



## Identity, Gender, and Politics: Creating Belonging for Hispanic Women in Literature and Other Courses

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To assess the level of belonging that Hispanic women students experienced in a post-pandemic environment during their enrollment in a college literature class and other related courses with readings connected to the topic of gender and the associated politics, the authors created a mixed-methods study using survey and short-answer, question instruments. Participants comprised 74 Hispanic women, college students, with a median age of 20 years. The authors formulated their survey based upon the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire, Pandemic-related Political Identities Scale, Campus Expression Survey, and College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech Survey. They ran paired samples t-tests to report potentially significant differences in the women's view of their enrollment in a literature class and comparable reading and writing-oriented courses both before and afterwards in terms of their academic and personal outcomes. The authors applied a grounded theory approach to code the students' short-answer comments about their attitude toward discussing their identity and the concept of gender in their classes, including any benefits in doing so. As findings, many women reported a growth in their appreciation of reading and speaking about literature, including how their lives and careers were linked to Hispanic readings; ability to sustain an interest in theoretical concepts; and capacity to discuss the fraught topics of gender, race, and the linked politics, including the stereotypes some women faced, while also empathizing with their peers' backgrounds. The study findings also extended to the women's pattern of growth in other reading and writing-oriented courses. Building upon these results, the article offers recommendations regarding how within the post-pandemic period, faculty can continue to conceive of Hispanic women students positively in terms of the capital they bring to academia rather than as through a deficit mindset.

**Keywords:** Hispanic college women students, identity, gender, belonging, controversial discussions, culturally relevant pedagogy, literature classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Loveland (2018), the U.S. Hispanic population has shown the most demographic increase of all races, accounting for half of national population growth. However, despite the simultaneous influx of Hispanic students into academia, especially Hispanic women, their sense of identity and belonging has been little studied until about the last decade. Instead, previous foci concentrated on the experiences of African Americans as a racial minority; nontraditional students; students marginalized by their low socioeconomic status (SES), geography, and prior educational disparities; and women in general. Given the expanding number of Hispanic women entering college, examining the academic and cultural experiences associated with their belonging in the classroom has become an urgent topic for higher education research as the women began advocating for their own needs. Hispanic women students represent an emerging group in academia boasting key strengths, but they often feel unrepresented due to their sex and race and unable to express their opinions. These women's exclusion is an obstacle to establishing equity and inclusion in U.S. classrooms to which researchers such as Anzaldúa (1987) drew attention about two decades prior more broadly. For Anzaldúa (1987), U.S. Hispanics represent Borderland dwellers who are both outsiders and insiders but who, according to Bost (2008), may go unheard because of their location in the middle. In Shapiro's U.S. study (2020), the feelings of schism and nonbelonging that some Hispanic women experience, even at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), leads them to feel disconnected and voiceless, with this context of concern for the current authors' study of Hispanic women enrolled in a literature class at a HSI. According to Murphy and others (2020), U.S. college students lacking belonging may avoid participating in valuable class conversations connected to their identities, including their sex and race; feel isolated from teachers and peers; do poorly in their courses; or not persist at all, with these academic and social consequences being of relevance for the current study of Hispanic women in a literature class and other reading and writing-based courses and their own inclusion.

In Sims and colleagues' (2020) study dedicated to U.S. Hispanic, women, college students' possible roadblocks to higher education success, the obstacles that many faced included financial, time-related, language, social, and psychological ones, with these being potential roadblocks of concern for Hispanic women at the current study's institution who might leave if they did not believe they belonged. Notably, Hispanic women are more likely than their peers to be family caretakers and additional income earners, responsibilities curtailing their time and availability but possibly stereotyping them as less involved students. As a further conflict for some U.S. Hispanic students overall, the political policies and realities surrounding immigration, deportation, and racial profiling can hamper their ability to finish their degree and influence their sense of acceptance and campus identity. Building upon these barriers impacting some U.S. Hispanic women's feeling of inclusion, Liou and colleagues (2023) also found that existing stereotypes attached to some Hispanic women's perceived circumstances damaged their views of their capacity to attend higher education, engage in debates, and thrive. Likewise, more U.S. Hispanic students experience mental health issues, such as depression, which can diminish their belonging and ability to express themselves to faculty and classmates similarly as another quandary for some Hispanic women in

feeling shunned in academia. Finally, as a further impediment for some Hispanic women college students, Lorenzo-Blanco and colleagues (2024) found that during the pandemic and its aftermath, many U.S. women, including Hispanics, experienced negative changes linked to the factors of education, death and loss, health, relationships, and finances, as could have affected some students at the current study's university also in influencing their sense of belonging and attitude toward discussing such contexts in terms of their identity and gender in a literature class featuring conversations about gender and politics.

As Loveland (2018) has identified, today in the U.S., more Hispanics are entering college than ever before but may not necessarily be succeeding, with higher drop rates than Caucasians, and a growing number of Hispanic women facing various impediments to their educational success and campus comfort level, including, as a matter of concern for the current study, in communicating about their backgrounds and joining class debates about controversial issues such as gender and race. To address the objectives of promoting student belonging and the freedom to participate in classroom dialogues about topics of post-pandemic interest, including gender, faculty must formulate inclusive curricula and establish welcoming classroom environments encouraging Hispanic women to share their identities and voices, including in addressing cultural and gendered stereotypes. In terms of novelty, the current study seeks to provide insight into the problem of some Hispanic women students' feeling of academic exclusion by exploring their relationships to reading cultural texts of possible relevance to themselves and participating in class conversations about multidimensional ideas, including gender. The authors investigate curricular options that literature faculty and others teaching reading and discussion-based classes can apply in supporting Hispanic women students' belonging and involvement in difficult dialogues, including about gender, related to their own lives.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Recognizing Students' Capital and Discussing Controversial Topics**

Romero (2005) found that in entering academia, U.S. Hispanic women bring various sources of capital, including the capacity for recognizing their race/ethnicity as a source of empowerment; ability to resist or reconceive of negative notions of Hispanics diminishing them; ability to navigate diverse social institutions such as higher education; capacity to form family and friend networks that can support them in college; and potential for formulating academic goals acting as motivators. Although delineating such strengths is vital for considering Hispanic women's persistence and larger academic outcomes, of concern, researchers must also examine the matter of whether Hispanic women experience a sense of belonging in their literature and other reading and writing-based classrooms more particularly, as well as whether they feel comfortable engaging in political discussions related to texts about gender and race. Indeed, most existing research focuses either on primary and secondary or college students' belonging in education overall and their class participation rates across the disciplines generally, as well as calling attention to the need for student equity across marginalized races and for women.

As obstacles, many Hispanic college women face stereotypes and historical and ongoing racial, sexual, and class discrimination that can impede their academic success by diminishing their sense of value and silencing their voices. According to Medina and Posadas (2012), who reported national data showing Hispanic students' continued marginalization, even some students enrolled at HSIs identified believing that they could not express themselves and their culture by joining the classes, clubs, or activities geared toward them. Additionally, in a U.S. Pew Research survey (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024) spanning the general population, including college students, within the preceding year, some Hispanic women aged 18 to 29 reported being harassed and discriminated against based on their perceived intelligence (50%) and appearance (42%), with 43% also feeling afraid for their safety. In continuing to portray the problem of U.S. Hispanic women's educational participation barriers, Romero (2005) contends that because Hispanic culture values community, family, and a respect for others, some Hispanic students feel pressured to maintain a sense of harmony and avoid conflict as a matter of course, a status possibly relevant to the current study causing some women to feel less inclined to enter into dialogues. Comparatively, linking the issues of academic exclusion and the fear of participating in curricular debates based on identity, studies such as that of Mohammadi and Izadpanah's (2019) in Iran have also examined students' attitude toward broaching difficult dialogues, with the finding that many wished to share their backgrounds and worldviews but encountered hinderances in doing so, including cultural stereotypes, misunderstandings, and the belief that they must speak for their community instead of themselves. Overall, as a rationale for many students' reticence in the face of class exchanges, in a study of U.S. college students' interaction with contentious subject matter, Aronson and Laughter (2016) discovered that some students, including Hispanic women, who felt marginalized or rejected after telling their stories or providing their opinions previously, grew self-censoring and silent in their present classrooms.

A further hurdle for some Hispanic women in feeling validated in the classroom is their lack of wider representation in reading texts, including those assigned by their literature and other reading and writing-oriented classes. Indeed, many U.S. popular books do not depict Hispanic culture broadly or even at all, a context barring some students from reading them in the pursuit of diverse authors or characters serving as role models (see Tager & Shariyf, 2022). Arguably, due to this context as well as others that could be examined with more time, Pew Research (Gelles-Watnick & Perrin, 2021) found that of U.S. adults at large, only 62% of Hispanics read at least one book in the past year, compared to 80% of Caucasians. Separately, in the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts' [NEA] (2022) study, only 56.6% of women of all races read at least one book, with both surveys theoretically pointing at least partially to the dearth of culturally relevant and diverse books for Hispanic women. Significantly, in terms of some U.S. Hispanic women feeling defined by traditional gender and racial roles in various settings, including in the availability of reading texts, another Pew Research (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024) survey reported that many Hispanic women between the ages of 18 to 29 continue to feel pressured to take charge of the cooking and cleaning (77%), marry and have children (67%), attain a successful career (66%), be affable (52%), live

nearby to family (35%), and financially support family (24%) as obstacles to the women's free expression.

According to Jones and Arnold (2024), who implemented the *Campus Expression Survey* (CES), besides potentially lacking representation in literature and other venues, as an additional conflict for some Hispanic women students, up to almost half of U.S. college students more generally are reluctant to enter conversations about politics (45%), gender (29%), and race/ethnicity (24%), even when they desire to do so and would appreciate hearing others' views, due to the former's fear of instructor and peer backlash. In fact, Jones and others' (2024) related study discovered that 96% of U.S. college students who were reticent about tackling multi-dimensional ideas were also afraid of suffering sanctions for doing so, while 13% had been sanctioned already. These figures indicate the predicament of some students feeling barred from entering into academic dialogues as one in need of addressing, balanced with that of free speech. Even though many students wish to express themselves more generally, nevertheless, the Knight Foundation's (2024) survey of U.S. Hispanic college students specifically showed that 16% felt threatened by a recent comment someone made on campus about the former's race/ethnicity. Altogether, in the U.S. Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression's (2024) survey about covering oppositionary topics, 41% of Hispanic students reported that conversing about "gender rights" remained complicated, while an equal number believed that talking about "racial inequality" was uncomfortable. Meanwhile, in comparing women versus men, in a study of Greek college students, Papadima (2021) determined that the women themselves were also less likely to enjoy heated debates than the men as another potential factor contributing to the current study's Hispanic women's possible discomfort with contentious dialogues that should be addressed in promoting their class involvement. However, in Jones and Arnold's U.S. study (2024), most students noted that their comfort in broaching provocative topics, such as gender, did not improve significantly even after multiple years of college enrollment, progressing from freshman to senior status, with these studies indicating the difficulty of generating fruitful debates.

### **Outlining Faculty Curricular Approaches to Promote Student Belonging**

Given the barriers to productive class dialogues, including some Hispanic women students' reticence or inability to share their identities through such conversations due to obstacles stemming from their cultural traditions, the stereotypes of racial minorities and women, and a trepidation of professors' and peers' negative reactions more generally, there is an increasing need to address these issues through faculty-driven interventions. As objectives, academia should be a place where Hispanic women students can read texts depicting their culture positively, think critically, and debate their ideas safely, leading to the outcomes of inquiry, knowledge production, reflection, and innovation (see Kachchhap & Horo, 2021; Liou et al., 2023). By gaining professional development and becoming attuned to students' unique needs, faculty in literature and reading and writing-focused classes can seek to structure their classrooms intentionally according to the above objectives, with these being relevant also to the current study where Hispanic women are queried about debates about gender and race and their possible merits.

As the first objective of three, Shapiro (2020) draws attention to the requisite for texts that depict students' varied cultures in promoting equity and representation. For Huber (2015), Hispanic-oriented readings can support U.S. Hispanic women in connecting their backgrounds with the authors' and establishing a sense of cultural pride, such as in foregrounding unique family traditions, holidays, foods, and Catholicism. Regarding the second objective, Aronson and Laughter (2016) indicate that selecting diverse texts can also build students' critical thinking skills and increase their comprehension and reflection, including with social justice issues. Likewise, offering students a choice in writing topics that draw upon their background and interests supports their independence and active learning. Carales (2020), also in the context of the U.S., suggests that faculty who help Hispanic students to converse about their degree expectations can also raise their capacity for achievement and foster their resilience and self-efficacy. Comparably, Murphy and colleagues (2020) discovered that Hispanic students who can draw upon their own experiences, as well as those of others, can conceive of their college struggles as surmountable. As the third objective, Gopalan and Brady (2020) identified that when instructors create strong class community and a space for open debates, racial minority students may benefit by telling their stories and establishing relationships bolstering their sense of camaraderie and empathy. Separately, in an Indonesian study, Muslimin and Abidin (2023) found that college students are mature enough to discuss difficult questions. Meanwhile, Shapiro (2020) advises teachers to prepare students to feel possible discomfort in joining heated conversations about politics even though they can foster a more engaging environment. Lastly, Torino and colleagues (2018) remind faculty to encourage sensitivity and good listening skills in generating empathy as well.

According to Sanchez (2017), HSIs have improved higher education access for Hispanic students recently, yet less research is available about raising the standards of Hispanic women's academic contexts overall (Ayala & Contreras, 2019), especially in assisting them in feeling belonging, sharing their backgrounds, and covering controversial topics, including gender and race, in literature and other reading and writing-oriented classrooms, as is of interest for the current study and would be a novel contribution. Building on the literature reviewed, the authors seek to extend the current conversation by considering these research questions: How do Hispanic women students' identities, level of campus inclusion, literary reading preferences, potential to sustain an interest in theoretical discussions, and view of class debates about gender and the related politics affect their attitude toward broaching gender discourses in a literature class and other related reading and writing-focused courses more specifically? Likewise, what strategies can literature and other teachers of reading and writing-based courses implement during the post-pandemic period in formulating curricula supporting students' expression, class involvement, tackling of gender concepts, critical thinking, and empathy?

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

Having read the literature and aligning with the study's objectives, the authors investigated the Hispanic women's 1) identities, 2) campus belonging and the possible

barriers, 3) literary reading preferences, 4) capacity to sustain an interest in theoretical discussions, and 5) view of class debates about gender and the linked politics in a literature class and related reading and writing courses in how these factors influenced the women's outcomes. Political themes that the literature course broached included aspects of race, class, gender, reproductive issues, career paths, immigration, and the American dream. As part of the research design, the authors constructed their study based upon Hembrough and Mixon's (2024) work concerning racial-minority, college women's building of peer relationships and covering of pandemic-linked, political identities and subject matter, including gender. With Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the authors selected an exploratory case study with a mixed-methods design and a convergent-parallel strategy to procure and analyze the data (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Via an exploratory case study, researchers gain a greater comprehension of a phenomenon by exploring it in more depth, with the study's Hispanic women's attitude toward covering political discourses associated with gender in the literature and other courses being a recent phenomenon. As a model, Jones and Arnold's (2024) study was also exploratory, investigating college students' attitude toward conversing about debatable topics more generally. Utilizing an exploratory case study, the authors chose a mixed-methods approach to benefit from both quantitative and qualitative methods in formulating the findings and examining them in depth (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Within the mixed-method approach, the authors employed a convergent-parallel design to gather the quantitative and qualitative data parallel to each other and evaluate them together in the same stage per variable to formulate aligning conception points (2017).

#### *Materials*

As study instruments, the authors adapted questions from four scales in generating a Likert-scale survey for the study's quantitative component:

##### *Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF; Cattell & Mead, 2008)*

This scale assesses participants' personality factors based on various dimensions. The authors adapted three questions regarding whether people "are good at starting conversations," "spend time understanding views that are very different from [theirs]," and remain "interest[ed]" when a conversation grows "highly theoretical or abstract."

##### *Pandemic-related Political Identities Scale (PPIS; Hembrough & Mixon, 2024)*

This scale measures college students' attitude toward speaking in a writing class and discussing political topics during the pandemic and beyond. The authors adapted 20 questions about students' attitude toward conversing about their academic and life stressors, as well as their personal identities and circumstances tied to their sex, race, income, and geography, within discussion and writing-affiliated courses.

##### *Campus Expression Survey (CES; Heterodox Academy, 2019)*

The authors adapted five questions about college students' reported comfort level in discussing their "honest thoughts, ideas, and questions" about the topics of gender, race/ethnicity, politics, and reproduction in a class environment and whether they were worried about the potential for their instructors and classmates to react negatively.

Moreover, the authors adapted two questions about whether “students should be able to share ideas and ask questions without fear of retaliation, even when those ideas are offensive to some people” and whether “regardless of their point of view, students should all be treated as valued contributors to conversations.” Finally, the authors adapted one question about the importance of the student’s race/ethnicity to their “sense of identity.” Altogether, the authors utilized contexts from six survey questions.

*College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech Survey*; Knight, 2024)

This survey invited students to address the premise that the university was a place for free expression and speech, even if it made others feel unsafe. The authors adapted 10 questions about students’ view of participating in classroom conversations about gender, race/ethnicity, and politics, including based upon their political affiliation.

### Research Sample

Concerning demographics, 74 Hispanic women between the ages of 18 to 41 participated. The median age was 20. Relevant to marital and family status, 97.3% ( $n = 72$ ) were single, and 98.6% ( $n = 73$ ) had no children. The women were employed in settings such as education, marketing, retail, and food and hospitality. Almost 75% ( $n = 55$ ) were Catholic. Additionally, approximately 40% were politically conservative, 40% middle-of-the-road, and 20% liberal. The study featured undergraduates, from freshmen to seniors. Refer to Table 1 for further information about the sample.

Table 1  
Women’s Demographic Characteristics

	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>					
Annual household income	\$0-15,000	6.8%	(5)	\$16,000-30,000	13.5%	(10)	\$31,000-45,000	14.9%	(11)	\$46,000-60,000	32.4%	(24)	\$61,000-76,000+	29.7%	(22)
	Psychological conditions	Depression	32.4%	(24)	Anxiety	37.8%	(28)	PTSD	8.1%	(6)	Sleep	5.4%	(4)	Other(s)	77%
Academic area of study	Biology	5.4%	(4)	Business	33.8%	(25)	Health	25.7%	(19)	Social science	14.9%	(11)	Other	20.3%	(15)

Note.  $N = 74$ . Christian religion includes Catholics.

### Research Location and Place

The study was located in the Southwestern U.S. at a metropolitan, private university where 45% of students have a low SES, and 26% are first-generation. Relevant to the location and place, at the institution, women, racial minority, and low SES students continue to be peripheralized populations facing persistence issues. Participants were enrolled in a required, lower-level, World Literature course. As part of the assignments, they read literary texts used to tackle linked political topics, with the goal of joining their experiences with those of the authors’ or characters’ as having universal value for contemplation. One example is Sandra Cisneros’ story, “Mericans” (1991), which features the narrative of three children who moved to the U.S. but retain characteristics of their Mexican culture, causing others, as well as themselves, to question where they belonged. In the class, the women also discussed their educational and life goals and successes. In promoting belonging, the students had a daily opportunity to interact with their classmates, including through discussion and groupwork.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Having employed a mixed-methods approach, the authors created a survey soliciting quantitative data (numerical) and qualitative data (short-answer comments) as dual collection techniques. The survey offered Likert-scale questions on a continuum from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree,” and correspondingly, the participants also completed linked, short-answer questions offering the opportunity for additional feedback. For the survey’s data collection process, the women participated in an online, anonymized study, with the consent form indicating its IRB-approved protocol and ethical clearance. Students were awarded a small amount of credit for opted participation.

### **Data Validation Techniques**

The authors utilized various data validation techniques. As mentioned in the research design, they selected a mixed-methods approach in generating the study’s findings to produce a dataset with additional detail in analyzing and triangulating the results (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Similarly, Murphy and colleagues’ (2020) referenced study applied a mixed-methods approach in triangulating results to avoid potential threats to internal validity. Relatedly, the study’s authors chose a convergent-parallel design to gather and analyze the data during the same stage to conceptualize how converging data points reflected upon and thus validated one another, especially since the study consisted of a single stage (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using *G-Power* software (Faul et al., 2009), the authors solicited an adequate number of participants ( $N = 74$ ). Additionally, in validating the quantitative data, the authors assessed the survey items’ internal consistency by calculating Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the four research tools (16PF = .72, PPIS = .70, CES = .89, and Knight survey = .95; see Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). All survey tools showed reliable responses within this sample. Proceeding, in generating reliable qualitative data, the authors used a grounded theory approach to code the survey’s short-answer questions independently, compare the results, and discuss existing discrepancies until reaching consensus to enhance interrater reliability (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Finally, applying a grounded approach heightened the study’s validity by producing findings derived directly from the participants’ own language instead of relying on the authors’ preconceived ideas.

### **Data Analysis**

As referenced in the research design, the authors selected a mixed-methods approach and applied a convergent-parallel design to gather and evaluate the quantitative and qualitative data in the same stage to render mutually reinforcing data points (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As a method of quantitative analysis, the authors used SPSS 28 software to analyze the survey’s Likert-scale items and identify potential differences through paired samples *t*-tests, with participants’ experiences and outcomes both before and after enrolling in the literature course and similar classes measured through a paired samples *t*-test analysis. Simultaneously, as a qualitative practice, the authors coded the survey’s short-answer comments through a grounded approach by establishing analytical codes and categories from the data (2017) with NVivo 14 software. The coded comments identified students’ attitudes toward reading literature and broaching gender and linked political topics in their literature and related classes,

along with any benefits that they believed they gained in doing so. Relatedly, in exploring a group of college students' degree of willingness to address controversial subjects on campus, Jones and Arnold's (2024) study applied a descriptive analysis to produce patterns about who, what, where, when, and to what extent a phenomenon occurred. Likewise, the authors' current study employed this method in formulating codes about participants' thoughts and actions. As a first step, the authors employed descriptive content coding to organize students' comments by their inductive meanings and capture what students stated expressly in line with the study's primary factors, including identity and potential belonging in the classroom, reading preferences, attitude toward discussing gender and politics, and any perceived learning outcomes (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In the second step, the authors applied thematic coding to note larger themes and define more abstract concepts established among the descriptive groupings, which could be linked. By conducting the two different types of analyses, quantitative and qualitative, with a convergent parallel design (2017), the authors compared the different data strands alongside one another and triangulated them for points of convergence, divergence, and complementarity.

## **FINDINGS**

To create findings, the study considered three foci related to the Hispanic women's potential growth in their literature class and other reading and writing-oriented courses within a post-pandemic environment: the women's 1) reading habits across varied genres and potential for the study's literary texts to present them with role models; 2) level of appreciation for literature, desire and ability to speak about it and other texts, including how their lives might be connected to them, and connected ability to sustain an interest in theoretical or abstract discussions; and 3) capacity to discuss the topics of gender, race, and the associated politics, including the stereotypes some women faced, despite their professors' or classmates' potential disapproval. As part of the third focus, the authors also considered the women's ability to empathize with their peers' views and backgrounds, and capacity to comprehend how gender discourses were tied to present events, were a necessary point of focus in their discipline, and had influenced them and their experiences more largely. Likewise, the study considered two linked areas of interest concerning the women's outcomes upon taking the literature class solely: 1) the possible development of their greater endurance in looking at life's potential challenges after being exposed to those of other students and/or the literary authors or characters and 2) potentially greater confidence in telling valuable stories about themselves and their families they had not shared before in past courses, including those related to their feeling of exclusion because of their gender in diverse circumstances.

To produce the first set of findings, the study gauged the women's attitude toward reading multiple genres, including the current literature course's Hispanic literary texts and the potential value they offered for the students in portraying role models. The "types of reading content or genres" that the women "enjoy[ed]" most in their "daily life" prior to the study are indicated in Table 2, with fiction being foremost. As part of the findings, the study explored similarly the women's attitude toward reading various literary texts assigned in the literature course, including whether they "depict[ed]" their

“lives in any way,” such as by “presenting role models” for them. Of respondents, 60.8% ( $n = 45$ ) expressed that upon finishing the study’s literature class that they “like[d] to read literature,” including at least some selections, and that the readings “reflected” them and their “lives” in providing “role models” (refer to the study’s “Research Location and Place” for a Hispanic literary text featured). Comparatively, as a lesser number, only 21.7% ( $n = 25$ ) agreed that “the literature” they “read in former literature classes in college and high school reflected” them and their “life,” regardless of the content or genre.

Table 2  
Reading Content or Genres that Participants Reported Enjoying Reading

Reading content/genres	%	$n$
Fiction	51.1%	(23)
History	44.4%	(20)
Nonfiction	40%	(18)
Religious Texts	35.6%	(16)
Biography	31.1%	(14)
Fantasy	22.2%	(10)
Comics/Graphic Novels	8.9%	(4)

Note.  $N = 74$

For the second grouped findings, the study explored the women’s attitude toward speaking and sharing their ideas in a literature course and other classes with a reading and writing element both before and after enrolling in the study, as well as the students’ potentially connected ability to remain interested in theoretical or abstract discussions throughout, arguably developing greater critical thinking skills. Specifically, the women were asked whether “before taking their current literature class, [they] liked to speak about [their] ideas in a literature class and other classes with a reading and writing component,” as well as whether they “liked to” after enrolling in the current literature class, with the students displaying a gain in both their literature and other courses through study participation. Besides indicating whether the women liked talking in a literature or related class, they also responded to questions about their “ability to sustain interest in theoretical or abstract discussions” linked to a literature or related course’s assigned readings, thus expectedly building their critical thinking abilities over time. For this latter factor, the women demonstrated a gain in both their literature and related courses with study participation. See Table 3 for the factors of students’ view of speaking in a literature or other reading and writing-based class before both and after the current literature course, as well as their attitude toward engaging in prolonged theoretical or abstract conversations. Connected to the women’s approach toward speaking in the classes, approximately a third also self-reported suffering from depression and anxiety, disorders that may have influenced their class discussion levels negatively (see Sims et al., 2020).

Table 3  
Women's Attitude toward Speaking in Class about their Ideas and Sustaining an Interest in Theoretical/Abstract Discussions before and after the Study's Literature Course

Factor	Before Lit. Course	After Lit. Course	Paired Samples <i>t</i> -Test/Increase
Liked to speak (lit. class)	23.6% ( <i>n</i> = 17); <i>M</i> = 2.71, <i>SD</i> = 1.25	31.0% ( <i>n</i> = 22); <i>M</i> = 3.01, <i>SD</i> = 1.24	<i>t</i> (72) = -2.87, <i>p</i> = .01, 95% CI [-0.57, -0.09]
Liked to speak (other class)	23.6% ( <i>n</i> = 17)	31.9% ( <i>n</i> = 23)	not statistically significant
Sustained interest in abstract discussions (lit. class)	34.7% ( <i>n</i> = 25); <i>M</i> = 2.10, <i>SD</i> = 1.21	63.9% ( <i>n</i> = 46); <i>M</i> = 2.79, <i>SD</i> = 1.11	<i>t</i> (71) = -5.56, <i>p</i> < .001, 95% CI [0.40, 0.91]
Sustained interest in abstract discussions (other class)	34.7% ( <i>n</i> = 25); <i>M</i> = 2.12, <i>SD</i> = 1.20	58.6% ( <i>n</i> = 41); <i>M</i> = 2.77, <i>SD</i> = 1.12	<i>t</i> (69) = -6.13, <i>p</i> < .001, 95% CI [0.49, 1.02]

Note. *N* = 74. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = paired-samples *t* test. Significance values (*p* < .05) indicate statistically significant increases from pre- to post-course factors.

Third, to generate further findings, the study not only assessed the women's proclivity for voicing their opinions in class and retaining an interest in abstract conversations but also gauged their potential willingness to debate about gender topics in their past and present literature and other reading and writing-oriented classes more generally and based specifically upon the potential for their professors' and peers' disapproval. Within this focus, the study also investigated the potential for students in the current literature class to develop a greater capacity for empathizing with others' experiences as well, along with garnering an understanding of how gender discourses were tied to important current events, were a point of emphasis for concepts in their major or discipline, and had influenced them and their experiences more personally. As factors, the students were surveyed as to whether they "felt comfortable discussing gender, including [their] own personal beliefs and/or experiences more generally" and could "empathize with their peers' backgrounds" in both their past and current literature and other classes with a reading and writing component. Coincidentally, the study explored as well whether the women "felt comfortable discussing abortion versus women's reproductive health rights, including [their] own personal beliefs, more generally" and could "empathize with [their] peers' backgrounds." As an additional factor, the women reported their view of "shar[ing] [their] opinions" about the same fraught subjects of "gender, abortion versus women's reproductive health, and racism" both before and after their current literature class "regardless of whether [their] faculty" and separately "whether [their] peers might disapprove." In Table 4, refer to the factors involving the women's comfort in discussing gender topics and their associated level of empathy for others in communicating about these subjects both before and after the study, with an increase for all factors.

Table 4  
Women's Comfort Level in Discussing Gender Topics despite the Potential Disapproval of Faculty/Students and Empathy for Others before and after the Current Literature Course

Topic, Comfort Level, Empathy in Discussing It with Faculty/Peers	Before Lit. Course	After Lit. Course	Paired Samples <i>t</i> -Test/Increase
Gender (lit. class)	28% ( <i>n</i> = 20); <i>M</i> = 3.0, <i>SD</i> = 1.2	37% ( <i>n</i> = 26); <i>M</i> = 4.8, <i>SD</i> = 1.3	<i>t</i> (73) = 2.85, <i>p</i> = .01, 95% <i>CI</i> [.09, .56]
Gender (other class)	28% ( <i>n</i> = 20)	35% ( <i>n</i> = 24)	not statistically significant
Abortion vs. reproductive rights (lit. class)	47% ( <i>n</i> = 35); <i>M</i> = 2.2, <i>SD</i> = 1.4	53% ( <i>n</i> = 38); <i>M</i> = 2.4, <i>SD</i> = 1.4	<i>t</i> (73) = -2.15, <i>p</i> = .03, 95% <i>CI</i> [0.02, 0.08]
Abortion/reproductive rights (other class)	47.9% ( <i>n</i> = 34)	55.1% ( <i>n</i> = 38)	not statistically significant
Gender/abortion vs. reproductive rights/racism, possible faculty disapproval (lit. class)	14.1% ( <i>n</i> = 21); <i>M</i> = 2.88, <i>SD</i> = 1.32	18.1% ( <i>n</i> = 27); <i>M</i> = 3.33, <i>SD</i> = 1.41	<i>t</i> (72) = -3.21, <i>p</i> = .002, 95% <i>CI</i> [-0.61, -0.14]
Gender/abortion vs. reproductive rights/racism, possible faculty disapproval (other class)	14.1% ( <i>n</i> = 21)	18.1% ( <i>n</i> = 27)	not statistically significant
Gender/abortion vs. reproductive rights/racism, possible student disapproval (lit. class)	30.1% ( <i>n</i> = 22); <i>M</i> = 2.99, <i>SD</i> = 1.26	42.5% ( <i>n</i> = 31); <i>M</i> = 3.23, <i>SD</i> = 1.28	<i>t</i> (72) = -2.54, <i>p</i> = .01, 95% <i>CI</i> [-0.53, -0.06]
Gender/abortion vs. reproductive rights/racism, possible student disapproval (other class)	30.1% ( <i>n</i> = 22)	41.7% ( <i>n</i> = 30)	not statistically significant

Note. *N* = 74. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = paired-samples *t* test. Significance values (*p* < .05) indicate statistically significant increases from pre- to post-course factors.

Summarily, as major findings, upon enrolling in the study's literature course within a post-pandemic setting, some women gained a greater appreciation for reading literature, and they learned to think more critically and sustain an interest in abstract concepts; discuss themes of gender, reproduction, and race even when faced with the potential disdain of teachers and classmates; and could empathize with their peers' positions, as well as comprehending more about how gender concepts were tied to current events, were a point of emphasis for their discipline, and had influenced their experiences more largely. As related findings, the women reported two other important academic and personal outcomes in enrolling in the literature course, with no additional feedback solicited about their other classes. These findings investigated the women's potentially increased endurance in examining life's challenges and sharing their identities, stories, and opinions due to the current literature class. As the first outcome, 6.75% (*n* = 5) "developed greater resilience, grit, or endurance in looking at life's challenges due to being exposed to those of other students" and/or "literary authors or characters." Second, 13.5% (*n* = 10) told "valuable stories" about themselves/their families they had "not shared in previous courses." Of the participants responding affirmatively about sharing new stories, some also provided additional information about their narratives' content, which the authors coded to explore further how the women expressed their identities due to engagement in the class. Overall, the accounts included the women's experiences as either children or adults of facing varied gender stereotypes (*n* = 15), being shamed (*n* = 5), and being excluded (*n* = 28) by family, friends, significant others, coaches, teachers, and faculty, and/or bosses due to the women's so-called or conceived

of lack of conformity with prototypical racial, cultural, and gendered roles (see Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024).

## **DISCUSSION**

The study offered three major findings that add to the available literature by providing a context for some Hispanic, college women's post-pandemic growth in a literature class and the benefits it provided: 1) a growth in their reading habits and ability to view the literary texts as displaying author or character role models; 2) larger appreciation of literature, ability to speak about it, including how the women's lives were connected to the texts, and capacity for theoretical or abstract discussions; and 3) increased ability to discuss the fraught topics of gender, race, and the associated politics, including the stereotypes that some women faced, despite the potential disapproval of their professors or peers. Connected to this last finding, the study provided information about the women's potentially greater abilities to empathize with their classmates' views and backgrounds and to comprehend how gender discourses were tied to current events, were a focus for their discipline, and influenced the women and their settings more largely. These outcomes also led to the women's pattern of growth in other reading and writing-based courses. Further, the study produced findings concerning two additional outcomes the women believed they achieved in completing the literature class, namely gaining greater endurance in looking at life's challenges after being exposed to those of other students (see Carales, 2020) and/or literary authors or characters, and expanding their ability of examining their backgrounds and telling stories about them, including the women's instances of exclusion. Finally, this section outlines key pedagogical practices that faculty might adopt in teaching literature classes that might be applied more generally to other reading and writing-oriented courses.

The authors determined that before conducting the study, as a reference point, slightly over half of the women enjoyed reading various genres, including literature, and fiction especially, in their daily lives. In considering the women's reported level of reading involvement connected to literature more particularly, only about one fifth had believed that the previous literature they read portrayed authors or characters who could act as role models for them. Thus, as a mean increase of 39.1 points, the study raised the number of women with an appreciation or greater appreciation of literature by the end, including of at least some of the course's Hispanic texts. To take a more measured look at these findings, however, it remains important to note that although almost two-thirds of women expressed that they "like[d] to read" literature within the study, more work must be done to increase this percentage, as the women's rate of agreement with the enjoyment of literature as a factor nonetheless only equates closely with the national research delineating Hispanics' and women's average reading participation outcomes, which totaled around 60% without any academic intervention necessarily having occurred (see Gelles-Watnick & Perrin, 2021; NEA, 2022). Proceeding, some women in the current study remained unenthusiastic about reading literature at the course's end, yet they still reaped the expected benefit of exploring culturally positive examples of Hispanic texts for the class. Meanwhile, other women, in their author-coded, associated survey comments, did see the class readings as valuable in presenting them with similarities to their own experiences of facing discrimination, being shamed, or being

excluded based upon traditional gender roles that sometimes maligned the women's *appearance, intelligence, lifestyle choices, selected geographical location or residency, and financial status*. Particularly, the women's examples of being stereotyped as a negative experience extends that of Knight's (2024) study, where some Hispanic college women felt threatened by comments about their sex and race/ethnicity, and Noe-Bustamante and colleagues' (2024) study, where Hispanic women faced discrimination based on their lifestyle, location, and finances. Altogether, the current study's first set of reading-linked outcomes outlines the women's increased literary reading patterns upon enrolling in a literature course featuring culturally relevant Hispanic texts and provides a basis for Tager and Rosaz Shariyf's (2022) larger claim that many racial minority college students are distanced from reading practices by the lack of ethnic/racial diversity in books as an area needing addressing.

Proceeding, as a second finding, the study also shone light on the women's greater appreciation of literature, wish and capacity to talk about it, including how their lives were connected to the literature course's texts, and linked ability to sustain an interest in theoretical or abstract discussions, thus building their critical thinking. Concerning the women's attitude about sharing their ideas in literature or connected courses before enrolling in the study, almost a fourth reported that they "liked to speak" about their "ideas." However, with class's end, this figure grew to nearly a third, with the women's difference in attitude showing a statistically significant gain (see Table 3). Nonetheless, for the approximate third of students who separately self-reported suffering from depression and anxiety, such factors may also have influenced their participation level and style more negatively, including in arguably lessening their sense of belonging and self-expression (see Sims et al., 2020), with the study providing new information about how mental health issues can affect Hispanic women college students enrolled in literature or reading and writing-oriented courses particularly. Furthermore, as extends a conversation in the research about other barriers to Hispanic women's speaking in their literature or related classes, some women in the study may also have felt less apt to talk in class due to the social structures associated with their sex, a factor that Papadima (2021) found contributed to many college women's greater reserve in presenting their ideas compared to men's. Moreover, as extends Romero's (2005) study about Hispanic cultural practices more generally by referencing a population of women enrolled in a literature class specifically, some women in the current study could also have felt pressured to conceal information about themselves, including about their cultural background, in valuing community over their individual and potentially different views. Yet, with a measured if growing number of women in the study choosing to convey their opinions while listening to others' because of the literature course's design, some women also gained greater critical thinking skills as another valuable outcome. Specifically, upon the literature class's termination, almost two-thirds agreed that they had kept their "interest in class discussions" even when "the ideas became highly theoretical or abstract" (see Cattell & Mead, 2008), with a statistically significant gain of 29.2 percentage points in the literature class and only slightly less in other courses (see Table 3). Altogether, this second finding presents an example of Hispanic women students' enrollment in a literature class and related courses where they could share their opinions, gain greater interest in discussions, and build critical thinking as a

method Aronson and Laughter (2016) espouse in establishing the benefits of a culturally relevant pedagogy.

As a third set of findings demarcating some students' positive outcomes in enrolling in the literature class and related courses, some women also cited their new or increased willingness to join dialogues about gender more specifically, including despite the possible disapproval of professors and peers. Likewise, the women saw an increase in their capacity to empathize with others' experiences during such debates. By the literature class's end, almost 40% identified they felt "comfortable" discussing gender-affiliated topics, including their "own personal beliefs and/or experiences more generally," and could also "empathize with their peers' backgrounds," with a gain of 8.5 percentage points for the literature course and a similar one for others (see Table 4). Additionally, as another part of gender conversations, over half of the women affirmed their "comfort" in covering "abortion versus women's reproductive health rights, including [their] own personal beliefs, more generally," and linked ability to "empathize with [their] peers' backgrounds," with an increase of 5.6 percentage points in the literature class and a like increase in other courses (see Table 4). As other elements coupled with the women's decision concerning whether to participate in gender dialogues in their literature or comparable courses, a small number also overcame their worry about their professors' and/or peers' possible disapproval of them, with more women opting to voice their thoughts than previously. Specifically, by the literature class's culmination, almost a fifth of women purported that they could "share [their] opinions" about "gender, abortion versus women's reproductive health, and racism" even if their faculty "disapprove[d]," with a gain of four percentage points in both the literature course and comparable classes. Moreover, as a larger gain, more than 40% of women also identified they could "share [their] opinions" about "gender, abortion versus women's reproductive health, and racism" even if their classmates disapproved, with a 12.4 percentage point increase in the literature course and a comparable number in related classes (see Table 4).

Significantly, the study's third finding indicating some Hispanic women's growing willingness to tackle contentious concepts linked to gender and their connected identities shines light on the significant number of students who increased their comfort in doing so and extends previous research about the requisite to support students in debating difficult ideas by offering an example of women studying gender-related texts in a literature course as a curricular design. Moreover, the study's delineation of some women's remaining reticence to tackle contentious subject matter due to their faculty's and peers' possible disdain contextualizes Jones and others' (2024) broader findings wherein students reluctant to pursue fraught discussions also cited a fear of sanctions, and it provides a specific example for Aronson and Laughter's (2016) study wherein students grew silent once their peers responded negatively to the former's sentiments. On the same note, the current study extends that of Mohammadi and Izadpanah (2019), who discovered that many students wished to share their backgrounds but were prevented from acting after being met with stereotypes and misunderstandings, by giving additional insight in turn about how some Hispanic women students were reticent to speak about debatable topics such as gender. Even though some Hispanic women continued to avoid gender-associated conversations in the literature class and

similar courses to avoid upsetting professors or classmates, many women gained a higher capacity to engage in such dialogues despite the consequences. Overall, this third finding extends that of Jones and Arnold's (2024) study wherein almost a third of college students feared discussing gender due to possible negative instructor and peer retribution by its demonstrating how Hispanic women students may be both more or less willing to converse about gender dependent on the audience and class design.

Overall, the three combined findings demonstrate that many women desired to read and converse about connections between gender-linked discourses and their backgrounds in their literature class and connected courses, even if their identities and loyalties may have remained conflicted due to their positioning between multiple cultures (see Anzaldúa, 1987) and the stereotypes they faced (see Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024). Of women who believed they benefited from the literature class, their additionally expressed academic outcomes also extend those of the larger literature by providing two further associated results that some students perceived that they had achieved: 1) having an increased capacity to develop resilience, grit, or endurance in looking at life's challenges after being exposed to those of other students and/or literary authors/characters and 2) gaining a greater ability to start conversations about controversial ideas (see Cattell & Mead, 2008; Muslimin & Abidin, 2023), particularly gender and race, in order to move past stereotypes in establishing a sense of social justice and cultural pride (see Huber, 2015; Shapiro, 2020). Drawing on these results, the authors call on faculty of literature and related reading and writing-focused courses to establish pedagogical best practices during the post-pandemic period that underscore the aspect of student belonging by interacting meaningfully with their marginalized students, including Hispanic women; exploring discussions of students' borderlands as contradictory but powerful places; and generating assignments that cover difficult political subject matter connected to the students' settings (see Murphy et al., 2020). Briefly, the authors recommend the following culturally relevant assignments and practices to support students in reading Hispanic literature or texts and joining in dialogues about gender and the associated political topics in bolstering their engagement, motivation, and deeper learning:

- 1) In designing an inclusive curriculum, teachers should select texts representing Hispanic writers from diverse places including Latin American, the Caribbean, and U.S. Hispanic communities; socioeconomic settings; and eras. Faculty can also partner with Hispanic cultural organizations or invite authors to share their work with the class. These approaches offer students variety, as well as the opportunity to connect with real writers.
- 2) Instructors should let students choose selected writing topics and link the literature they read to modern and cultural events that students might identify from their backgrounds. This method supports their agency and indicates their ideas are valuable.
- 3) Faculty can build classroom community by asking students to introduce themselves on the first day by describing an important song or book for them tied to the course themes.

- 4) Teachers and students can co-author discussion rules that focus on showing respect, listening, and encouraging diverse views. Additionally, by using breakout groups, faculty can help students to collaborate and create valuable peer relationships in a lower-pressure environment.
- 5) Faculty can encourage students to link the course's reading themes to their own lives, families, and cultural experiences, thus validating their identities. Teachers can also honor the use of multilingualism or dialects when students write or examine texts in remaining open to how language functions in diverse ways.
- 6) Teachers can assign low-stakes, reflective writing that supports students in responding personally to the readings without worrying about being graded on analysis or grammatical issues.
- 7) Faculty can invite students to share their voices by composing assignments using storytelling; interviews with family or community members; or digital media elements such as personal photos, quotes from Hispanic authors, and other artifacts identifying their heritage that assist them in portraying their cultural ties.
- 8) Importantly, instructors should take care to address social and historical contexts carefully, including those related to historical dictatorships, colonization, migration, and discrimination, in order to treat students with respect and generate space for their potentially emotional responses.
- 9) Teachers can also address power dynamics by covering Hispanic literature's colonial history, the event of language imposition, and Hispanic people's limited representation in publishing.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As findings significant to understanding U.S. Hispanic, college women's sense of post-pandemic belonging in the literature classroom and related courses and their attitude toward discussing gender and the linked politics as a controversial topic, in the urban Southwest, many Hispanic women at a HSI profited from delving into such dialogues in their literature and other courses. Academic and personal benefits the women gained from the literature class's curriculum design included an increased confidence in their discussion skills, growth in their critical thinking, increased empathy for peers, and a larger understanding of how the concepts of gender and racism and the stereotypes surrounding them were connected to current events, their major, and their life. Additionally, as valuable outcomes, many women increased their ability to identify role models in the Hispanic literary texts, tell their own connected stories, and explore or overcome gender roles forced upon them while establishing a sense of cultural pride.

## **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

As a first limitation, the study included participants solely from the U.S. Southwest in an effort to link that population to the literary texts many college students read in that region while a more diverse sample might have been considered otherwise. Moreover, as second limitation, the current study excluded Hispanic college men in examining their own sense of belonging, reading interests, and attitude toward engaging in gender

dialogues only due to the study's need to formulate a specific focus on the similarly complex topics of belonging and identity in a literature class for racially marginalized women.

### RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The study investigates Hispanic women college students' attitude toward broaching gender topics in a literature class and other courses and how this design impacted their outcomes, yet future research could explore this context through additional directions. Significantly, such research remains important, as according to Lopez and others (2018), more than half of U.S. Hispanic people nationally, including some college students, believed that due to recent political policies, it had grown more difficult for them to live in the country, receive an education, and belong, with some college students facing further challenges connected to their language, background, culture, and SES. However, as a countermeasure to focusing on such obstacles, it is also necessary to recognize that Hispanic college students who hold a favorable view of their racial/ethnic background also persist and graduate in higher numbers (Ayala & Contreras, 2019). Thus, as research recommendations, the current study featured U.S. Southwestern participants, but future researchers could examine Hispanic women students in other U.S. regions or countries by comparison in investigating how their culture might differ geographically, socially, and/or culturally. As a further recommendation, although the current study excluded U.S. Hispanic college men in terms of their own sense of belonging, reading interests, and attitude toward gender debates, future studies could also explore differences between men and women in these areas. Largely, in response to the dilemmas that some Hispanic women college students face in being peripheralized because of their sex and race, faculty must continue to search for ways to provide them with an equitable educational setting, including classrooms where they can discuss gender, their identities, and culturally relevant texts in order to garner a sense of belonging and ability to express themselves (see Liou et al., 2023).

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