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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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University of Vermont

Caroline S. Turner
California State University, Sacramento

Desiree D. Zerquera
University of San Francisco

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A Critical Look at Perspectives of Access and Mission at High Latinx-Enrolling Urban Universities

Desiree D. Zerquera

University of San Francisco

Tracy Arámbula Turner

University of Vermont

Emerald Templeton

University of San Francisco

Abstract

This article examines administrators' perspectives related to embracing and fulfilling a diversity- and access-centered mission at urban-serving universities with high Latinx enrollment. Considering today's context of higher education—whereby access and opportunities for Latinx and other marginalized populations has become increasingly stratified—this timely work seeks to foster dialogue regarding how to best uphold an access-centered mission. To achieve this, we framed the study using a critical lens that defines leadership for access as a leadership model that must focus on transformation for the greater good. Our critical lens also critically interrogates the meaning and implementation of "diversity" agendas on America's college campuses. Organizational sensemaking offers an analytical frame to situate administrators' accounts and trigger sensemaking processes, particularly with respect to identity and enactment of the environment. The study analyzes interviews with 21 administrators across four urban campuses within the same state and examines the administrators' commitment to and fulfillment of an access- and diversity-centered mission. The study categorizes the administrators' perspectives into three key areas: 1) diversity as an assumed identity as a by-product of situation within a diverse region; 2) diversity as a double-edged sword; and 3) enactment of a diversity- and access-centered mission.

Keywords: access, leadership, higher education, mission management

Introduction

The U.S. system of higher education is a "driver of the nation's economy…an engine of social mobility…a key contributor to this nation's commitment to democratic values" (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005, p. 259). While a college degree is in many ways essential to attain life-long social benefits for individuals and society at large, structural inequalities disproportionately preclude access to higher education opportunities for large segments of our nation's population. Though access to higher education in the U.S. has expanded significantly in recent decades (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016), opportunity across the system has been stratified by race and ability to pay (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012). Attainment gaps persist along these same demographics, as institutions fail to retain and graduate Black (41%) and Latinx[1] (53%) students at the same rates as other students (59% for all students, 63% for White students) (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). For Latinx students in particular, while enrollment has increased, stratification into open access institutions and lagging success rates are of great concern (Krogstad, 2016), with nearly half of all Latinx college students enrolled in the community college (Excelencia in Education, 2015).

As our most selective institutions have become increasingly inaccessible to students of color (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Haycock, Lynch, & Engle, 2010; Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012) and as tuition has increased at an alarming rate (Baum & Ma, 2013), opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds have been primarily provided by a particular set of institutions, i.e., community colleges, Minority-Serving Institutions, and Urban-Serving universities. Consequently, these institutions serve our nation's most marginalized students at disproportionate rates. As a key example, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) have been conceived as those that serve large Latinx proportions of undergraduates (25% or more of student population). Though HSIs comprise just 13% of all U.S. colleges and universities, they enroll over 60% of all Latinx undergraduates, with the majority of these institutions situated within regions that have dense Latinx populations (Excelencia in Education, 2017). Though a number of these institutions have committed to supporting Latinx student success through

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[1] The term *Latinx* is used throughout this manuscript in line with a movement for usage of more gender-inclusive terminology for how we refer to those typically called Latina/o, Latino, Latin@, or Hispanic. Please see this volume's introduction for a more robust discussion on the utilization of *Latinx*.

their admissions, programs, curricula, and services (Andrade & Lundberg, 2016; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Torres & Zerquera, 2012), the extent to which many institutions are actually *serving* Latinx students versus merely passively enrolling them has been questioned by scholars (e.g., Andrade & Lundberg, 2016; Malcolm, Bensimon, & Dávila, 2010; Santiago, 2012; Torres & Zerquera, 2012). Similarly, Urban-Serving Research Universities (USRUs) are institutions that have a historical mission to serve their surrounding cities, including via mechanisms of access (Lynton & Elman, 1987; Zerquera, 2016). Questions about their commitment to this mission have been raised (e.g., Doran, 2015; Zerquera, 2014) given a context of diminished resources for higher education (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2014) and shifts in state policies that reward institutions based on measures that may unintentionally contradict access (Umbricht, Fernandez, & Ortagus, 2015). Thus, while an espoused commitment to serving Latinx students is present within these institutions relegated to do so by higher education opportunity structures, close attention to the ways in which these types of institutions perceive and enact their diversity- and access-centered missions is needed.

Higher education leaders play an important role in upholding equitable access, in fostering campus environments that are inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds, and in promoting success for historically marginalized groups. As captured by Bensimon (2005), "institutional actors, as a consequence of their beliefs, expectations, values, and practices, create or perpetuate unequal outcomes" (p. 101). While an espoused commitment to access and diversity is important, upholding this mission must go beyond simple recognition and be embedded in the mission, policies, and practices of an institution (Bell, 2004; Bensimon, 2005). University leaders often passionately highlight diversity measures while simultaneously supporting traditional markers and measures that exclude students of color and impede their success, resulting in "too much love and not enough justice" (Reider, 2004, p. 6). In reality, higher education today sorely needs more creative approaches to ensure an enacted mission that supports marginalized students while navigating the aforementioned context.

It is within these tensions and needs that we situate the current work. The purpose of this study is to critically examine leadership perspectives related to embracing and fulfilling a diversity- and access-centered mission, particularly as it pertains to serving Latinx students. By offering a social justice-focused lens to the accounts from administrators and other leaders within HSIs, we hope to contribute to the literature by offering a more in-depth understanding

of the approaches to this mission and how perceptions of these notions are shaped. To do so, we focus on urban-serving universities within the shifting higher education context, which as described includes stratification of opportunity for students of color, diminished resources, and pressures from ranking systems to conform to metrics misaligned with an urban-serving mission. Urban-serving universities provide an important context as a whole, as these institutions serve large proportions of students of color in their cities and states. To achieve this, we draw from interviews with 21 administrators from four urban-serving universities within the same state. These institutions each play a large role in educating the Latinx population in their state, with undergraduate Latinx enrollment of over 20 to nearly 70%. As such, two of these institutions meet criteria to be HSIs and the two others meet criteria as emerging HSIs (eHSIs)—institutions with Latinx undergraduate populations of 15-24% and which may potentially become HSIs in the next few years (Santiago, 2010). The findings from this study are important for informing the policies and practices of those committed to an access and diversity-centered mission, but also for those who may struggle to enact that commitment. These findings are also important for informing leaders of HSIs and other institutions committed to serving Latinx populations. We advance this work with the hope that this understanding will foster a creative imagination regarding how to work towards greater equity, particularly within the institutions facing the most urgent call to uphold opportunity for Latinxs in higher education.

Conceptual Framework

Leadership committed to diversity has the potential to shape an institution, affecting all aspects of higher education—students and faculty experiences, administrator recruitment, curricular reform, academic support, and institutional mission (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004). As we focus on perspectives of leaders and their own challenges in navigating their diversity-centered missions, we draw from the rich body of research pertaining to leadership in higher education focused on change for the greater good. Sensemaking in organizations is used to frame and connect these ideas to better understand these administrators' commitment to upholding an institutional commitment to access and diversity.

Transformational Leadership for Diverse Missions

Numerous studies underscore the benefits of fostering diversity in higher education, even among various institutional types (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999) yet the actual and potential role of leadership in fostering diversity remains elusive. Opinions regarding the definition of effective leadership in higher education vary widely among individuals along racial, class, and gender lines, shaping the perceptions and experiences of those in leadership roles (Bray, 2003; Minor & Tierney, 2005). Definitions of leadership also vary amongst students, staff, faculty, and administrators (Bensimon, 1989a, 1989b; Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Tierney, 1989) as well as by institutional type (Rosser, Johnsrud, & Heck, 2003). While varying roles and identities may offer different perspectives, DiTomaso and Hooijberg (1996) suggest leadership for diversity is "mostly about developing awareness of difference, rather than about leadership skills from the perspective of diversity" (p. 164). Turner (2007) argues that presidents that share certain identities can leverage their influence to serve underserved communities and nurture their educational institutions to achieve access and equity goals. Therefore, emphasizing the awareness that leaders have of diverse others as well as one's social identity as a leader is important.

In a classical but progressive defining of higher education leadership, Trow (1985) described leadership as taking "effective action to shape the character and direction of a college or university, presumably for the better" (p. 45). However, higher education leaders do not generally pursue their roles in the name of social justice (Birnbaum, 1988; Green, 1988). Even when administrators articulate a value for diverse and accessible campuses, they rarely support efforts that enact these values. For example, a survey of administrators in colleges and universities by Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte (2002) suggests that while 39% supported the availability of courses on the experience of racial minorities, only 17% indicated they would actually require those courses to be taught. Aguirre Jr. and Martinez (2006) posit that the challenges facing higher education demand new conceptual framings and practices in leadership to adapt to an increasingly diverse environment, yet they also admit that "...diversity is pregnant with turmoil when it challenges societal institutions to alter their structure" (p. 1). Thus, alternative perspectives of leadership are needed to advance leadership that works for the complex difficulties that diverse campuses present.

Leadership for diversity requires leadership beyond typical framing of administrative roles emphasizing management. As explained by Aguirre and Martinez (2006), "managing uses power and privilege to get people to subscribe to organizational expectations regarding performance, whereas leading promotes change as a vehicle for organizational members to transform organizations as a collective enterprise" (p. 72). They further argue that true leadership for diversity is "highly multidimensional and complex...about the intergroup dynamics that characterize colleges and universities in both structure and culture...nested in organizational roles and practices that promote changes in higher education's organizational culture" (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006, p. 39).

While others have advanced notions of transformational leadership within higher education (e.g., Hill, Green, & Eckel, 2001; Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006), Aguirre and Martinez (2006) center equity, defining transformational leadership as leadership that attempts to alter the values of exclusionary organizational cultures to better serve diverse populations. Transformational leadership requires higher education to respond to recognizable changes in society (Astin & Astin, 2000; Hartley, 2004). As argued by Aguirre and Martinez (2006):

> Transformation, unlike social change in general, is radical fundamental change that is the result of deliberate efforts by leaders and followers. As a result, transformational leadership is conceived as a type of leadership needed by organizations to respond and adapt to environmental change, that is, demographic and cultural diversity (p. 35).

Nonetheless, leadership for diversity as a means to achieve organizational transformation is often lacking (Mitchell & Kumar, 2001) and too few perceive leadership as an opportunity to enact organizational transformation (Diamond, 2002; Hill et al., 2001). In that, leadership becomes a mechanism to perpetuate traditional practices within an institution or institution piece-meal change, without enacting a perspective that fundamentally changes the values and policies that inform the practices of an organization.

Transformational leadership is enacted throughout the organization, including the cultures within and in the defining and enactment of an institution's mission. An organizational culture that is guided by a valued mission is the glue that binds an institution. While mission statements themselves often play a normative role rather than a functional one (Davies, 1986; Morphew & Hartley, 2006), some argue that mission statements may help organizations convey

a shared sense of purpose across an entire institution (Hartley, 2002). As such, mission statements both describe the current state of things and also what institutions strive to embody (Lang & Lopers-Sweetman, 1991), which may have little to do with written documents (Goodsell, 2011). In this way, they operate more so as the notion of an institution's purpose and functions.

A commitment to diversity must be enacted by a leader through the various channels of an institution. Transformational leadership has the potential to incorporate diversity into organizational culture holistically as a core value that extends throughout an institution (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006; Chang, 2002). More is needed to better understand the ways in which leaders enact diverse missions in their work.

Co-Optive and Color-Blind Approaches to Diversity Management

While transformational leadership invaluably enable campuses to serve diverse missions, many institutions fail to acknowledge diversity as an important attribute of their organizations (Jacobs, Cintron, & Canton, 2002; Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002; Turner & Myers, 2000), forcing diversity to the margins of institutions of higher education as a valued practice. Some have described this process as *co-optive*. Selznick (1949) describes a "co-optive" approach as a "process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence" (p. 34). Building upon this notion, Aguirre and Martinez (2006) argue that higher education has not embraced diversity as a core value but instead employs co-optive strategies that add diversity dimensions to the existing organizational culture. These qualifying tactics preclude the need for fundamental organizational change. Examples of this include: the addition of minoritized faculty, a focus on multiculturalism, and the provision of role models for minoritized students. These co-optive methods result in leadership that treats diversity as institutional window dressing.

Similarly, Contreras (1998) argued that tokenism in higher education incorporates demographic diversity into the existing normative and authoritative structure as a means to demonstrate that the organization values diversity. This minimizes threat without requiring true organizational transformation as diverse institutions. Brayboy (2003) likewise asserts that meaningful leadership for diversity is challenging because "predominantly white institutions of higher education often view diversity as a freestanding policy...that diversity is something that

can be implemented without necessarily changing the underlying structure of the institution and its day-to-day operations" (p. 73). In contrast, institutions of higher education must seek to integrate diversity by wholeheartedly transforming their organizational structures and thereby, their organizational cultures. Without doing so, these approaches devalue the complexity involved in upholding a diversity- and access-centered mission and simplify it to an additive outcome.

In other instances, color-blindness is utilized as an enticing but idealized approach to diversity leadership. However, color-blindness fails to acknowledge certain critical "societal phases and stages" by which the dominant group works to overcome bias, accept others as equals, and "systematically dismantle" inequitable social structures. Evolution toward a color-blind society requires that the perspectives and interests of other groups are considered when seeking solutions to societal and institutional problems (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006, p. 74).

Color-blind ideology has been critiqued for allowing oppression to persist via the guise of good intentions and equality. Bonilla-Silva (2009, 2014) describes four ideological frames that people use to explain racial outcomes (e.g., standardized test scores of Black students or graduation rates for Latinxs). Briefly, these frames include: abstract liberalism, which argues that equal opportunity exists and that individualism can explain racial differences; naturalism, which attributes racial inequalities to inevitable and natural occurrences; cultural racism, which justifies racial inequality by attributing outcomes to cultural attributes and generalizations about groups of people; and minimization, in which racism and discrimination are ignored and claimed to be nonexistent. Bonilla-Silva (2014) argues that these frames serve to rationalize policies and practices that cause inequitable outcomes for people of color. Leaders must not focus merely on the "old racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 62) but instead they must consider the ways held ideology "otherizes softly" (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 3). This perspective deepens the complexity involved in examining perceptions of diversity, but offers a necessary critical lens to understanding leaders' perspectives of access within their institutions. We include the framing of both co-optive and color-blind approaches to diversity to help interrogate more general descriptions of diversity that were offered by administrators in this study.

Sensemaking in Organizations

Combined with the perspectives presented above, the work of Weick (1995) and colleagues (2005) provides both theoretical and analytical frameworks for this study. Described as the "black box" between inputs and outcomes (Maitlis, 2005), sensemaking centers on the ongoing understandings that are created and interpreted through a co-constructed view of an organization. The concept of sensemaking builds upon several principles (Weick, 1995): all meaning is made of actions that have already occurred, sensemaking reflects what an organization considers itself to be, is ongoing and not static, depends on organizational members' own socialization processes and values, and is based upon plausibility and sufficiency rather than a sense of absolute truth.

While sensemaking processes occur within the organization, they are connected to a process of *enacting* the environment—engaging with the environment in light of a change in effort to adjust to the changes being imposed (Jennings & Greenwood, 2003). In the process of enactment, actions taken often reinforce previously held understandings of the organization's identity and reflect individual values and preconceptions (Jennings & Greenwood, 2003). Leaders play a significant role in driving sensemaking, particularly through the identification of the conditions that necessitate enactment (Pye, 2005).

Thus, through the lens provided by sensemaking and the perspectives of leadership and diversity presented above, the continuous engagement with the external environment plays an important role in reifying an institution's self-proclaimed identity and how that identity is enacted. This identity might be shaped by an espoused or understood mission which is largely upheld by leadership. As it pertains to a mission centered upon diversity and access, with our explicit focus on how this interacts with serving Latinx students in particular, careful consideration of the complexities involved is needed. When combined, these perspectives provide a critical organizational lens through which to analyze the perspectives of administrators and thereby, to better understand how their institutions consider access in light of their core institutional missions. This framing will aid our understanding of organizational members' perceptions of their own universities and enable us to better situate individual perspectives within the broader organizational context.

Methodology

This article seeks to critically examine leadership perspectives related to embracing and fulfilling a diversity- and access-centered mission within the context of Latinx-serving universities in light of changing higher education contexts. This work draws from a larger study that examined the perceptions of administrators from four Urban-Serving Research Universities (USRUs) across the same state, each located within large metropolitan regions and serving large proportions of Latinxs and other students of color. Twenty-one administrators from across four universities participated (see Table 1). The majority were White (12) and male (12), with a number of People of Color and female administrator participants also participating. Administrators were recruited via email based upon their position titles at their respective institutions. Participants represent the functional areas of student affairs, academic administration, admissions, and public relations.

Table 1

Study Participant Information

Participant Information	Number of Participants
Campus	
Campus A	5
Campus B	4
Campus C	6
Campus D	6
Race/Ethnicity	
Black/African American	4
Latina/o	4
White	12
Asian	1
Gender	
Male	12
Female	9

Participants were interviewed and asked to describe their perceptions of the following: 1) mission and identity, 2) excellence, and 3) challenges to mission fulfillment within their institution. Interviews were conducted either in person during campus site visits with one conducted via telephone and the other video conferencing. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed utilizing the constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data were initially analyzed using open coding for a preliminary review. A series of research team discussions informed by our conceptual framework helped to refine our codes, with particular attention dedicated to transformational leadership processes, co-optive and color-blind values of diversity, and enactment around identity, in particular. We conducted a second round of more selective coding for the manuscript at hand. Although we considered all interview data during this second round of coding, we focused in particular on those data that had been coded during the first round under the categories of access, diversity, and institutional identity. These engaged research team discussions ensured trustworthiness in the data. As our manuscript considered administrators' perspectives within the broader context of the demand for and barriers to access and diversity in higher education, our analysis focused on the common narratives emerging from these campus leaders, as opposed to consideration of differences between them. Though surely differences are present between narratives, it is beyond the scope of this article to center on examining these differences. We instead underscore the shared themes in these administrators' experiences. Following further research team discussions, three dominant themes emerged and are presented in the following section.

Findings

The perspectives of the administrators in this study centered upon three key areas: diversity as an assumed identity, diversity as a double-edged sword, and the enactment of a diversity- and access-centered mission.

Diversity as an Assumed Identity

Emerging as one of the primary themes across the institutions, participants discussed diversity as integral to their institutional identities. Diversity was described primarily with regards to students: as an institutional charge (e.g., we serve *diversity*), as a description of the

student body (e.g., our students are *diverse*), and as a goal to be achieved (e.g., we strive for *diversity*). Racial and ethnic descriptions were rarely used to define diversity, but participants used euphemisms such as: *first-generation*, *low-income*, *urban*, and *international* to depict the faces of diversity that comprised their student body.

Still, these descriptions widely centered diversity as a defining characteristic of the institution at all of the campuses. For example, in answering the question, *what makes your campus special?,* participants responded:

> *Campus A:* I think it's also the rich diversity of our student body too. We're about I think 42% now ethnic, you know in terms of racial diversity...
>
> *Campus C:* I think the number one thing that makes [this campus] special is our diversity. We're at approximately 56% minority student population, which is one of the highest in the State… and one of the highest in the nation.
>
> *Campus D:* I mean, one thing is obviously where we are and who we are...I don't think there are a lot of places that really have this mix of students…

These excerpts demonstrate how the diversity of the student body was often heralded as a key feature of their institutions, simultaneously acknowledging the overall lack of diversity within higher education as well as their unique institutional identity within that organizational milieu.

Some institutions explicitly emphasized this commitment. For instance, one participant shared their own perception of a commitment to access at their institution: "I kind of say it's in our DNA." Participants described practices that demonstrate that commitment, such as community partnerships, recruitment and support efforts focused on access and diversity. In contrast, others suggested that the diversity on their campuses was not necessarily tied to intentional efforts by the institution, but rather a function of how they were externally perceived or geographically situated, as reflected in the comment above by the participant on Campus D. Participants described their institution's surrounding communities to connote parity in characteristics with their student body. Concurrently, participants noted admission growth trends for student populations from outside of the surrounding community as well as efforts to support their recruitment. Therein, these descriptions reflect an embedded notion of diversity as an assumed identity resulting from an institutional mission that may actually be shifting.

Diversity as a Double-Edged Sword

Discussions of access and diversity reflected a widely-shared perception that upholding diversity may work *for* and at times *against* an institution. As captured in the comments above, it provides an institutional rallying point for these institutions, a central ethos that guides the collective understanding of the work they do. It was sometimes described as a recruitment tool for students and faculty alike, and provided connection points with the surrounding community, particularly helpful for political leverage with that community.

Despite the celebration of a mission centered on access and diversity, the diversity of the institution frequently was depicted as approximate to a liability, and for some, as something they actively worked to circumvent. These discussions were almost entirely motivated by resources. As one participant stated, "'Sin azucar no hay pais' [*without sugar there is no country*]. So, I would like to translate that into money: without the necessary funding, we cannot realize [our] mission, or we can only realize part of [our] mission." The dependence upon resources is viewed, at least partly, as a necessity for implementing the access and diversity mission these institutions espouse.

According to participants, resources came in two forms: monetary currency from state appropriations but also from prestige pursuits. These differing but similar perspectives are exemplified in the following:

> *Campus B:* What I mean by the students that we're admitting, we are striving for
> AAU so that means our academic profile continues to increase.
> *Campus D:* We're going to have to start to say no to some people. We just are...
> Performance metrics [the base funding connected to performance relative to
> other institutions in the state] can be scary…Fortunately, the urban institutions
> are still faring okay, but at a certain point we're all going to be at the bottom.

In both of these accounts, participants reflected an understanding that the values within these resource streams were in direct conflict to an access- and diversity-centered mission, or more specifically, to the students served by it. These specific accounts further reflect a prevalent sense that the status quo for institutional mission enactment had been adjusted or was expected to face an inevitable shift.

Enactment of a Diversity- and Access-Centered Mission

While depictions of diversity were somewhat constant, leaders across campuses demonstrated varying understandings regarding how their missions were understood and enacted. At the most fundamental level, mission appeared to be grounded in serving the needs of students on their campuses. For example, administrators heralded their institutional commitment to hiring faculty and staff who more closely reflected the diversity of the student body.

However, there were clear distinctions implied by accounts of administrators regarding their approaches to serving diverse students and to serving students who were not necessarily within their access focus. Consider the following two accounts of services provided on campus:

> *Campus B*: We're admitting students who are already academically prepared, but those students are also very involved before they come here, so they want to be involved when they get here. We are now more intentional…in making sure that we have programming throughout the semester and that we're looking at the population of students that we're serving to make sure that we're programming to those student needs.
>
> *Campus C*: [W]e have a high number of underrepresented students here, but the attrition rate tends to be higher from the represented students…This program is sort of a holistic approach…and it's very, very intentional. It's taking services to students, or students to the services, versus 'these are all your resources, if you need them, go get them.' Because we know that these students won't actively seek some out and if they do, they tend to do it at a point where they've sort of already fallen through the cracks, or it's too late to try to assist them. It's a very intentional approach that we take in order to be sure that the student has those support systems and opportunities to seek out engagement.

Both administrators frame their thinking in terms of serving students' needs. However, while newly-served populations of students were offered opportunities based upon enriching the student experience within a traditional paradigm of student engagement, whereas the diverse students' needs were approached through a need-based, but possibly deficit-oriented lens.

Furthermore, and related to the points previously raised, serving diverse students while honoring a diversity mission at times necessitated strategic navigation. This represented a

circumventing strategy that was not reflected in discussions of, for example, providing more on-campus housing facilities for out-of-state students. That is, serving diverse students was something that institutions needed to creatively approach; whereas providing resources that serve high-achieving students could be done more explicitly. One participant described such a strategy: "We continue to invest in National Merit Scholars even though people wonder 'how do you do that with access in the mission?' but doing that allows us to bring in more students at a lower level." This works because performance levels offset class scores to improve the scores of the institutions incoming class. Another widely-cited approach included transfer programs that defers university applicants to nearby community colleges to admit at a later date. One participant illustrated this phenomenon when she described spring as the "access term." This reflects greater institutional flexibility in the range of students who can be admitted outside of the traditional incoming first-year fall class. All of these efforts, however, were described as approaches that enacted a diversity-centered mission, reflecting an awareness of the challenges inherent therein.

Discussion and Implications

This work set out to examine the perspectives of leaders working within institutions that have historically espoused a diversity-serving mission. Given the context of higher education today, whereby access has become increasingly stratified and opportunities limited for Latinx populations and other marginalized groups, this work is intended to foster and contribute to conversation regarding how to best uphold an access-centered mission to benefit outcomes for all students, particularly within these institutions that serve such large proportions of Latinx students. To do so, we framed this study through a critical lens that defined leadership for access as one which must focus on transformation for the greater good and critically interrogates the meaning and implementation of a diversity agenda. Organizational sensemaking was used as an analytical frame to situate the accounts by administrators and trigger sensemaking processes, particularly regarding identity and enactment of the environment.

Role of Collective Sensemaking

As noted earlier in this manuscript, collective sensemaking by an organization upholds the ideas an organization embraces regarding itself. In that lens, it is difficult for an organization to face their limitations when it comes to notions of racial equity. A shared narrative centered upon a historical mission inhibited leaders from viewing their own contradictions regarding how they described, approached, and enacted diversity-centered missions. This played out within our findings.

For many participants, enactment processes, such as consideration of external pressures and comparisons to peer institutions, drew upon sensemaking to reaffirm a particularly-held narrative rather than drawing a critical eye inwards. For instance, while administrators widely lauded the significance of diversity and access, mixed messages were frequently conveyed that conflicted with this mission. Though some offered critique, it was coupled with rationalization of practices or descriptions of circumventing strategies. Though some of the strategies and initiatives described equity-centered goals in their consideration, they seem to fall short of providing the transformational power needed to re-shift sensemaking around mission enactment, pointing to significant misalignments between espoused commitments and their fulfillment.

Diversity in the Age of Color-Blind Racism

The institutions in this study are distinct in that they make explicit their commitments to upholding diversity in higher education. However, the findings of this study point to pervasive dominant ideologies regarding diverse students and how to fulfill a diversity-centered mission in light of environmental pressures that may impede the accomplishment of these significant goals. In many ways, diversity was described as a commodity—a thing of value that can be exchanged. However, like all commodities, the value of diversity to an institution, as depicted by participants in this study, fluctuates. This somewhat co-optive approach to diversity (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002, 2006) raises questions about the ways in which market-based values have permeated the way we think about who is deserving of higher education.

In particular, some of the administrator comments were deficit-oriented and pejorative towards the diverse students they espoused to serve. This likely did not represent the internal values of the leaders to whom we spoke, but rather, reflects the dominant ideologies of the

higher education system. This was particularly reflected in the descriptions of serving students. Serving Students of Color was viewed as a costly endeavor in need of circumvention. In contrast, serving high-achieving students did not require such a strategy. These representations reflect the pervasiveness of color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, 2014). Though institutions of higher education in the U.S. no longer uphold explicit policies barring admission by race, it is clear from these findings that the ways in which "racism lite" (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 3) manifests itself vis-a-vis the rationalization of oppressive frameworks. These points raise important recommendations regarding what leaders and researchers can do to better challenge these systems and foster more equity in higher education.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

As higher education opportunities become increasingly stratified in light of rising costs and policy-making that favors particular models of higher education (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), institutions with this shared commitment to a diversity-centered mission must be supported to achieve their missions. Furthermore, their leaders must be prepared to enact these goals. The restrictive context of funding provides real challenges to these higher education organizations and their leaders; research has shown us the potential and realized implications of these constraints in various areas of institutional activity (e.g., Fowles, 2014; Jaeger & Thornton, 2005; Jaquette & Curs, 2015; Jaquette, Curs, & Posselt, 2016). The US system of higher education can, and must, do better.

Greater preparation of higher education leaders focused on cultivating critical and transformational leaders is needed. This preparation, both within formal education and professional spaces, should focus on fostering skills in facilitating difficult conversations regarding what it means to cultivate environments grounded in the foundations of inclusive excellence and equitable access. This would further require more complicated conceptions of diversity and access cultivated through centering and challenging deficit notions of communities of color and unpacking the ideologies of what Bonilla-Silva (2009) calls the *new racism*. True transformational leaders centered on upholding an access and diversity mission within their universities must be able to be more than co-optive and color-blind but forge ahead to better serve our Latinx and other marginalized students.

In doing so, leaders could take an active role in challenging dominant sensemaking processes to shift them for greater awareness of the expansive reach of inequity. This means intervening during the collective sensemaking processes that occur, for instance, during strategic planning sessions. These engagements require deep consideration of who the institution is and who it aims to be (Hinton, 2012). Reaching these shared ideas must involve critical reflection as well on the ways these types of efforts do more to rationalize and reflect dominant ideologies (i.e., color-blindness) than to push the vision of an institution towards one that better upholds equity. Research can support these efforts by extending more critical conceptions of organizations. As sensemaking centers upon how and what we see and understand, without cognitive frames that support critical consciousness, sensemaking falls short of its potential to shift the range of possibilities of action for leaders and researchers alike. Organizational literature should forge sensemaking that challenges organizations' actions rather than rationalizing them, and position that process upon achieving equity in society.

Additionally, the findings here point to the chronic and complex relationship between diversity and resources, adding qualitative insights into ways these relationships are complicated by dominant ideologies regarding diversity. Institutions that espouse commitments to diversity and access, like HSIs, in particular are subject to pressures for prestige (Daly & Dee, 2006; Zerquera, 2016). Particularly within the changing context of higher education in which resources for public education have declined, and institutions have adapted to a *new normal* of funding (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2014), considering prestige pursuits at these institutions is imperative as it may potentially exacerbate stratification of opportunity for students of color. This is particularly alarming within institutional contexts like those of our study which either by mission or default enroll large proportions of Latinx students. More research and collaboration between researchers and policy-makers is needed to advance strategic and critical ways of upholding access and diversity.

Conclusion

As our nation becomes increasingly diverse, our institutions of higher learning must mirror, celebrate, and embrace that diversity or risk facing institutional upheaval that is characteristic of so many campuses across our country today. Though many institutions and administrators espouse a commitment to serving Latinx students, close attention to the ways in

which these types of institutions perceive and enact their diversity- and access-centered missions is needed. The accounts of these administrators reflect belief in their espoused missions and a genuine commitment to the diverse students they serve. However, the ideologies regarding these missions and students illuminate challenges in upholding these service commitments. If we are to better serve our Latinx and marginalized populations, more must be done to push beyond our current frame of what is possible and to forge ahead with new ways of thinking and action.

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