled at a public R1 university in Florida. The bounded case includes eight Brazilian graduate students who had studied at the institution for at least six months. This design is appropriate for examining lived experience within a bounded institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data was collected through online semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included 18 questions organized around four areas: cultural and academic backgrounds, experiences during the university application process, interactions with the Latin American and Caribbean scholarship, and changes in identity perception across their academic journeys.

The analysis followed open coding (Miles et al., 2018) and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015). First-cycle descriptive and in vivo codes were used to identify recurring meanings in the data, followed by more inferential coding to connect those meanings to broader patterns. This analytic strategy supports theme development across qualitative datasets. The analysis produced high-level categories related to identity shifts, racial categorization, and institutional influence. Themes were then connected back to the study's two research questions. To strengthen trustworthiness, the coding system was reviewed in a second analytic round.

Results and Discussion

The findings show that identity negotiation begins early, often through institutional forms. Most participants reported that their first meaningful encounter with the Latino label occurred during the university application process. For some, this classification felt unfamiliar, confusing, or misaligned with how they had understood themselves in Brazil. For others, the term was more readily accepted, either because they already saw Brazil as part of Latin America or because the label proved useful in the U.S. context.

Three broad patterns emerged. First, some participants accepted or pragmatically adopted the Latino label when it offered access to institutional belonging, cultural recognition, or support networks. Second, some participants used the label strategically while still prioritizing a Brazilian identity, showing that identification could be situational rather than permanent. Third, others resisted or felt discomfort with the label, describing it as reductive, homogenizing, or disconnected from Brazilian linguistic and cultural distinctiveness.

Participants who received the scholarship were more likely to describe some degree of reinforcement, reevaluation, or negotiation of a Latino identity, even when that shift remained

partial or context dependent. This suggests that institutional mechanisms do not merely recognize identity; they can actively shape how identity is performed and interpreted within the university. At the same time, participants also described tensions produced by these systems, including linguistic misunderstandings, cultural homogenization, label discomfort, and a sense of invisibility when Brazilians were treated as indistinguishable from Spanish-speaking groups.

Overall, the study argues that Brazilian graduate students are not passive recipients of institutional labels. They actively negotiate identity across national, cultural, and institutional boundaries. The paper contributes to research on international students, identity, and higher education by showing that cross-cultural mobility can make identity both more visible and more contested, thereby creating spaces for broader belonging along with higher education institutions.

Keywords: Brazilian graduate students; identity negotiation; Latino label; higher education; cross-cultural belonging

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