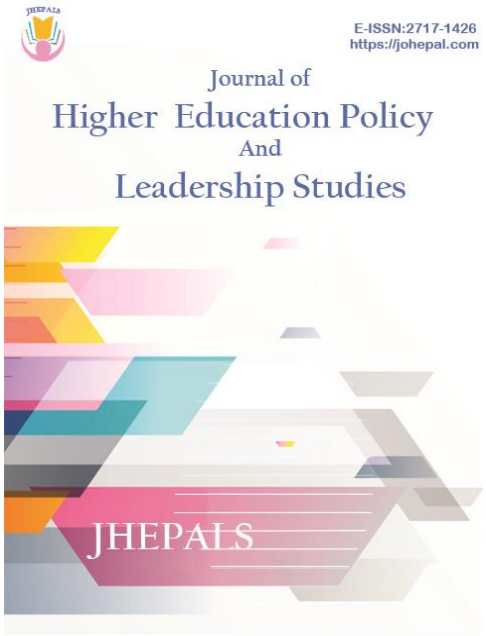
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Role of Servingness-Conscious Agents: Examining Leadership Practices within Hispanic-Serving Institution Grants

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Abstract

Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs) face unique challenges in securing federally designated funds. These funds are integral to supporting the educational success of Latinx and low-income students. Historically, many HSIs were once predominantly White institutions that have inherited racialized structures. These structures often drive agendas of prestige, leading to a competitive struggle for legitimacy and resources. A dilemma has arisen where the competition for grants has shifted the institutional focus away from genuinely serving students towards monetizing the Latinx population for access to funds. This study delves into this complex issue by identifying leaders who actively seek to challenge the notion of monetizing and consciously strive to create equity structures through a servingness framework. These servingness-conscious agents utilize their positions in HSI grant implementation to leverage evidence of meaningful impacts rather than merely satisfying funding requirements. The insights gained from these participants shed light on the importance of being servingness-conscious when crafting programs and policies. Through a servingness-conscious lens, the study offers a nuanced understanding of leadership identity and how leaders navigate the complex tensions between competition for funds and the pursuit of equity.

Keywords: Hispanic-Serving Institutions; Education Leadership; Latinx Student Success; HSI Grants; Higher Education

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Introduction

The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) engaged in extensive advocacy with the U.S. Congress to address the educational gaps and funding disparities that have historically marginalized Latinx students within the higher education landscape (HACU, 2021). Their efforts culminated in the passage of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1992, a legislative milestone that inaugurated the specific designation of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). The designation, as outlined in HEA, facilitated a new stream of federal fund appropriations, deployed through competitive requests for proposals (RFPs) under the guidance of the Department of Education's Title III and Title V, as well as more recent initiatives from agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the Department of Agriculture. The establishment of the Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation signified a significant shift in the landscape of federal educational funding, providing new opportunities for institutions with at least 25% Latinx student enrollment to access previously unavailable resources. However, the shift to opening competitive funding also prompted a series of critical inquiries and debates among Latinx educational scholars (see Cooper et al., 2020; Freeman, 2015; Garcia, 2013, 2016; Reguerin, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). As a growing number of traditionally White institutions attained Hispanic-serving status, researchers and policymakers began to interrogate the very definition of "serving." This led to an intricate discourse that sought to problematize the word "serving," moving it beyond a mere demographic marker representative of Latinx students on campus.

Against this backdrop, a crucial research problem emerges: As the demographic landscape of American higher education shifts and as more institutions achieve HSI status, it becomes imperative to critically assess whether these institutions are merely labeled as HSIs or if they are actively fulfilling the servingness aspect of their designation. This issue is compounded by the growing concern that the increase in competitive funding may inadvertently prioritize institutional gains over the authentic serving of Latinx students' educational needs. The research problem, therefore, centers on exploring the extent to which the HSI designation catalyzes genuine servingness — the active and qualitative support of Latinx students' academic and cultural needs — and how this aligns with or diverges from the original intent of the legislative designation.

Scholars are urging a deeper engagement with the qualitative dimensions of serving and, in extension, servingness. Servingness engages deeply with the foundational tenets of equity, prompts a rigorous contemplation of success metrics, and prioritizes the experiences of minoritized students within the higher education paradigm (Garcia, 2017b; Petrov & Garcia, 2021). The HSI designation then prompts a reevaluation of institutional missions and calls for a comprehensive understanding that aligns demographic realities with an unwavering commitment to educational excellence and inclusivity for Latinx, African American/Black, indigenous, refugees, LGBTQIA, and other minoritized students (Cataño & Gonzalez, 2021; Garcia, 2017a, 2018b, 2020; Gasman et al., 2008; Núñez et al., 2011, 2015).

This study investigates this problem by examining the current practices of HSIs, focusing on identifying whether these institutions are substantively serving their Latinx populations or merely benefiting from the label. As such, the following literature review will critically engage with the theoretical frameworks of servingness, scrutinizing how they are

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applied or misapplied in the context of HSIs. This discussion sets the stage for exploring the tensions between demographic representation, resource competition, and the foundational commitment to educational equity that the HSI designation intends to uphold.

Literature Review

$erving or Serving

The U.S. Department of Education (2021) defines Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) primarily by the metrics of student population characteristics of being at least 25% or greater full-time enrolled Latinxs and 50% Pell Grant eligible. The shift in demographics and the college-going population constitutes a relatively new phenomenon that has led to distinct challenges within Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs). Research has revealed that many HSIs need a cohesive institutional mission and tailored strategies to specifically support the unique needs of Latinx students (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Petrov & Garcia, 2021; Sutton, 2023). A critical aspect identified is that the notion of "$erving" reflects a tendency among institutions and funding agencies to engage in race-evasive practices that omit the core principles embedded in the HSI designation. Such approaches may capitalize on the Latinx population without authentically addressing the cultural, social, and educational layers of Latinx and minoritized student communities (Aguilar-Smith, 2021).

In the multifaceted context of higher education, universities' pursuit of prestige has frequently been linked to their success in securing external grants. Within this framework, some researchers contend that the appropriation of Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) grant funds can become racialized, leading to proposals and activities that inadvertently or intentionally shift the focus away from Latinx students (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Garcia, 2021; Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). Such a practice risks commodifying the minority student demographic, exploiting it as a mere mechanism to redistribute funding broadly rather than concentrating on the unique needs and aspirations of the Latinx community.

Nevertheless, existing grant program proposals have predominantly focused on academic priorities, often yielding only indirect impacts on the targeted student population (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). Examination of proposal abstract submissions reveal practices that, while constructive, such as faculty exchanges, equipment purchase, and technological investment, these focus areas may inadvertently divert attention from centralizing minoritized students (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Garcia, 2017a, 2019, 2020; Núñez et al., 2015). Garcia and Cuellar (2023) further critique that the existing mechanisms for accountability and assessment of HSI policies have operated on fundamentally colorblind and race-neutral premises, thereby obscuring the underlying roles of race and racism within the federal appropriation process.

Institutional Agents

The concept of institutional agents, first brought into educational discourse by Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011) is pivotal within the educational landscape, particularly in the context of Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs). Bensimon et al. (2019, p. 1691) define agents as "individuals who, having experienced or developed an understanding of institutionalized oppressiveness, use their knowledge to support minoritized student success." Institutional agents can be instrumental in challenging prevailing and majoritarian norms on grant fund

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allocation within HSIs. A growing body of research reveals the multifaceted roles that institutional agents—which encompass faculty, staff, students, and administrators—can play in advancing the success of minoritized students. Through an array of intervention strategies, including formal mentorship, constructive faculty interactions, targeted undergraduate research, personalized counseling, and the development of traditional peer support programs, institutional agents can make significant pathways to student success (Bensimon et al., 2019; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2010).

Garcia and Ramirez's (2018) qualitative study at one HSI serves as an illustrative case, whereby interviews with 47 administrators, faculty, and staff unraveled the complexities and opportunities inherent in the institutional approach towards students of color. While members of educational organizations were found to harbor deficit thinking, the role of institutional agents as empowering actors emerged prominently. These agents challenged existing biases and actively contributed to the institution's transformation towards a servingness agenda. They emerged as political advocates, architects of programs that foster engagement in high-impact practices, and conduits for transferring resources to build students' social capital (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018).

Similar findings were echoed by Bensimon et al. (2019), who underscored the role of faculty as agents in bolstering students' self-efficacy and fostering a sense of belonging within disciplinary communities. Despite these positive developments, the dynamics of student-faculty interaction still present challenges. Minoritized students were found to have fewer interactions between faculty and students of color in vital areas like mentorship and research, contingent on the specific college attended (Hurtado, 2011). Further complexity was added by Blake-Beard et al. (2011), who noted a greater inclination among minoritized students to seek faculty mentors of the same gender and race. This preference was often intertwined with an expressed desire for faculty mentors who better understand the student's background and its influence on their academic journey.

Servingness-Conscious Agent

Being an "agent for change" in the educational setting is more than a rhetorical assertion; it involves a complex interplay of academic motivation, student-centered approaches, and cultural sensitivity, especially within the context of Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs). Roksa and Whitley (2017) contribution to this discourse was instructive, as they argued that the elevated academic motivation among minoritized students is intimately connected to faculty's willingness to transcend conventional roles by being student-centered, welcoming open discussions, extending efforts to learn, and demonstrating nuanced cultural sensitivity.

However, such observations are not endpoints but signify a call to action to augment faculty interactions, particularly those of similar cultural or racial backgrounds. This push directs attention toward what can be referred to as "servingness-conscious agents." Servingness-conscious occupies a unique position within the institutional landscape as an institutional agent. Bensimon et al. (2019) and Garcia and Ramirez (2018) articulate HSI institutional agents are not mere functionaries but potent actors capable of furnishing critical support, social capital, and institutional backing directly to students. The discourse around these servingness-conscious agents brings additional intersectant roles to the forefront, as well as questions of power, capital transfer, and how opportunities are passed on to minoritized students. Beyond an institutional agent, servingness-conscious agents

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interrogate the fabric of institutional roles and responsibilities, suggesting that the traditional gatekeeping functions be reflexive, critiqued, and possibly transcended.

Theory of Racialized Organizations

Victor Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations provides a critical framework for understanding how race is a central organizing principle within institutions, affecting their operations, structures, and outcomes. According to Ray (2019), racialized organizations are those in which race shapes the distribution of resources, opportunities, and constraints, creating an embedded system of advantages for some and disadvantages for others. This framework is particularly relevant to the study of higher education institutions, including Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs), as it can help explain how such institutions, which were often historically predominantly White, may continue to perpetuate racialized practices even as their demographics shift. By acknowledging that racialized structures inherited from their past still influence current policies and practices, HSIs can be seen as engaging in a form of organizational behavior that privileges certain groups over others, sometimes inadvertently reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to diminish. Therefore, leaders within these institutions who are conscious of servingness must navigate these embedded racialized structures to foster equity and inclusivity, leveraging grants and resources to genuinely benefit the Latinx and low-income students they aim to serve.

Servingness

Gina Garcia and colleagues' work (Garcia, 2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Garcia & Cuellar, 2023; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Petrov & Garcia, 2021) on "servingness" in the context of Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs) presents a paradigm shift from viewing HSIs merely as institutions with a certain percentage of Latinx enrollment to understanding them as entities actively engaging in practices that serve their students' educational needs and cultural assets. Garcia (2017a) suggests that servingness involves a commitment to transforming institutional practices, policies, and structures to foster success among Latinx students, thereby challenging and reshaping the predominantly White institutional norms. This commitment goes beyond quantitative representation to ensure qualitative and equitable educational experiences for all students. The concept of servingness is crucial for institutional leaders who must introspectively evaluate how their policies are not just serving but also valuing and empowering their Latinx student populations. This involves a critical assessment of resource allocation, curriculum development, and community engagement that aligns with the cultural strengths of Latinx students. Such a servingness-focused approach is instrumental for HSIs to recruit, retain, support, and propel Latinx students toward academic and post-graduation success.

The review of current literature underscores the complex interplay between funding, racialized structures, and the aspiration for servingness within HSIs. Moving from these conceptual discussions, the study shows how HSI leaders embody servingness-conscious practices. The next section presents the research design, examining these leaders' real-world efforts to align their institutions' actions with the goals of equity and inclusivity for Latinx and low-income students.

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Research Methodology

Research Design

A notable gap in existing research is the need for in-depth analysis of narratives from minoritized leaders, particularly how their unique motivations, backgrounds, and training shape a service- and equity-conscious approach in their decision-making. This study sheds light on these aspects, examining how HSI leaders implement decisions that foster equitable and service-oriented environments for Latinx students. It further investigates the potential of minoritized leaders' personal experiences and institutional roles to drive the transformation of organizational identities into an authentic and impactful servingness model.

The study's participant pool primarily consisted of self-identified minoritized leaders, six of whom identified with Latinx backgrounds and two as White. Their insights and experiences contribute to a rich and textured understanding of the complexities and potentials within the HSI landscape, shedding light on paths toward a more authentic and inclusive enactment of the serving mission.

This study focuses on the role of Hispanic-serving Institution (HSI) grant implementation leaders, who are seen as servingness-conscious agents with the potential to promote equitable practices that benefit Latinx students. Rather than examining grant writers, the study looks at HSI program leaders who manage grant activities, employ staff and faculty, operationalize proposals' vision and goals, and make decisions. The research question is as follows:

- What specific factors within the HSI grant leadership role have led to developing servingness approaches among leaders who implement HSI grants?

Researcher's Positionality

As a Latino scholar-practitioner deeply embedded in the landscape of higher education leadership, my work is intricately tied to my identity and experiences within Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Serving as a grant administrator, I navigate the complexities of federal funding mechanisms with a commitment to foster equity and inclusivity in practice. My research on HSIs is not merely academic; it is a reflection of my lived reality, aiming to bridge the gap between policy and practice. This unique positionality enables me to critically assess and contribute to the discourse on servingness, ensuring that our institutions not only bear the title of HSIs but also embody serving in consequential ways.

Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to explore individuals' lived experiences and stories within the context of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Denzin and Lincoln (2018) explain that narrative inquiry allows researchers to delve into the stories of individuals, offering a comprehensive view of their experiences over time within a specific context. By focusing on personal narratives, this approach seeks to illuminate the complex layers of meaning and the rich, contextualized understandings of how HSI grant leaders embody and execute servingness in their professional practices. This method honors the voices and perspectives of the participants, many of whom identified as Latinx, allowing their stories to show the dynamic interplay

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between individual agency and institutional structures (Bell, 2002; Bowen, 2009; Patton, 2015). Through detailed, storied accounts from HSI leaders gathered via in-depth interviews and document analysis, this inquiry aims to trace the narrative threads that weave together personal motivations, institutional missions, and the lived realities of fostering equity and service within higher education.

The constructivist lens acknowledges that individual realities are constructed through an interplay of culture, lived experience, geographical location, and subjective understanding of the world (Patton, 2015). Patton's (2015) assertion that this perspective enables researchers to "capture diverse understandings and multiple realities about people's definitions and experiences of the situation" (p. 201) resonates strongly with the study's objectives.

Site Selection

Through a methodical examination of three distinct school sites, the research offers a comprehensive portrayal of the university climate at both the "field level" concerning grant programs and the "grassroots" level of leadership practice. The comparative analysis of narratives, documents, and institutional-level success data further allows for triangulation, enhancing the understanding of institutional climates and underlying organizational parallels and divergences that either support or undermine the servingness of Latinx students (Bowen, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Saldaña, 2021).

Situated within the context of one large public 4-year institution, one research-intensive (R1) public 4-year institution, and one private non-profit 4-year Hispanic-serving institution in a borderland state adjacent to Mexico, all protected with pseudonyms for confidentiality, this study offers nuanced insights into the leadership identity development of selected HSI grant program leaders. Participating universities were selected deliberately, focusing on institutions that manifest discernible qualities of servingness and have actively embraced a Hispanic-serving identity at an institutional level. This goal-directed sampling encompasses three universities in the western United States, each of which has instituted specific Hispanic-serving qualities and used three sources of data: 1. intentionality to serve students from coding websites, abstracts, and reports, 2. graduation and retention rates greater than the national average for Latinx students, 3. presence of HSI investments, such as director positions and dedicated Latinx or HSI office spaces. All three institutions had administrative or director management positions focusing explicitly on an HSI mission.

Table 1.
6-year graduation rates at Hispanic-serving Institutions sites compared to the national average

	Latinx 6-year Graduation	White 6-year Graduation
Manzana University	71.5%	77.5%
Lima University	75.4%	80.1%
Florence University	73.55%	70%
National Average	**54%**	**64%**

Note. Adapted from three institutional data sources (IPEDS, 2023; Univstats, 2022).

Such a structural arrangement signals explicit, strategic efforts by these institutions to integrate HSI development within their overarching leadership frameworks, granting

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individuals in these positions considerable authority and access to institutional funding earmarked for supporting HSI initiatives.

This integration also reflects a commitment to serving minoritized students, a commitment which is manifest in various forms, such as the articulation of specific intentions on institutional websites and in abstract submissions for grants. As 4-year public institutions, the selected universities present congruencies in various facets, including structural design, application procedures, recruitment strategies, and student demographics. A 4-year private non-profit university, a research-intensive university, and a state university in the Western United States were selected with over 70% graduation rate for Latinx students compared to the national average of 54% (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2023). For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were used.

Participants

After concluding a content analysis of websites, program abstracts, and public reports for Latinx serving intentionality, fifteen potential active leaders were identified and contacted for interviews, with eight leaders responding, accepting invitations, and signing consent forms. Three leaders were from pseudonyms, Manzana University (R1), two from Lima University (state 4-year), and three from Florence University (private non-profit). The purpose for using the initial content analysis was to begin from the ground up and be objective, systematic, and observational of institutions' HSI branding and intent to serve Latinx students. I examined thematic structures and overarching constructs from the codes for inductive analysis of servingness-type universities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015). The case studies included proposal abstracts, websites, and publicly available documents.

Table 2.
Overview of Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Occupation	Gender	Ethnicity	Generation	University
Jose	Chair/Faculty	Man	Latino/Hispanic	First-Gen	Manzana University
Laura	Director	Woman	Latina/Hispanic	First-Gen	Manzana University
Sophie	Director	Woman	Latina/Hispanic	First-Gen	Manzana University
Martha	Director	Woman	Latina/Hispanic	First-Gen	Florence University
Juanita	Coordinator	Woman	Latina/Hispanic	First-Gen	Florence University
Vicky	Coordinator	Woman	Latina/Hispanic	First-Gen	Florence University
Elizabeth	Director/Faculty	Woman	White	Non-first-gen	Lima University
John	Director/Faculty	Man	White	Non-first-gen	Lima University

Data Analysis and Findings

This study's results show that these servingness-conscious agents can significantly impact the academic and social outcomes of Latinx and minoritized students. The upcoming section will concentrate on two main topics: the role of servingness-conscious leaders and the legitimization of HSI work.

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Servingness-Conscious Agents: HIS Grants

Category Identification and Coding for Data Analysis

To begin analyzing the data using NVivo software, the institutions and participants were divided into three separate cases by institution type and given pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and maintain confidentiality:

- Case 1: Large Public University – Pseudonym Manzana University
- Case 2: Research-Intensive Public University – Pseudonym Lima University
- Case 3: Private Non-profit University – Pseudonym Florence University

These categorizations facilitated a structured and comparative analysis of the data, enabling the identification of unique and common themes across different institutional contexts. The use of pseudonyms ensures the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants while allowing for a detailed exploration of their experiences and practices within Hispanic-Serving Institutions. I used priori codes and the theoretical framework of Theory of Racialized Organizations in this study to help systematically analyze and interpret the data by providing predefined categories and concepts. The Theory of Racialized Organizations served as the primary theoretical lens, guiding the identification of priori codes such as racialized structures, servigness, and organizational behavior.

Table 3.
Theoretical Framework and Priori Codes

Theoretical Framework	Priori Codes
Theory of Racialized Organizations	Racialized Structures
	Servingness
	Institutional Agents
	Resource Allocation
	Organizational Behavior
	Institutional Legitimacy
	Racial Equity
	Power Dynamics
	Historical Context
	Grant Utilization
	Policy Implementation
	Cultural Sensitivity

Servingness-Conscious Leaders

Within the context of the Hispanic-serving institutions examined in this study, a recurrent pattern emerged wherein the leadership and guidance of Latinx and minoritized student equity were often concentrated in the hands of a small team of committed university personnel. Driven by their nuanced observations of the student's needs, these individuals pursued various avenues to secure federal grants and other resources to enhance the equitable treatment of Latinx and minoritized student populations.

The personnel, characterized in this study as servingness-conscious agents, manifested a distinct commitment to the principles and praxis of HSI work, exhibiting an unwavering motivation to raise awareness, advocate for equity, and effect transformative change within their institutions. Many of these individuals were working with limited availability of financial resources and often forming part of small, underfunded teams.

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A participant from Manzana University, referred to by the pseudonym Jose, encapsulated the spirit of these servingness-conscious agents with his remarks, which exemplify the ethos that motivates their work:

> I was in very close contact with this population of first-generation Latinx students, who were coming in significant numbers for the first time to the [university] and, in particular to [MU]. We are quickly diversifying the campus demographically, so I could see what they needed. I could see their assets because it is not just a deficit thing. I could see that we were wasting their assets.

His observations of the students' unique assets — such as bilingualism and the pioneering role as the first in their families to attend university — went beyond mere academic analysis. Instead, Jose saw these characteristics as intrinsic qualities that were being neglected or underutilized by the system. He understood these attributes not as mere demographic data points but as cultural and personal strengths that could be leveraged to enrich the educational experience of Latinx students and the academic community. However, his keen awareness highlighted a systemic failure to recognize and apply these assets within the institutional framework. Jose continues —

> You need a grassroots effort to meaningfully address the needs of first-generation students. This cannot be accomplished solely by top-down mandates. It requires faculty and administrative staff who are in close contact with these students and understand their challenges. These individuals must recognize that these students are neither lazy nor merely underprepared. Instead, they should question whether the institution is prepared to support them successfully. Embracing the HSI mission means committing to the success of these students.

The reflections and initiatives of servingness-conscious agents like Jose are not merely anecdotal or isolated instances; they embody a growing movement within higher education to reevaluate and reconfigure how institutions engage with and support their student populations' multifaceted identities and needs. Through the lens of individuals like Jose, the complexities of this evolving landscape can be more clearly seen and more effectively navigated. Jose found a space where he could provide new resources to address some of the equity issues faced at his institution. They participated in multiple spaces to create change from committees at the university level to committees at the systems level and bring new ideas to make policy changes to help support underrepresented students.

The portrait that emerges from these findings underscores the pivotal role of servingness-conscious agents in shaping the institutional environment and fostering a culture that prioritizes the needs and aspirations of Latinx and minoritized students. Their labor, often under-recognized and under-supported, is a testament to the impact dedicated individuals can have in the ongoing struggle to ensure equity and access within higher education.

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Servingness-Conscious Agents: HIS Grants

Culturally Responsive Leadership

At Manzana University, the testimony of Sophie, who identifies as Latinx and serves as a director of HSI grant initiatives, provides insight into the transformative power of lived experiences in shaping educational leadership. As a first-generation student actively engaged with student affairs and college access programs, Sophie's journey was intrinsically linked to her identity as a Latinx individual whose family's primary language was Spanish. Sophie's reflections elucidate her trajectory:

> My journey into the world of Student Affairs was deeply influenced by my status as a first-generation college student. Throughout my college years, I not only studied but worked consistently, which eventually led me to a position with a college access program. Participating in this program allowed me to contribute significantly to financial aid and college admissions literacy efforts, helping other students navigate the complex processes of applying to college and securing financial aid. My own background, as a student from a family where Spanish was the primary language, drew me towards these initiatives. I knew firsthand the value of receiving such services in one's native language.
>
> Drawing from my personal experience, I conducted presentations in Spanish, aiming to make the information more accessible to families like my own.

Sophie's engagement was not a mere function of her role but an expression of her identity and experiences. Her proactive measures to provide programming presentations in Spanish signified a culturally responsive approach to serving the student demographic population at Manzana University, recognizing and validating the cultural and linguistic heritage of Latinx families.

Another illuminating case is that of Juanita, a program coordinator for a Department of Education grant at the Florence campus—a traditionally predominantly White non-profit private institution situated in a primarily high-income, White neighborhood. Juanita's reflections provide a compelling counterpoint to Sophie's experiences. Unlike the latter's empowered agency, Juanita's college experience in a minority-serving program like EOP lacked a sense of belonging, leaving her feeling disconnected. Juanita stated, “I was an EOP student… I was part of the program but didn’t feel part of the program. So, you know, being part of these grants allowed me to make the involved students feel more welcome. I tried to be more of a face to [students]."

Juanita's candid admission elucidates a critical dichotomy in minority-serving programs: the discrepancy between inclusion in name and practice. Her commitment to altering this disconnect by being more accessible to students symbolizes an intentional shift toward fostering a Latinx-welcoming culture and climate at Florence.

These narratives underline the importance of nuanced, culturally responsive leadership in promoting equity within higher education. The accounts of Jose, Sophie, and Juanita reflect diverse pathways through which personal experiences and cultural identities inform and enrich professional practice. Their stories show the significance of authentic,

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engaged leadership in transforming institutions into spaces that accommodate and celebrate minoritized students' multifaceted identities and needs.

Director Laura of Manzana University eloquently encapsulates how personal identity and experience can translate into practical and empathetic leadership within higher education. Identifying as Chicana and having grown up in a small agricultural farming town, Laura's navigation through life has shaped her understanding of student needs and informed her strategies for transforming institutional approaches. She articulated:

> I am Chicana and grew up in a small agricultural farming town, so my experience has helped me navigate how I do my work. I am primed to share my expertise regarding what students need and what the institution needs to do differently when serving our students.

Laura's reflections underscore a critical aspect of leadership within Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs): interweaving personal identity with professional practice. Her emphasis on aligning institutional structures with minoritized students' authentic needs demonstrates a reflexive understanding that transcends mere policy-making.

In sum, the motivations and interventions of the servingness-conscious agents examined in this study have been profoundly shaped by their interactions with the education system and the barriers they have encountered or observed. These leaders have not merely acted in administrative capacities; they have championed efforts to assist students with similar cultural and historical backgrounds. They have critically evaluated existing structures, recognized areas failing to meet minoritized students' needs, and strategically employed grant program interventions to initiate meaningful change.

Transforming HSI Identity and Legitimization

The transformation of educational structures within higher institutions often transcends mere policy changes and expands into socio-political dynamics. A compelling example of this complexity can be found in the following reflection by Jose from Manzana University:

> We have successfully established the importance of our educational initiatives on a political level within the state. Our work has now become a priority across all agendas. This shift has been possible because of grassroots advocacy, which has prompted the university system to adopt a top-down approach, adopting these initiatives in a more substantial and institutionalized manner. To launch any initiative, we must demonstrate its economic potential to our administrators; it's the financial aspect that often garners the support needed to move forward. Our success in fulfilling our institutional mandate — graduating our students — hinges on the understanding that while the promise of financial gain, political influence, and bridging educational gaps are interconnected, it's often the financial incentive that catalyzes administrative support and gets our projects off the ground.

The statement by Jose illuminates how the recognition and validation of work within the university system is achieved through a synergistic approach that combines top-down

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systemic directives with grassroots activism. The change being described is not just top-down; it is significantly influenced by grassroots movements, showcasing the critical role of such activism in shaping policy and securing external funding. This dynamic, where change is precipitated by pressure from the ground up, highlights the powerful role of funding opportunities. These opportunities, while they can be seen through a critical lens as potentially perpetuating existing racial inequities, are navigated by leaders who apply an equity lens. These leaders reframe these opportunities, using them as a tool to further the mission of inclusivity and equity within the institution.

Geographical Context

The concept of servingness within a border university context presents unique opportunities and challenges that require nuanced understanding and responsive approaches. In his reflection on Lima University, Director John emphasizes aligning with the institution's Hispanic-Serving Identity and recognizing its unique transborder student population. He states:

> At Lima University, we're fully embracing our identity as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. There's tremendous support for securing grants that enable us to develop more comprehensive, impactful, and engaging services tailored for our Latinx students. Additionally, our unique geographical position near the US-Mexico border situates us amidst a significant number of refugee families. This results in a diverse student body that brings different educational backgrounds not typically accounted for in traditional educational pathways. Many of our students have attended high school in Mexico or commute across the border daily. Recognizing this, we're now dedicating efforts to realign our educational offerings to better accommodate this transborder dynamic, which requires an educational model that is different from the conventional pathway of elementary to high school completion within the same educational system. It's an area that's receiving more attention as we continue to adapt and serve our student population effectively.

This reflection is embedded in critical insights into how the institution is leaning into its HSI identity. Significant support is channeled into pursuing grants and enhancing services for Latinx students. This active embracing of the HSI identity is a strategic move, recognizing the opportunities and responsibilities of serving a Latinx majority population.

Director John's remarks draw attention to the distinctive educational landscape shaped by the institution's proximity to the US-Mexico border. The presence of students with transborder experiences, those who attended high school in Mexico, or daily cross-border commuters presents both unique challenges and potential strengths. The traditional alignment of courses and assumptions about students' educational progression may fail to accommodate these experiences, highlighting the need for more intentional consideration of border dynamics.

The narrative presented here paints a vivid picture of how aligning personal experience with professional expertise can serve as a powerful catalyst for change, shaping educational environments that are genuinely responsive to the multifaceted needs of Latinx

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and other minoritized students. By placing servingness-conscious agents at the forefront, this analysis contributes to a growing discourse on the essential role of reflective and compassionate leadership in enhancing equity within higher education.

Discussion

In this study, the agents emerged as servingness-conscious of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and exemplars of culturally responsive leadership. They are defined as members of the university organization who advocate for structural changes that support minoritized students and engage with the complex dynamics of HSI identity, servingness paradigms, and decision-making processes that are mindful of students' racial, cultural, and intersectional identities. The intricate profiles of servingness-conscious agents in this research share common threads, most notably their racial background and analogous educational experiences as Latinx and first-generation students.

Existing literature emphasizes institutional agents' capacity to provide more comprehensive support, thereby humanizing minoritized students' educational experiences (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). Reflecting on these shared educational and lived experiences, I sought to understand participants' underlying motivations to engage in the multifaceted work within HSIs.

Servingness-conscious Agents

In the context of this study, I introduce and advocate for the term "servingness-conscious agents" as a framework for serving. This is an idea that resonates with and builds upon Villarreal's (2022) work on Latinx-serving consciousness – faculty being willing to share the commitment to serving the area in which they operate, experienced in mentoring Latinx students, level of understanding of intersections of Latinx experiences, the multidimensional servingness framework – focusing on student-centering, policy, structures, academic, and non-academic outcomes of Latinx students (Garcia et al., 2019). Hence, the servingness-conscious term signifies more than an administrative or functional role. Being conscious represents a profound and active engagement with the institution's mission. Being servingness-conscious calls for participation that verges on activism, necessitating advocacy, resistance, and challenges to existing structures, as well as thoughtful and strategic utilization of cultural and social capital to bolster student support and optimize grant outcomes. Being servingness-conscious is an ongoing praxis of reflective work. Education leaders involve continuous professional development, such as exposure to training, conferences, and cutting-edge educational research specific to HSIs.

The exploration unveiled a nuanced engagement with the "big picture" of systemic change, with all participants centralizing students in their decision-making processes. Themes crystallized the characteristics of servingness-conscious agents, *including their roles as champions, motivations, and advocacy*, the transformation of HSI identity *encompassing current conditions and servingness interpretations*, and the orientation towards equity-driven decisions *highlighting aspects like culturally responsive leadership, resistance strategies, legitimization of HSI work, and the cultivation of institutional support* (see figure 1 below).

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Servingness-Conscious Agents: HIS Grants



Figure 1. Servingness-Conscious Agent

Note: The framework emphasizes a continuous and reflexive process that centers students, advocates for culturally responsive leadership, legitimizes HSI work, and transforms the HSI identity.

An aspect of this investigation is the evident absence of racial considerations in grant solicitation requests for proposals and the deployment of color-evasive language by institutions in their HSI program proposals. As articulated by scholars such as Annamma et al. (2017), Ray (2019), and Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2019), this omission could be viewed as a mechanism that perpetuates racialization, thereby thwarting the achievement of substantive goals such as closing equity gaps and nurturing an institutional ethos with students at its core.

Conclusion

The present study showed the multifaceted roles, motivations, and practices of servingness-conscious agents within Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), adding depth to our understanding of leadership dynamics and personal experiences within educational institutions committed to serving Latinx and minoritized students. Central to this inquiry were the intricate profiles of institutional agents who actively advocate for structural changes, engage with the complex dynamics of HSI identity and leadership identity, and make decisions that honor their students' racial, cultural, and intersectional identities. The alignment between the personal backgrounds of the leaders as Latinx and first-generation students and their professional commitments was revealed as a consistent thread linking these themes. This alignment fostered a humanized, responsive educational experience supported by previous research (Petrov & Garcia, 2021; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016; Villarreal, 2022).

At the operational level, HSI efforts within institutions are often characterized by grassroots initiatives. These are typically spearheaded by a small contingent of committed faculty, staff, and students, frequently without substantial institutional backing. This dynamic underscores the importance of external grants as vital catalysts for meaningful institutional change. Ultimately, this research contributes a nuanced, textured

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understanding of how servingness-conscious agents operate within HSIs, highlighting their roles as adaptable, culturally responsive leaders. These insights fill an important gap in the literature and offer a foundation for further exploration of the mechanisms, strategies, and contextual factors that influence the success of HSIs in achieving their mission.

Limitations

The qualitative narrative inquiry approach limits the generalizability of findings. The experiences and perceptions of the eight participating leaders from three specific universities may only partially represent the diverse array of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) across different regions and contexts. Future research could benefit from a case-study approach and follow grant leaders after programs end, incorporating quantitative measures to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, expanding the participant pool to include a broader range of stakeholders and exploring HSIs in varying geographical and institutional contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the leadership dynamics in these institutions.

Implications

This study underscores the critical role of servingness-conscious leaders in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and offers valuable insights for policymakers, educational administrators, and practitioners committed to advancing equity in higher education. The findings reveal that the genuine serving of Latinx and minoritized students extends beyond mere compliance with federal funding requirements; it necessitates a deep, intentional commitment to equity and inclusion that permeates institutional practices, policies, and cultures. For policymakers, these insights advocate for the development of funding criteria and accountability measures that prioritize authentic servingness and support HSIs in fulfilling their mission. Educational leaders and administrators are encouraged to foster a servingness-conscious leadership culture, emphasizing the importance of personal experiences, cultural competencies, and an unwavering commitment to student success in shaping their strategies and policies. Practitioners within these institutions can draw on the study's findings to implement culturally responsive programs, mentorship, and support services that meet the nuanced needs of their diverse student populations. Collectively, embracing these implications can catalyze meaningful change, ensuring that HSIs not only bear the title in name but also embody the ethos of servingness in action, thereby advancing educational equity and excellence for Latinx and minoritized students.

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Author's Note

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The author has no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article. The author adheres to the highest standards of ethical conduct, ensuring transparency and integrity throughout the research process.

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Human Participants

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the protocol number IRB 21-112, ensuring that all ethical guidelines were strictly followed to protect the rights and welfare of the participants.

Originality Note

The content of this article is original and has not been previously published or under consideration for publication elsewhere. The study is an extension of a dissertation study, the work in this article is original and adds to the existing body of literature.

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