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Answering the Call: Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Leaders in the Quest for Access, Excellence, and Equity in American Higher Education

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**Becoming an Hispanic-Serving Research Institution:  
Involving Graduate Students in Organizational Change**

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**Abstract**

The changing demographics of higher education have led to an increase in the number and type of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). As research universities continue to see a rise in the enrollment of Latino/a students, a better understanding of the implications of this change within the existing institutional context will be essential to best serve this growing community of students. We position our study within a tradition of organizational culture theory that points to the importance of organizational actors' interpretations, perspectives, and actions in order to understand an organization's general behavior and change. By acknowledging the importance of graduate students within research universities, we focus on their perspectives at an Emerging Hispanic-Serving Research Institution (HSRI) and ask, "What are the organizational culture implications of an HSI designation for a research university?" Our analysis revealed four important themes: communicating institutional pride as an HSRI, engaging the benefits of an HSRI, operationalizing a serving mission, and involving graduate students as institutional actors at HSRI. Institutional recommendations that follow from our findings include providing clear communication regarding HSI status, objectives, and commitment; assessing the campus climate; and increasing graduate student involvement as key leaders within HSRI.

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## Introduction

For decades, demographers have predicted increases in the U.S. Latino/a population. This growth has resulted in significant changes in Latino/a higher education enrollment: in 2014, 35% of Latinos/as ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in college, an increase of 13 percentage points since 1993. This represents a greater enrollment increase than that observed for Whites, Blacks, or Asians during approximately the same time period<sup>1</sup> (Krogstad, 2016). Because Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are largely classified based on Latino/a enrollment—they must have at least 25% Latino/a undergraduates—the changing demographics of higher education have led to an increase in the number and type of HSIs (*Excelencia in Education [Excelencia]*, 2016).

Although historically the vast majority of HSIs have included community colleges and teaching-focused comprehensive universities, over time this designation has expanded to other sectors. Most recently, due to changing enrollment, research universities with the highest research activity (Research I institutions) are adding HSI to their list of classifications, deliberately or not (*Excelencia*, 2016). Despite the various types of institutions now included among the HSIs ranks, however, the policy, practice, and research conversations have primarily centered on institutions that are under-resourced, broad-access institutions (e.g., Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Núñez, Hurtado, & Galdeano, 2015). While this narrative is important, it is no longer the story of all HSIs. Consequently, as more types of institutions take on the HSI classification or meet the criteria for being eligible to do so, it is critical that researchers continue to trace such shifts so that HSIs are not characterized as a monolithic group. Ultimately, as research universities continue to see a rise in the enrollment of Latino/a students, a better understanding of the implications of this change within the existing institutional context will be essential for these institutions to incorporate the HSI designation into their identity and best serve this growing community of students they enroll.

Different from most HSIs, Research I institutions typically include a substantial graduate student body. This group of individuals is essential to an RI for many reasons, including the service and support they provide as teaching assistants, research assistants, lab instructors, and mentors to undergraduates. Because of their engagement with the organization through

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<sup>1</sup> Data for Asians are only available starting in 1999.

multiple roles, these students provide unique insight into the implications of organizational change. With this important vantage point in mind, in this study we focus on the perspectives of graduate students at a Research I Emerging HSI<sup>2</sup> to answer our research question: What are the organizational culture implications of an HSI designation for a research university?

To frame this work, we first provide a brief history of HSIs and summarize existing strands of HSI research. To make clear why graduate students' perspectives are particularly important in the Emerging HSI context, we then highlight studies of the contributions of graduate students within research institutions. Next, we position our study within a tradition of organizational culture theory that points to the importance of considering organizational actors' interpretations, perspectives, and actions to understand an organization's general behavior and change. Finally, after explaining our methodology and presenting our four major themes, we discuss the related implications for Hispanic-Serving Research Institutions (HSRI)—the term we use to distinguish this group of institutions from other HSIs—with a focus on recommendations for institutional practice.

### **Hispanic-Serving Institutions: History and Research**

Hispanic-Serving Institutions are unique among Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) because they were not necessarily created with a mission to serve Latino/a students. In fact, their mission statements may not even reflect their HSI status (Núñez & Elizondo, 2012). Rather, these institutions became HSIs through population shifts and increasing Latino/a undergraduate enrollment, resulting in institutions that are HSIs due to demography and not necessarily intention. In the 1980s a growing concern emerged among higher education leaders about Latinos/as' limited access to college and low college degree completion rates. Further fueling these concerns was the fact that large percentages of Latino/a students were enrolled in a concentrated number of poorly funded institutions. These institutions carried a great responsibility to educate Latino/a students and to provide them a quality education (Santiago, 2006). As a result, at that time concerned advocacy groups and institutional and government leaders explored ways to support these institutions with the goal of improving Latinos/as' access to higher education as well as their college completion rates. After various failed

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<sup>2</sup> *Excelencia* (2016) defines Emerging HSIs as having “15–24% undergraduate Hispanic FTE enrollment” (p. 4).

legislative attempts, HSIs were finally federally recognized in 1992 as institutions with a Latino/a undergraduate enrollment of 25% triggering access to federal funding supporting the development of these institutions.

As Latino/a enrollment in higher education continues to increase, so does the number of HSIs. In 2014–2015, 435 institutions were identified as HSIs and 310 institutions were identified as Emerging HSIs (*Excelesencia*, 2016), representing increases of 26 and 14 institutions, respectively, from the previous academic year. Of the current HSIs, the majority of institutions are public, two-year (46%); 28% are private, four-year; 21% are public, four-year; and four percent are private, two-year. Nearly 40% of these institutions ( $n=172$ ) have graduate programs and, among those, 90 institutions have doctoral programs (*Excelesencia*, 2016). Seven of the HSIs with doctoral programs are listed in IPEDS as “highest research activity” with 17 more institutions with similar classification identified as Emerging HSIs. As the number of HSIs with graduate programs has more than tripled in the last 20 years, it is a phenomenon that deserves further study to better understand the similarities and differences of these institutions as compared to other HSIs. Despite these changes in the landscape of HSIs, the majority of research continues to focus on other institutional types.

Current research on HSIs includes several lines of inquiry. For example, some strands of research have focused on the development of HSIs, their institutional characteristics, and the institutional agents of HSIs (e.g., de los Santos & de los Santos, 2003; Doran, 2015; García & Ramirez, 2015; Laden, 2004; Murphy, 2013; Santiago, 2006). Additional research has examined factors that influence Latino/a students’ persistence, success, and college-going experiences at HSIs suggesting that the unique context at HSIs is an important factor impacting educational outcomes for these students (e.g., Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011; Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Cuellar, 2012; Fosnacht & Nailos, 2016; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013). Other studies have focused on why students choose to attend HSIs (e.g., Cejda, Casparis, & Rhodes, 2002; Núñez & Bowers, 2011; Núñez, Sparks, & Hernandez, 2011; Santiago, 2008; Torres & Zerquera, 2012). Generally, with a few exceptions, research institutions are not reflected in these bodies of work.

A handful of studies have focused solely on graduate students at HSIs (e.g., Craven & Kimmel, 2002; Perez, 2011; Tran, 2011; Vaquera, 2008). Vaquera’s (2008) study of doctoral student persistence at the University of New Mexico, an R1 HSI, found that Latino/a students

reported higher levels of persistence than their peers of other racial/ethnic groups. The author suggests that the institution itself, as an HSI, created an environment conducive to their success. This environment included the visibility of Latino/a students and faculty, positive relationships with faculty advisors, and positive academic integration (e.g., participation in academic activities like conferences) and academic satisfaction. Another study on graduate students at HSIs found that while graduate students' persistence/dedication and time-on-task to their academics were the strongest variables contributing to their success, graduate student involvement, positive interactions with faculty and peers, and the structure and organization of the students' departments and programs were also important factors (Perez, 2011). Generally focusing on the experiences of the graduate students themselves, this literature suggests the importance of involvement, integration, and positive relationships with others. To fill the gap in the HSI literature that examines R I institutions, our study focuses on graduate students as members of the university who play vital roles within the institution. The institution in our study is a public, four-year Research I university that offers master's and doctoral degrees. At the time of our study, it was an Emerging HSI, closely approaching HSI status.

### **Graduate Students as Important and Influential Actors in Research Institutions**

The roles of graduate students position them as important and influential actors within research institutions. In this study, we focus on the roles that connect graduate students with undergraduates as this is the population that determines HSI status. Graduate student roles include: teaching assistant, graduate assistant, research assistant, and mentor (Austin, 2002; Dolan & Johnson, 2009; Flora, 2007; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Park, 2004). Graduate students who serve as teaching assistants, for example, teach in classrooms and laboratories, lead discussions, grade student work, and advise undergraduates on academic and non-academic issues (Park, 2004). These opportunities, while providing support to undergraduates, simultaneously train graduate students to deepen their understanding about their discipline and provide opportunities to practice faculty duties (Austin, 2002; Park, 2004).

Mentorship between graduate and undergraduate students can also be a mutually beneficial experience (Dolan & Johnson, 2009; Reddick, Griffin, Cherwitz, Cérda-Pražák, & Bunch, 2012). Graduate student mentors often train undergraduate students in research, supervise them on research projects, and provide academic and interpersonal support. In

particular, graduate students have noted the importance of mentoring female students and students of color to advance these students through the educational pipeline, thus increasing diversity in graduate school and academia (Reddick et al., 2012). In turn, graduate students benefit from help that undergraduates provide on research projects, opportunities to develop their advising and mentoring skills, and an increased sense of empathy and self-awareness from these experiences. Many of these benefits make them more marketable, especially when they have worked with students with a diverse set of backgrounds (Dolan & Johnson, 2009). Overall, literature on the roles of graduate students indicates they can have significant involvement with and impact on undergraduate students, while simultaneously benefiting from these experiences. Tying this to the organizational culture literature we use as our conceptual framework, we focus on the perspectives of graduate students to examine the organizational culture of Emerging HSRIs—institutions that are shifting demographically because of undergraduate enrollment.

### **Conceptual Framework: Organizational Culture Literature and HSIs**

Given this important background and the need to better understand research universities within an HSI context, we turn to organizational theory and respond to García's (2015) call to use this theory to study change within HSIs. Using organizational theory allows researchers to uncover “ways in which HSIs are in fact changing...into organizations that embrace their newfound role to serve Latina/o students” (p. 84). In this context, we can broadly consider “values, processes, and goals” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3) of members of the organization and how, or even whether, changes are occurring. Although few studies on HSIs use organizational theory, “empirical research suggests that the organizational culture of each HSI is unique and enhances a number of important outcomes” (García, 2015, p. 89). For example, Cuellar (2014) studies the impact of the institutional contexts of HSIs, Emerging HSIs, and non-HSIs on the academic self-concept of Latino/a students. Doran's (2015) case study of the University of Texas at San Antonio focuses on an HSI with Tier One aspirations and the impact of this “striving” on its historical focus on access. Another study “complicate[s] what it means [for an HSI] to have a Latina/o-serving identity” (García, 2016a, p. 137), suggesting that “a Latina/o-serving organizational identity is multifaceted” (p. 137). Collectively, these studies highlight the developing literature on HSIs and organizational culture.

Turning to the broader literature, researchers often employ organizational culture perspectives to study change in higher education institutions (García, 2015; Kezar & Eckel, 2002) because, in addition to external factors of influence, institutions “are also shaped by strong forces that emanate from within” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). As suggested by Tierney (1988), This internal dynamic has its roots in the history of the organization and derives its force from the values, processes, and goals held by those most intimately involved in the organization’s workings. An organization’s culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level. (p. 3)

Concepts used to study the organizational culture of a university include: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership (Tierney, 1988). While each concept occurs within institutional settings, they can differ in “the way they occur, the forms they take, and the importance they have” (p. 9). Ultimately, Tierney posits that to understand organizational culture one must include the interpretations of those individuals within the organization. This is supported by the work of Gonzales, Lanhai, and Hall (forthcoming) who indicate:

It is important to note that although an organizational theorist’s overriding concern is the organization, this does not preclude them from being interested in questions related to human perspectives, experiences, or interactions. Indeed, people’s experiences and engagements are very often the entry point for understanding and theorizing about organizations and have been for a long time.

Our study, then, contributes to the literature by examining the organizational culture of an Emerging HSRI, in broad strokes, using graduate students as our “entry point” (Gonzales et al., forthcoming), a group “most intimately involved” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3) in essential functions of an RI institution, especially those pertaining to undergraduate students.

### **Methodology, Data, & Analysis**

This study focuses on the perspectives of graduate students at an Emerging HSRI and broadly asks, “What are the organizational culture implications of an HSI designation for a research university?” As two Latina researchers who have worked in higher education, this study stemmed from our interests in and commitment to HSIs and our belief in the importance

of these institutions serving their students. Further, our interest in research institutions and graduate students raised questions for us about potential changes to organizational culture and the related unique possibilities and challenges of this sector among HSIs.

We employed a qualitative design for our study. Using purposive sampling we selected an RI Emerging Hispanic-Serving Research Institution to study a university just before it became an HSI, allowing participants to consider future changes to organizational culture as a result of an eventual HSI designation. When we conducted the research, the institution was on the cusp of reaching 25% Latino/a undergraduate enrollment<sup>3</sup> providing a unique opportunity to expand the HSI literature by studying an Emerging HSRI. Once we identified an institution, we emailed a public graduate student listserv to solicit participants. All masters and doctoral students were eligible to participate. The invitation stated that students would discuss their awareness of the institution's HSI status and their related experiences and perspectives. We indicated that participants were not required to have prior knowledge of HSIs. A \$20 Amazon gift card was offered to each participant.

Forty-five graduate students participated across 10 open-ended, one-hour focus groups. We employed focus groups because the interaction among participants would “highlight the agreements and disagreements in a particular population” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 70)—in our case, graduate students. Further, group interviews can yield a wider range of ideas, as well as reconstruction of viewpoints (Morgan, 1988). In a group interview, students would be able to gain knowledge through the process and respond based on the information obtained during the focus group. Students were assigned to groups based only on availability not by any other criteria or characteristic(s). Ultimately, our sample was diverse and included representation from various racial/ethnic groups, as well as both domestic (35) and international students (10). Of the domestic students, 18 self-identified as White, 11 as Latino/a, two as Black/African American, and four as Asian/South Asian. Twenty-nine participants were female and 16 were male. Participants included nine masters students, five masters/Ph.D. students, and 31 doctoral students from a range of disciplines (social sciences, humanities and fine arts, education, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM]). Only two

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<sup>3</sup> Since the time this research was conducted, the institution has crossed the 25% threshold needed for HSI status. To maintain confidentiality promised to our participants, we do not identify the institution by name and minimize providing identifying characteristics.

participants previously attended an HSI. This diverse group of participants allowed us to simultaneously bring a wide range of viewpoints to the study while also benefiting from the unified experience of students enrolled in the same university.

We designed our semi-structured interview protocol to gain insights from graduate students on the organizational culture implications of an HSI designation for a research university. With a focus on organizational culture, graduate students were encouraged to discuss the institution in its present context, as well as offer thoughts on a future that could include an HSI designation. This allowed students to compare and contrast potential cultural changes to an RI that they thought should occur as the institution became an HSI. Throughout the process, researchers encouraged participants to have exchanges with each other and not focus solely on responding to questions and prompts.

To analyze our data, we used Dedoose—a cross-platform application for analyzing qualitative data—to inductively code focus group transcripts guided by Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) method of qualitative data analysis. Specifically, we started with the data, versus *a priori* categories, and allowed “the categories and names for categories to flow from the data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). This allows “new insights to emerge” (p. 1279) instead of being limited by existing theory.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain data analysis as having two main components: unitizing and categorizing. A researcher unitizes his or her data by searching for an element (phrase, sentence, paragraph) that is “heuristic” or “aimed at some understanding or some action that the inquirer needs to have or to take” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 345). In addition, this unit “must be the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself” (p. 345). This unitizing process, then, was applied to the qualitative data. After units were identified, they were grouped into broader categories. Finally, we reviewed the data put into each category to confirm whether they were similar, and should be in the same category, or different, and should be put in other or new categories. Ultimately, we used the final categories to observe patterns about the organizational culture of an Emerging HSRI as described by its graduate students.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In this study, we focus on the perspectives of graduate students as individuals involved with essential functions of their institution to offer insights into the organizational culture of an

institution on its way to becoming an HSRI. Before discussing our resulting themes, we provide important context about our participants. First, prior to the information we shared in the study's focus groups, graduate student participants held little to no knowledge concerning their institution approaching HSI designation. While some of the participants had heard the term "Hispanic-Serving Institution," the information they held was quite basic and generally incorrect. For example, one participant, acknowledging her confusion about the definition, asked "does that mean 50/50?" Regardless of the awareness some had of the HSI term, most did not realize their own institution was on the verge of becoming an HSI. The few participants who had more knowledge of the topic tended to be in disciplines that would discuss the matter as a relevant academic subject—Chicano/Latino Studies, Education, Sociology, or Spanish/Portuguese.

After we provided graduate students with information about HSIs (e.g., the federal definition, available funding opportunities and uses) and encouraged them to ask questions and discuss the issues with each other, many were able to contemplate the impact of the designation and related institutional issues, discussing both potential positive and negative effects. Ultimately, our analysis revealed four important themes related to organizational culture from the perspective of graduate student participants: communicating institutional pride as an HSRI, engaging the benefits of an HSRI, operationalizing a serving mission, and involving graduate students as institutional actors at HSRI.

### **Communicating Institutional Pride as an HSRI**

Participants first focused on the importance of a public acknowledgement from the institution regarding its new status upon becoming an HSI. As participants came to understand that their institution would be unique in its position as an HSRI, they hoped that the institution would take the opportunity to demonstrate pride and encourage other institutions to do the same. As one student suggested, "[the institution should say], 'we're an HSI and not only that but we're proud that we're an HSI.'" One student indicated:

if you become an HSI, being responsible about the portrayal of the emerging increase of Hispanic students going to college [is important].... And so I think it's responsible for an HSI to make sure that the perception of that trend is a positive one.

Participants agreed that there was great potential for this new designation to be seen as a negative both within and outside the campus and, therefore, highlighted the need for a positive institutional message because some people might not welcome the new HSI label. In fact, some participants indicated that any negative stereotypes about Latinos/as could result in students and their families saying, "I don't wanna be associated with that school." As one student said, "In the short-term I think maybe the perception would not be universally favorable." This would require a commitment to educating people about the benefits of the designation and addressing any misconceptions. Participants articulated that there was potential for people to assume that the institution was changing its admission process to benefit Latinos/as (which would be illegal), and that they also might assume the institution "will just start catering, only serving the Latino population" which would generate "resentment" on the part of other racial/ethnic groups. In fact, some participants even wondered these things themselves, raising the issues in the focus groups. One student suggested that by becoming an HSI the institution was "going to push really good students out to get substandard people." As these perceptions would not be in the institution's interest, participants concluded that active institutional engagement to combat these notions, which would reflect a cultural change for the institution, would be important for the campus.

Because most of the students had not even heard about this on their campus, however, they questioned the plans the institution might have noting that it had not yet been incorporated into the institution's messages but believed it was important for the campus to serve as a role model to other institutions and communicate, both internally and externally, about their new status. In particular they emphasized the responsibility of campus leaders to open and maintain communication with all students, faculty, staff, and external stakeholders, not just a select few, which would reflect a significant change. Overall, students described a need on the part of the institution "to circulate information about this change," "to be very transparent," and to communicate a strong message of pride in the new HSI designation. Participants believed that an HSI designation for a research institution in particular could lead to negative reactions and so leaders would be obligated to be proactive to address this. These insights of participants shed light on the mission and information components of an organizational culture framework and align with Tierney's (1988) discussion of organizational culture as he points out that institutions "can perform quite differently because of the way their

identities are communicated to internal and external constituents and because of the varying perceptions these groups may hold” (p. 3).

### **Engaging the Benefits of an HSRI**

Participants discussed the benefits of an HSI designation for the campus due to increased student diversity. With regard to the campus, students imagined existing racial barriers breaking down as a result of increased interaction across racial lines but also suggested that this would require “a certain awareness across campus about how to effectively use those opportunities.” Within the undergraduate classroom, students suggested that more diverse classes would provide an opportunity to “change the nature of the discussion or the examples that get brought up” making classes “more interesting” “because then we get to profit from that level of knowledge and that level of perspective.” One student concluded, “it’s diversifying perspectives that really allows research universities to flourish.” This aligns with existing literature on the educational benefits of diversity that highlights the potential educational opportunities resulting from increased campus diversity (e.g., Chang, 2011) and that requires the intentional engagement of this diversity to reap its benefits (Marin, 2000). Echoing the sentiments of other participants, one student emphasized the benefits resulting from “the cultural change that will occur with a demographic change of students.” This aligns with the organizational culture literature that has examined the resulting benefits at HSIs to educational outcomes (e.g., Cuellar, 2014; Doran, 2015). These insights from participants address environment, mission, and socialization components of organizational culture as articulated by Tierney (1988), highlighting how the ongoing demographic changes at an HSRI would, in fact, allow a research institution to “flourish” and more fully address its mission.

### **Operationalizing a Serving Mission**

As graduate student participants discussed the implications of organizational change at their institution, they couched some of their insights in a concern that the current HSI definition only emphasizes undergraduate *enrollment* and does not focus on student experience or other critical outcomes such as retention and graduation. Participants acknowledged, then, that enrolling an increasing number of Latino/a students includes the institutional responsibility to provide the support necessary for their success. As one student described,

it's one thing to let people in but then it's something else to make sure that they are supported...that they have resources....I mean, even if you're hitting that 25% that still means that three out of every four people don't look like you and aren't like you and aren't coming from a background like you and maybe don't have the same first language as you and don't have all of these social things that you don't necessarily think about if you're in the majority but all of a sudden when you're not in the majority you can feel very different very quickly. And so part of that support is on the academic side but I think part of that support is also social support. It's making people feel like they do belong at this institution and they're not different or separate or whatever those things are. So, I think there's a dual responsibility there and both of those contribute to helping people get through. It's not just 'let you in.' It's 'get you through and help you be successful in whatever comes afterwards.'

Ultimately, participants emphasized that even at an institution with 25% Latino/a undergraduates, Latinos/as would still be a numerical minority and the institution would need to be mindful of the need to ensure the students did not feel "different or separate."

Furthering their thinking on operationalizing the "serving" part of the Hispanic-Serving Institution term, graduate students decided that additional institutional responsibilities would include educating the campus and prospective students about HSIs, dispelling stereotypes about Latinos/as, and articulating how the institution planned to implement an Hispanic-Serving mission. These responsibilities stemmed from an acknowledgement of a current lack of knowledge about HSIs as well as proliferating stereotypes about Latino/a students that would need to be addressed because an increase in the population would not, in and of itself, change the stereotypes. In fact, several study participants thought that the increase in the Latino/a population would lead to an increase in students with academic and language barriers, thus hurting the reputation of the institution. Another student offered, "Maybe more people will know how to dance." Overall, these insights suggest the importance of minimizing stereotypes, especially as new members join the community, and clearly articulating an HSI plan that requires the involvement of all members of the community. Here participants engage organizational culture concepts of environment, socialization, information, and leadership (Tierney, 1988) as they relate to the changes they believe are needed at an RI institution becoming an HSI.

## **Involving Graduate Students as Institutional Actors at HSRI**

Although graduate students initially focused on the responsibilities of the formal institutional leadership, in due course and through discussion of their roles as graduate students, a majority of the students eventually saw clear and important responsibilities for themselves and other graduate students as their campus became an HSRI. Building upon the roles many of them already play as researchers, teaching assistants, and lab instructors for undergraduate students, they believed that their direct contact with undergraduates carried great responsibility to mentor Latino/a students, both formally and informally, encouraging these undergraduates to persist and continue through the educational pipeline. One participant shared:

I think for me specifically I would probably take on more of a mentorship type of role because I TA. I definitely would want to encourage Latinas or Latinos to pursue higher education, if that's something that they're thinking of. So I think it's important to be a mentor.

This mentorship also included exposing Latino/a undergraduates to research, changing their position from “I don't know if I can do that” to “I could do that,” as one participant suggested. Ultimately, participants indicated that a challenge to being able to successfully contribute to the new designation would be the overall lack of awareness and knowledge on this topic on the part of graduate students. Students, therefore, suggested institutionally provided training for graduate students, especially those who interact with undergraduates. Such training would include information about HSIs and Latino/a students, as well as opportunities to increase cultural competency.

In addition to the roles that they saw themselves playing, graduate students began to consider ways that a change in organizational culture would benefit them as well, even if they are not part of the HSI definition. In addition to simply increasing their own knowledge on the topic, one person described some potential spill-over benefits: “My hope would be that we would also see an increase [in], and also increased support for, graduate students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.” Participants expressed an interest in being able to hire Latino/a students to assist with research projects that required Spanish speakers, as well as having a more diverse undergraduate population to expand their research pool (for those who require college-level participants). Several participants acknowledged that they considered the overall

experience to provide them with a “marketable skill.” One participant framed it as: “After grad school you could be like, ‘Yeah I was a grad student at an HSI university...I’ve worked with diverse undergrads.’ So that’s something you can take to the job market with you.”

Regardless of the responsibilities and benefits described by participants, generally they believed that it was essential for graduate students to at least be aware of the upcoming HSI designation and, at best, be involved with it. This, once again, relates to the institutional responsibility identified by participants. One student indicated: “I just think that we as students in general need to be more informed about [our campus’] participation in becoming an HSI because before this study I basically had no idea that this was going on.” Another student added:

Well, I think with any institutional decision being made it’s important that all players are involved in that.... Even though it may not directly impact them you never know. We’re still all a part of the same university so there can certainly be indirect benefits or consequences for certain decisions pertaining to subpopulations within [the institution]. So I think it’s important.

Ultimately, then, institutional leaders should be thinking about the contributions graduate students, an often-ignored population in the HSI conversation, can play to help with the responsibilities and challenges that exist for the campus and the information they need to better take on these roles within a changing organizational culture. This leads us to recommendations for institutional practice.

### **Implications for Hispanic-Serving Research Institutions**

This study expands the HSI literature by highlighting an Emerging HSRI approaching HSI designation and focusing on the perspectives of graduate students as key actors within these institutions. Our findings present the insights of participants and their recognition of important aspects of a changing organizational culture as a research institution becomes an HSI. More specifically, they see themselves as important actors that need to be educated and trained to successfully contribute to the changing institution and contribute within a community that needs to intentionally adjust practices to be more aware, welcoming, and supportive of the changing student population, encouraging a collectivist cultural orientation. Guiffrida, Kiyama, Waterman, and Museus (2012) discuss the importance of institutional culture shifts that

consider the development of more communal environments that involve a wider range of campus and local community members. Although Guiffrida et al. (2012) specifically reference faculty, staff, parents, and community members, they do not mention graduate students. It is clear that our participants believe that as important members of research institutions they also have roles in this cultural shift that would “provide a more communal, welcoming environment for all students” (p. 83).

Although institutions generally become HSIs due to changes in Latino/a undergraduate student enrollment and not by mission, practice, or culture changes, our participants indicated that institutions must look beyond enrollment numbers and focus on serving their Latino/a student population to ensure retention through graduation and beyond. While Santiago (2012) posits that a “critical mass of students motivates an institution to change how it operates to better ‘serve’ these students” (Santiago, 2012, p. 163), participants offered specific examples of such needed changes. From the perspective of the institution, this study offers concrete ways to educate, engage, and incorporate more members from the campus into the HSI process, especially graduate students. The recommendations that follow from our findings fall into the following categories, each suggesting changes to current organizational culture: provide clear communication regarding HSI status, objectives, and commitment; assess the campus climate; and increase graduate student involvement.

### **Provide Clear Communication Regarding HSI Status, Objectives, and Commitment**

Study participants emphasized that a lack of communication regarding an institution’s HSI status, goals, and objectives makes way for misconceptions about the HSI definition and significance of this status, mistrust of institutional motives, and stereotypes about Latino/a students and the Latino/a community. It is, therefore, important that institutional leaders create a communication plan that is thoughtful in explaining how the institution’s HSI status will impact the campus and how it has the potential to benefit all students, including graduate students, and not just Latino/a students. Additionally, this messaging needs to reach all members of the campus community, including potential applicants, and not just select departments. The way the university chooses to unveil its messaging and incorporate it into the current culture may help set the tone for how the campus embraces the HSI status. One option for disseminating

information is to follow the model of the focus groups used in this project. Ultimately, the study served not only as a research project but also as an opportunity to educate participants about their campus' HSI designation. Regardless of their motive to participate, at the conclusion of each focus group and the discussions that occurred among participants, most students indicated they had learned a great deal, were thinking further about the issues and their roles, and were interested to see how the institution would proceed.

### **Assess the Campus Climate**

Graduate student participants shared concerns about the effects of an HSI designation on an already challenging campus climate and misconceptions and stereotypes directed towards Latino/a students. Campus climate can positively or negatively impact the academic and social experiences of students, thus, institutions should assess the campus climate for Latino/a students prior to and after becoming an HSI. This can be achieved through surveys, interviews, and forums. Following the recommendations of García (2016b), an additional step would be to more closely examine “microclimates,” a practice not currently employed, to identify differences that can be found within smaller units, such as departments, when compared to the campus as a whole. This information can help understand students' experiences across the campus and can be used to educate those, including graduate students, who interact with undergraduate students in a range of environments. Doing so ensures that community members contribute to an institutional culture that cultivates learning, research, and academic performance.

### **Increase Graduate Student Involvement**

Based on participants' responses, we found that an institution's HSI status does, in fact, implicate and impact graduate students—something not acknowledged in previous literature. Graduate students are highly involved on R I campuses and interact with undergraduates in many capacities—this tends to be typical of the organizational culture of an R I. They are the first point of contact for lecture and laboratory classes, they provide undergraduates with research opportunities, and they assist them with their academic and postbaccalaureate choices. Just like staff and faculty, graduate students also support undergraduate students personally and academically. Even though the HSI designation is based on undergraduate enrollment, graduate

students will be impacted by the changing undergraduate population and can contribute to the needed cultural change. Therefore, institutions should maximize the roles and contributions of graduate students by including this population as it becomes an HSI. Many campuses have a graduate student association that represents the graduate student constituency and interests. These types of associations can help institutions disseminate HSI information to educate graduate students, address any concerns or impacts that graduate students may face as a result of demographic shifts in their classes or labs, and connect with graduate students to increase their involvement with the changing undergraduate population.

### **Conclusion**

Demographic changes to higher education institutions will continue. In particular, growing Latino/a enrollment in all higher education sectors is resulting in an increase in the number of Hispanic-Serving Research Institutions—particularly doctoral granting institutions—a newer phenomenon in the HSI arena. For both research and practice this means that we must take a closer look at these institutions and not assume that everything we know about HSIs will apply to them since the culture of each institution is different. For this reason, in our study we chose to focus on graduate students—key actors within research institutions who serve multiple roles and contribute to the institutional culture. Our findings highlight benefits to take advantage of and responsibilities to act on. These require a shift in organizational culture to address existing and future challenges and point to the gains of including graduate students in that process.

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