A Critical Interpretation of the Hispanic-Serving Institution Designation Effects on Institutional Identity

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"Students of color must be viewed from a place of strengh."

"Policymakers have the ability to reallocate capacity–building funds to HSIs."

"HSIs must play an even more critical role."

Introduction

When Hispanic–serving institutions (HSIs) were being conceived, there was a need to recognize the growing presence of Latinx students at a small number of institutions in higher education, especially in the border states of Texas and New Mexico. By the early 1990s, the HSI designation was authorized and recognized by the federal government under the Higher Education Act (Santiago, 2006). Efforts from institutional and state leaders, along with assistance from Congress, allowed the designation to become a reality.

Since its conception, the HSI designation has created a plethora of institution–al effects that necessitates understanding, unpacking, and reimagining. In this piece, I will discuss the institutional impacts of the HSI designation, examine the approaches institutions take to the HSI designation, and outline practices that move the HSI designation to the next level.

Within the past two decades, institutions of higher education designated as HSIs have more than doubled, reaching 409 in 2014 (Santiago, Taylor & Gal–deano, 2016). This unprecedented growth rate has enabled HSIs to be the primary vehicle for Latinx entrance to higher education, accounting for more than 60% (1.9 million) of Latinx students who are enrolled in higher education (Santiago, Taylor & Galdeano, 2016).

Despite graduating a disproportionate number of Latinx students, some scholars have shown that HSIs demonstrate lower completion rates between Latinx students and their peers (Contreras & Contreras, 2015). On the one hand, HSIs have become an essential point of access, often graduating a large percentage of all Latinx students who are enrolled in higher education. Since HSIs already enroll and graduate the bulk of Latinx students, improving these institutions presents an ideal opportunity to advance Latinx completion

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success.

Unpacking the HSI Designation

In 2001, less than 10 years after the HSI designation began, Berta Vigil Laden wrote the article "Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Myths and Realities." She stated in the piece, "Defined by the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, as amended in 1992, HSIs are those 2- and 4-year colleges and universities with 25% or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollments" (Laden, 2006). Clearly, Laden understood the importance of these institutions as they singlehandedly educated half of Latinx students as well as a one-fifth of other historically underserved students.

Unlike historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and tribal colleges, HSIs were not started to specifically serve Latinx students (Santiago, 2006). Fundamentally, the HSI designation is based on an institution's Latinx enrollment. Under the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program — Title V in the U.S. Department of Education's website, HSIs are defined as an institution of higher education that:

(A) is an eligible institution; and(B) has an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Hispanic students at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application (U.S. Department of Education Website)

As defined by the federal government, HSIs are under no obligation to serve Latinx students as a population. This left open the possibility for every institution to define what the HSI designation means for them.

A further complication arose when federal grants began to be awarded to institutions defined as HSIs. In FY 2015, more than $100 million was awarded through the HSI Title V program (IDUES, 2016). Since the funding is intended for capacity-building projects, when HSI grants are awarded to institutions, they can utilize the funds for projects that benefit the entire campus community and are not specifically for serving Latinx students. This dilemma is, therefore, at the center of this discussion. In the research literature, this quandary has evolved around two distinctive terms: Hispanic-enrolling versus Hispanic-serving. In the next section, I will discuss these two terms in relation to the way HSIs approach their federal designation.

The Hispanic-Enrolling Approach

The HSI designation, as the federal government currently defines it, is based purely on the enrollment number of Latinx students at a higher-education institution. Institutions are considered HSIs once they reach the 25 percent threshold, whether they intentionally engage Latinx students or not—and this is precisely the concern. Since HSIs are not federally mandated to serve this constituency, many of them continue operating under a traditional paradigm that centers whiteness.

Leslie Gonzales (2015) challenges institutional leaders to move away from what she says is a "majoritarian form and function that does not present itself as a culturally relevant or friendly

place for underrepresented communities" (p. 32). Since HSIs evolve around whiteness as their modus operandi, they are not able to efficiently serve Latinx communities and other traditionally underserved communities.

Many HSIs, for example, do not deliberately disclose their status on their websites or campuses due to fears of "alienating" or "discriminating" against non–Latinx students. Whites have often used this language of "reverse racism" to reverse the rights harvested by the civil rights movement, especially to limit the impact of affirmative–action policies that have increased the enrollment of students of color and women in higher education (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004).

Notably, affirmative action was attacked under the erroneous idea that access to students of color resulted in the discrimination of white students (Bonilla–Silva, 2017). The Hispanic–enrolling concept, then, can be viewed as a product of whiteness, stemming from institutions that closely resemble the ideals and values of Western white males (Gonzales, 2015). Under the Hispanic–enrolling term, many HSIs treat Latinx students in a transactional manner, often enrolling them without having to serve them.

The rise of Latinx student enrollment has assisted the enrollment of many HSIs, despite the de-cline of white students nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Under these circumstances, many Latinx students entered spaces where they are expected to assimilate or integrate into a campus culture that does not reflect or affirm their cultural background. This one–sided approach intensifies the erasure of difference while hoping the students adapt to the traditional culture of the campus. Drawing from Gloria Anzaldúa, this approach creates an imag-inary "borderland" or "frontera" (Anzaldúa, 1980) in which students are expected to cross over from their communities to higher education spaces that repeatedly accentuate male leadership and whiteness.

The Hispanic–enrolling approach feels even more disingenuous when institutions receive an HSI award but do not serve the intended population. This is reminiscent of what Derrick Bell calls

"interest convergence." In analyzing the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, Bell (1980) wrote, "The interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (p. 523). Within the Hispanic–enrolling approach, it is assumed that Latinx students are better served under the current institutional culture while painting them as neutral spaces. However, since whiteness is at the heart of almost all HSIs, the Hispanic–enrolling approach remunerate whites. This is commonly seen in HSIs where Latinx students are the numerical majority but the administrators, faculty, and professional staff are mostly white. While increasing the representation of Latinxs is not enough to influence student success, representation coupled with practices that intentionally serve Latinx students through a variety of well–resourced avenues can have a positive impact on Latinx success (Garcia, 2012).

The Hispanic–Serving Approach
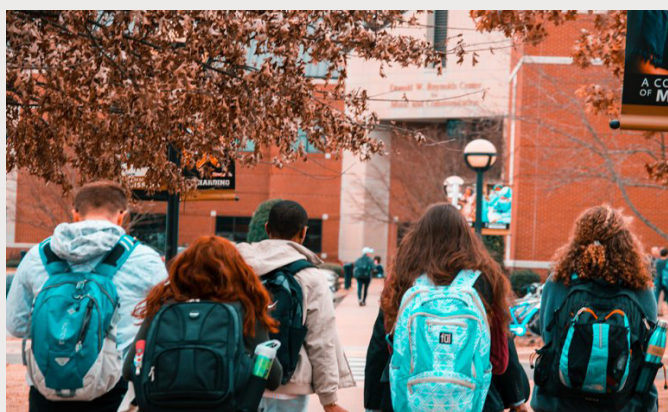
Over the years, some institutional leaders have made the conscious decision to engage the HSI designation intentionally. While the 25 percent Latinx enrollment threshold con–tinues to be the rule, the Hispanic–serving approach takes pride in advancing the inter–ests of Latinx students.

Gina A. Garcia, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, asked, "What does it mean for postsecondary institutions to be Latinx–serving?" She concluded that the Hispanic–serving identity "may be constructed by members at an institution that enrolls the minimum 25% Latinx students, produces an equitable number of legitimized outcomes, and enacts a culture that is educationally enhancing and welcoming" (Garcia, 2017, p. 121–122).

HSIs must be intentional in creating programs and services that advance the outcomes of Latinx students but must also create an atmosphere in which Latinx cultures are validated and celebrated on campus. Institutional leaders are therefore critical as institutional agents to empower students by developing structures and practices that result in the serving of Latinx students (Garcia and Ramirez, 2015). This often includes empowering faculty and staff members who work directly with students. In essence, whiteness must be decentered from these spaces to reflect the composition of the campus community.

When students of color pursue higher education, they must be viewed from a place of strength and as individuals who carry critical knowledge (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, these students must be validated through every step of their higher education journey (Rendon 1994). As change agents, higher education leaders play an increasingly important role in ensuring that the college experience for Latinx students reflects their lived experi–ences, especially for nontraditional, low–income, students of color.

The HSI designation is fluid and malleable and can mean different things from campus to campus (Garcia, 2015). Given the diversity of HSI institutions, leaders must create aware–

ness and new directions to better confront the challenges and resistance to the HSI identi-ty (Martinez, 2015). Due to the federal definition of HSIs, their designation will continue to cause problems for current and emerging HSIs. By decentering whiteness and celebrat

ing differences, HSIs might start to move away from the traditional paradigm by intentional-ly serving Latinx and other historically marginalized students as well as acknowledging their cultures and histories.

Conclusion

As the number of HSIs continue to increase, these institutions will provide an even more sig-nificant role in the success of minoritized populations, especially Latinx students. Therefore, changes in public and institutional policies are required to ensure that HSIs are purposefully serving Latinx students through well-resourced institutions.

In 2012, Deborah A. Santiago wrote the article "Public Policy and Hispanic-Serving Institutions: From Invention to Accountability." She says in the piece, "Higher education is changing because of increased demand for accountability, demographic shifts, and decreased public funding" (Santiago, 2012, 166). Since HSIs are already an underfunded sector in higher education, the continuing decline in funding hampers an institution's ability to serve students effectively. Given that the HSI designation stems from the federal government, these policies must be reexamined to ensure better educational outcomes for Latinx students. As Gina Garcia (2012) reminds us,

Policymakers have the ability to reallocate capacity-building funds to HSIs and to determine policies that will support the advancement of these institutions. Currently, HSIs can apply for capacity-building grants offered by the Department of Education, but these monies need to be continually reallocated and increased to have a long-term impact on HSIs' ability to gradu-ate Latina/o students (p. 265).

Overall, HSIs must play an even more critical role. Leslie Gonzales (2015) would agree and says these institutions must become "spaces where Latina and Latino students and the broader communities from which they come are positioned as thinkers, knowers, problem-solvers, and theorists in their own right" (p. 29). For this to happen, HSIs must move away from their white-centered values and perspectives while challenging the obligation of institutions to the local community. This also means celebrating Latinx cultural differences and seeing them from a place of strength. Furthermore, institutions must begin to engage in conversations that cover what the HSI designation means to them, in all its complexities (Garcia, 2017). Given these realities, Latinx student success is linked to federal, state, and local policies and how institutions ultimately respond to them.

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