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DEFINING “SERVINGNESS” AT HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIs): PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR HSI LEADERS

Gina A. Garcia



ABOUT THE ESSAY

This essay is part of a portfolio of work on race and ethnicity in higher education. *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report* and its accompanying microsite provide a data-informed foundation for those working to close persistent equity gaps by offering a comprehensive review of the educational pathways of today's college students and the educators who serve them.

This essay was made possible through the generous support of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Visit www.equityinhighered.org to learn more about ACE's work on race and ethnicity in higher education and to download the full report containing more than 200 indicators on race and ethnicity. Also available on the site are downloadable figures, detailed data, and other resources on race and ethnicity in higher education.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina A. Garcia is an associate professor in the Department of Administrative and Policy Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, where she teaches master's and doctoral students pursuing degrees in higher education and student affairs.

Her research interests center on issues of equity and diversity within higher education with an emphasis on the organizational culture and identity of Hispanic-Serving Institutions and the retention, success, and identity development of Latinx college students. Garcia's work has been recognized by major organizations and foundations. She was the recipient of a Ford Foundation postdoctoral fellowship in 2016 and a National Academy of Education/Spencer postdoctoral fellowship in 2017. In spring 2018, she received the Early Career Scholar Award from the American Educational Research Association's Hispanic Research Issues SIG, and in fall 2018 she was the recipient of the Association for the Study of Higher Education's Council for Ethnic Participation's Mildred García Award for Exemplary Scholarship (Junior). Notably, she is also the author of *Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Opportunities for Colleges and Universities*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press (2019).

Garcia received her PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles (higher education and organizational change) and her master's degree from the University of Maryland, College Park (college student personnel).



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Washington, DC 20036

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Introduction

The American Council on Education's *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* report provides timely data about the continuing significance of race when it comes to enrollment and completion patterns of racially minoritized groups. Most notably, postsecondary institutions are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse (Espinosa et al. 2019). Latinx¹ students, in particular, are entering the nation's colleges and universities at increasing rates, which also drives the growth in the number of institutions eligible for federal designation as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). HSIs not only represent the largest and fastest-growing share of minority serving institutions (MSIs) (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019), but also enroll 66 percent of all Latinx students in the country (*Excelencia in Education* 2019).

The federal government defines HSIs as nonprofit, degree-granting postsecondary institutions that enroll at least 25 percent undergraduate Latinx students.² By definition, HSIs also enroll a high concentration of low-income students (Santiago, Taylor, and Calderón Galdeano 2016). Yet there is no federal requirement for having a commensurate institutional infrastructure in place for serving these students, whose needs are different from traditional college-goers. As more colleges and universities become HSI-eligible, they must grapple with the best approaches for serving Latinx students in practice—what is referred to as “servingness” in this essay. Servingness is a concept that Garcia, Núñez, and Sansone (2019) argue is a multidimensional and conceptual way to understand what it means to move from simply *enrolling* Latinx students to actually *serving* them.

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Defining Servingness Is Difficult

Defining servingness at HSIs is difficult because the HSI designation is based solely on an institution reaching a specific enrollment threshold of Latinx students, as defined through the Higher Education Act. The policy mostly defines HSIs by student descriptors (Latinx and low income) and provides little federal guidance for not just enrolling but serving the needs of these students. As such, HSIs themselves are most often the ones to define servingness in practice.

Although not all HSIs pursue grants earmarked by federal agencies (such as the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the National Science Foundation), grant-seeking is one way to define servingness. While each federal agency has its own focus and priorities for its grant programs, agencies

- 1 The author prefers the use of the term “Latinx” over “Hispanic” to refer to people who have historic, social, and geographic roots in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Latinx people have a shared identity based on indigenous ancestry, Spanish colonization, and African slavery. The “x” replaces the “o” in an attempt to be gender-inclusive.
- 2 The federal government also requires that HSIs have educational and general expenditures per full-time equivalent student that fall below the average of similar institutions, as calculated by the U.S. Department of Education. (Higher Education Act of 1992, Pub. L. No. 102–325 (1992)).

have similar allowable activities that “expand and enhance capacity, quality, and student achievement” (Santiago, Taylor, and Calderón Galdeano 2016, 4). Beyond these 16 allowable activities, grant programs allow HSIs to define servingness on their own terms, which gives institutions autonomy but makes it difficult to arrive at a mutually agreed upon definition of servingness.

The HSI designation is a racialized designation, meaning it is connected to and evolves from the racial and ethnic identities of the students (Garcia 2019; Garcia and Dwyer 2018). As such, race and ethnicity must be considered a part of servingness, and yet the allowable activities outlined in federal grant programs do not require institutions to utilize these funds specifically to meet the needs of Latinx students. Indeed, research shows that some HSI grant seekers do not explicitly address race and Latinx students in their grant proposals (Vargas and Villa-Palomino 2019). This missed opportunity means that when institutions apply for grant funding or implement programs through a race-neutral lens, they often mask racial inequities in outcomes and experiences of students, hindering servingness for racially minoritized groups (Bensimon 2012; Garcia 2019).

Servingness is also difficult to define because of the extreme diversity within and across HSIs. For one, the Latinx population is incredibly diverse in and of itself, with numerous subpopulations, including Mexican, Mexican American, Chicanx, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Salvadorian, Central American, South American, and other Latinxs (Espinosa et al. 2019).

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HSIs also enroll Black and Asian American students, as well as students who speak a range of languages, have different immigration experiences, come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and are underprepared for college (Contreras, Malcom, and Bensimon 2008; Malcom-Piqueux and Lee 2011; Núñez

and Bowers 2011). In short, the diversity of students within HSIs makes it difficult to serve all of them with one approach, as they have different needs and will have different experiences during their time on campus.

Across-institution differences further challenge the ability to define servingness (Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo 2016). Nearly half of all HSIs are two-year institutions (*Excelencia in Education* 2019). By their very nature, two-year and four-year institutions have different missions and purposes, making it difficult to define servingness across these types. Looking at sector, almost 70 percent of HSIs are public institutions, with the other 30 percent being private (*Excelencia in Education* 2019). These sectors are also different, with varying funding models, governance, and ability to fund initiatives, programs, and financial aid packages for students. These differences within and across institutions and sectors make it imperative for HSIs to serve students in ways appropriate to their context and to their core missions (Garcia et al. 2019).

Servingness Is Multidimensional

Although defining servingness is hard, it is necessary, as HSIs are becoming increasingly significant in not only providing access to Latinxs, but graduating them (Espinosa, Turk, and Taylor 2017) and supporting their upward mobility (Espinosa, Kelchen, and Taylor 2018). Based on a systematic review of HSI research, the Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness at HSIs (Garcia, Núñez, and Sansone 2019) suggests that servingness is multidimensional and can be conceptualized by indicators of serving and structures for serving.

Indicators of Serving

Indicators of serving are things HSI leaders can measure to assess servingness. They include academic outcomes, such as persistence, graduation, transfer, course completion, STEM degree completion (a priority for the federal government), and labor market outcomes. Indicators of serving also include nonacademic outcomes, such as the development of academic self-concept, leadership identity, racial identity, critical consciousness, graduate school aspirations, and civic engagement. Yet, a majority of researchers and practitioners primarily focus on academic outcomes, and rarely consider nonacademic ones (Garcia, Núñez, and Sansone 2019), despite their great importance to the academic success of Latinx students in college (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Rendón Linares and Muñoz 2011). Moreover, HSIs have been intentional and effective at enhancing the very nonacademic outcomes (Cuellar 2014; Garcia and Cuellar 2018) critical for servingness.

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Indicators of servingness also include the experiences of students on campus, including experiences that are validating and positively influence sense of belonging, such as interactions with same racial-ethnic peers and Spanish-speaking peers, faculty, and staff. Experiences may also be participation in mentoring and support programs, as well as cultural signifiers on campus, such as murals by Latinx artists, that enhance a welcoming, affirming environment. While many HSIs do offer positive experiences for the students, research shows that students continue to experience negative, racialized incidents such as discrimination, harassment, and racial microaggressions at HSIs that do not validate their racial-ethnic identities (e.g., Cuellar and Johnson-Ahorlu 2016; Sanchez 2017), which makes the student experience all the more crucial to servingness.

Structures for Serving

Structures for serving are organizational in nature, and often require transformation in order to better serve Latinx students. Such structures include mission and purpose statements; HSI grant activities; decision-making processes; equity-minded leadership practices; policies; curricular and co-curricular structures; institutional advancement activities; compositional diversity of faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate students; and engagement with the community. While many HSIs are intentional in serving Latinx students (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019), others have been slow to change.

For example, in their mission statements, many HSIs tend to focus less on Latinx students and institutional HSI identity, and instead talk more broadly about concepts such as access, diversity, and inclusion (Andrade and Lundberg 2018; Contreras et al. 2008). While these concepts are important, the outward recognition of Latinx students goes a long way in setting the stage for Latinx-focused institutional activities and signals to Latinx communities that their presence matters. Curricular and co-curricular structures are also slow to change, often occurring on a case-by-case basis instead of through broad intentionality across campus structures (e.g., Garcia and Okhidoi 2015; Natividad 2015). Faculty, staff, administrator, and graduate-student diversity across the whole of higher education, including HSIs, is still a challenge and yet is vastly important in serving undergraduate students at HSIs (e.g., Contreras 2018; Garcia and Guzman-Alvarez 2019).

Servingness in Practice

Moving from servingness as a theory to actual practice requires learning with and from HSIs that are currently implementing these practices. *Excelencia* in Education hosts an online resource called the Growing What Works database that HSI leaders can utilize as a resource as they move to servingness.³ The database has

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numerous examples of programs and initiatives that transform structures in order to enhance indicators of serving, including academic and nonacademic outcomes and experiences. Here are a few examples drawn directly from the database and connected to the Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness at HSIs.

- California State University, Dominguez Hills, with the support of an HSI Title V grant, implemented a program called Encuentro Hacia el Exito (Encounter to Excellence), with the goal of increasing retention of Latinxs who enter the university academically underprepared.⁴ Preliminary data show that the first-year retention rates of participants are higher than that of non-participants. With this program, the academic indicator of serving is first-year retention rates, while the structures for serving include the summer program and ongoing support services offered.
- The University of Texas at El Paso's Center for Community Engagement's mission is to engage students and faculty in community-based activities that promote civic engagement and student learning.⁵ Through the center, students participate in community-based internships and service learning projects and have shown increased self-confidence and commitment to social change, as well as overall positive outcomes associated with such leadership development. The Center for Community Engagement is a good example of a structure for serving that is enhancing nonacademic outcomes, including leadership development, self-concept, and critical consciousness.
- CUNY Lehman College offers a Multilingual Journalism and Mass Communication Program that allows students to take courses in ethnic media and marketing as well as English-Spanish bilingual courses in journalistic writing.⁶ The goal of the program is to train journalists to meet the multicultural and multilingual needs of journalism in the United States and beyond. The program has graduated hundreds of students that are able to practice journalism in multiple languages. This program exemplifies a transformation of the structures for serving Latinxs (and other multilingual students) at an HSI. They tout the labor market outcomes as indicators of serving, stressing that graduates are working in major media companies, thus having far reaching influence in their fields.
- Valencia College developed a partnership called DirectConnect between the University of Central Florida (UCF) and four Central Florida colleges: Valencia College, Brevard State College, Lake-Sumter State

3 For more information, please visit <https://www.edexcelencia.org/programs-initiatives/growing-what-works-database>.

4 For more information about this program, please visit <https://www.csudh.edu/title-v-ete>.

5 For more information about this program, please visit <https://www.utep.edu/cce>.

6 For more information about this program, please visit <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/lehman/depts/depts/langlit/mlj/mljstats.html>.

College, and Seminole State College.⁷ The goal of the program is to increase successful transfer and degree completion for Latinx students. Participants in DirectConnect receive preferential admission to UCF, shared advising across campuses, and course offerings that align with UCF. Valencia College has witnessed an increase in the number of Latinxs transferring to UCF as a result of the program. With this program, the academic indicator of serving is successful transfer as enhanced by the DirectConnect program, which includes multiple structures for serving such as academic advising and articulation agreements between institutions.

Recommendations for HSI Leaders

The following are recommendations for HSI leaders that recognize the difficulty of defining and enacting servingness, in practice, yet draw on the most contemporary theories and research.

1. Approach HSI grant opportunities as a vehicle to enable institutional leadership, faculty, and staff to proactively think about what servingness looks like in practice, and fully embrace and outwardly articulate the value of an HSI identity.
2. Define and enact servingness through a race-conscious lens, and seek out a campus environment that is positive and affirming of the race, ethnicity, language, and cultural experiences of Latinx and other minoritized students.
3. Embrace the great diversity within your student body, and seek ways to identify, recognize, and enhance the cultural wealth and knowledge students bring to campus.
4. Prioritize and measure numerous academic and nonacademic outcomes of interest along the spectrum of servingness.
5. Disrupt negative racialized experiences on campus before they happen, using strategies including ongoing training for faculty and staff on how to be anti-racist in policy and practice.
6. Seek to transform all structures that affect the institution's ability to serve students—governance, leadership, curricular and co-curricular offerings, decision-making processes, incentive structures, training and development, assessment and evaluation, and community engagement, to name a few.

⁷ For more information about this program, please visit <https://net1.valenciacollege.edu/future-students/directconnect-to-ucf/connecting-to-other-schools>.

Conclusion

Given the ongoing significance of race and ethnicity in college-going and the growing population of Latinx students, MSIs will remain a critical national resource for providing access to racially minoritized groups. Enrollment, however, is simply not enough when it comes to servingness. Colleges and universities that are eligible and federally designated as HSIs must enhance the racial-ethnic identity of Latinxs while striving to provide equitable experiences and outcomes for these students. This will require a transformative approach. HSI leaders must be up to the task and commit to transforming their institutions to truly serve Latinx students by supporting the faculty, staff, and students and their ability to enact change. Several strong examples of true servingness are already at work on college campuses, but there is more to be done.

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