Organizational Identity, Outcomes, and Culture at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Alejandro G. Rios

This paper addresses the ever-changing student populations in higher education and examines the ways that Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) support their Latinx students through academic success, cultural validation, institutional mission, self-awareness, and an institution's organizational identity. By understanding the unique challenges that Latinx students face, promoting a culturally validating environment, and prioritizing positive organizational outcomes, HSIs can move towards a Latinx-Serving Institutional Typology.

Institutions of higher education are committed to supporting all of their students from the moment of enrollment up until graduation. These institutions take pride in their enrollment numbers, retention rates, graduate employment rates, and overall academic reputation which they seek to improve each year. However, when we see how entrenched colleges and universities are in their efforts to solely provide students support for their own professional and academic advancement, institutions fail to meet the growing needs of their ever-changing student populations. Trends now show the increasing diversity of students entering college; Latinx students are the largest minority group at four-year colleges and universities (Fry, 2011), yet they are said to have fewer college degrees and postsecondary participation rates compared to all other racial and ethnic groups (Martinez & Cervera, 2012). Inversely, institutions that solely focus on providing an inclusive, affirming, and cultural environment leave Latinx students with less support in relation to their vocational aspirations. To allow for optimal student growth, institutions must focus on providing a healthy balance between academic support and identity development.

Today, colleges and universities are called to reevaluate how they are supporting their students of color—specifically Latinx students—from enrollment to graduation to allow for increased representation and equitable educational opportunities for a population so vast yet underserved. To argue this point further, Pascarella (2006) states, “institutional policies designed to promote racial/ethnic diversity in an undergraduate student body are not simply the projection of a “correct” political or ideological agenda, they have solid empirical support” (Pascarella, 2006, p. 511). It is evident that college environments thrive with a diverse population of students, however, why are Latinx students consistently the population that have difficulty navigating institutions of higher education? Researchers will argue that without the economic and social resources that their white classmates come with, Latinx students are ill-equipped and often left to their own devices in their postsecondary, educational journey (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). This is yet another example of how Latinx students are institutionally ignored, underserved, and inequitably regarded. To holistically understand the challenges that Latinx students face in regard to matriculation, retention, and graduation from institutions of higher education, we are to critically examine where institutions are falling short. This starts with understanding
and acknowledging the needs of Latinx students. What makes the Latinx student experience distinct and what are institutions doing to serve their Latinx population? This paper will take a closer look at the challenges Latinx students face, bring awareness to their needs, address the importance of identity and culture to ultimately maximize their college experiences specifically at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). For Latinx students to succeed, institutions must take it upon themselves to prioritize and produce 1) equitable, academic outcomes that match an institution’s organizational identity, and 2) a culture that enhances racial and ethnic identity development. Together, these two priorities will allow Latinx students to grow both intellectually and personally, while creating the conditions for a Latinx-Serving institutional typology.

Latinx Students

Throughout society, government documents, and institutions of higher education, there are a multitude of identifiers that are used to describe this population of students. As mentioned earlier, these terms are important to distinguish because of their historical, and cultural underpinnings. Moreover, it is important to consider how individuals choose to refer to themselves, as it also gives us an indication of their own understanding of their identity and developmental journey. This process which we call social identity development plays a significant role on students’ college experiences, considering it involves a great deal of self-reflection, deliberation, and acceptance. At its core, social identity development is the process of how people come to understand their own social identities, and how these identities may influence their life experiences (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Social identity development, specifically regarding ethnic identity, will remain a vital aspect to consider with Latinx students. This section will outline the meaning and history behind certain ethnic identifiers, why Latinx students find their identity salient in their college experiences, and how their ethnic identity development might influence their perception of their own academic capabilities.

Defining Hispanic and Latinx

The term Hispanic was officially created by the United States Bureau of the Census. This term includes people of Spanish origin with cultural ties to Spain. Explained further, Hispanic identity “reflects the long colonial history of Latin America, during which racial mixing between white Europeans, indigenous Americans, and slaves from Africa and Asia occurred” (López & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016). Hispanic also connotes a shared culture and experience with the Spanish language—this excludes people from Brazil whom vastly speak Portuguese.

The term Latino and Latina are used to refer to people originating from or having heritage related to Latin America. This includes Central America, South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. The term Latino/a also removes the imposed connection to Spain. By utilizing the term Latino/a, Latinos are thus rejecting colonization, challenging identity imperialism, and allows Latinx people to reclaim their identity in a way that feels more authentic (Comas-Díaz, 2001). For some Latinx students, they will grapple with differentiating race and ethnicity as a result from the historical conquest, genocide, and racial blending of Spanish and Indigenous people. Furthermore, Garcia (2018a) asserts that it is paramount to recognize the effects of imperialism and colonially of power that has subjugated Latinx students within
education. For these reasons, I decide to use the term Latinx to sever European ties and reaffirm native identity.

As it continues to increase in popularity, the term Latinx serves as a derivative of the term Latino/a and can be used as a gender-inclusive term that disrupts the gender binary and acknowledges the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ Latinxs (Patterson, 2017). With the variety of terms and historical underpinnings, it is evident that Latinx students place considerable value in their identity development. As a result, Latinx students will self-identify with a term that culturally affirms their upbringing and experiences which continues to evolve over time. HSIs should be cognizant of the identity development process and empower their Latinx students to choose their identifiers heuristically.

Identity Salience

Starting college is a pivotal milestone for many students. It symbolizes new beginnings, the precursors of a successful career, maturation, and self-discovery (Patton et al., 2016). Students do not expect or understand the growth they will experience until they actually get to college. In fact, students often overlook the exploration and meaning-making process they undergo in relation to their own social identities. Depending if their school environment largely reflects their home environments, students can even be unaware of their development (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). Consequently, transitioning to college may be a seamless process for students entering comparable environments, whereas students who have contrasting home and school environments may experience a level of dissonance and challenge. As it relates to social identity, students increasingly recognize the level of importance an identity has on their self-concept. This is a concept that researchers refer to as salience (Garcia, Patrón, Ramirez, & Hudson, 2018).

For Latinx students, ethnicity, language, family, and culture are central to their understanding of social identity (Bordas, 2013); Latinx students seek a level of support that specifically addresses each area (Flink, 2011). Consequently, attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI) can present a cultural challenge for Latinx students when they may come from diverse neighborhoods and communities, making their ethnic identity increasingly salient in white spaces. In a college or university context, Latinx students may experience these pressures, discrimination, and hyper-awareness when interacting with their peers. Assimilation and acculturation may seem to be the only survival mechanisms that these students resort to. In addition, the competitive environments that colleges and universities give rise to particularly make negative stereotypes about Latinx students more difficult to evade. As a result, Latinx students internalize these stereotypes and grow to believe them (Garcia et al., 2018). Yet again, Latinx students are left to fend for themselves and endeavor to defeat these negative stereotypes. This specific challenge that Latinx students face seem to suggest the dissonance and conflict between ethnic identity and academic identity, making Latinx identity development increasingly salient for students. Latinx students are looking for institutions that are conducive for both their personal and professional growth.

Academic Self-Concept

To complicate matters further, Latinx students develop their own academic self-concept simultaneously with their social identity development. Academic self-concept is closely coupled with psychosocial factors regarding academic achievement and how a student perceives their own scholarly
capabilities (Cuellar, 2014). With the challenges, pressures, and negative stereotypes that Latinx students face, as mentioned previously, there are stark differences between self-reported academic self-concept between first-year Latinx students and their non-Latinx peers ranging across multiple academic disciplines—most notably science and math (Cuellar, 2014). Although research shows that a student’s self-reported academic self-concept is predicted to increase from their first-year to graduation, Cuellar (2014) points out that Latinx students are still especially vulnerable to report lower levels of academic self-concepts for reasons such as cultural disconnect, lack of representation, and the lower racial/ethnic status Latinx people experience within the United States. Other factors such as self-doubt, isolation, exposure to negative racial and ethnic stereotypes, discrimination, and lack of mentoring all present particular difficulties for Latinx students (Núñez, 2009). It is imperative to ensure Latinx students are fortifying their academic self-concept because it can have a detrimental effect on their likelihood to persist to graduation. Another critical area mentioned that can strengthen Latinx students’ academic self-concept is the availability of faculty support. Faculty members can indirectly have an effect on a student’s self-confidence—this happens when faculty pay particular attention and engage with their Latinx students to ensure their academic adjustment and academic success (Cuellar, 2014). Faculty relationships inherently build a student’s network and social capital, which is known to be an institutionalized status that serves as a power resource to access higher positionality and otherwise privileged spaces (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). When Latinx students feel supported by their faculty, self-confidence, in turn, will rise. The social capital that Latinx students seek, including relationships with friends, professionals, faculty, administrators, or other Latinx mentors are all examples of the community that these students are hoping to gain. Research shows that out of all non-academic factors, academic self-confidence is the strongest predictor of college retention (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). It is clear that self-confidence is closely connected with the idea of academic self-concept. Together, healthy levels of academic self-concept and identity salience allow for Latinx students to maximize their college outcomes and performance. These two aspects are also what make institutions what we consider to be Latinx-Serving.

Understanding Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)

Given that HSIs were first federally recognized in 1992, there is a lack of history that HSIs can rely on when constructing a mission and organizational identity while keeping in mind the Latinx students that attend their institution (Garcia, 2018b). HSIs are not established for the sole intention of primarily serving Latinx students—at least not in beginning. All HSIs are developed over time, based on the changing student demographics. Consequently, HSIs are called to establish a clear organizational identity reflective of the institution’s mission, while addressing the unique needs of Latinx students regarding their academic success and cultural validating environments. This section will focus on what HSIs are, what their purpose is, and how their organizational outcomes and organizational culture are equally important in fulfilling a Latinx-Serving typology.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions Defined
According to the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU), a Hispanic-Serving Institution is defined as “a
nonprofit, accredited college, university, or system/district in the U.S. or Puerto Rico, where total Hispanic enrollment constitutes a minimum of 25% of the total enrollment at the undergraduate or graduate level” (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2017a). In order for an institution to officially receive federal support and institutional benefits, they must apply for HACU membership to become a fully recognized HSI; membership is renewed annually. With over 470 institutions recognized as HSIs, combined, both HSIs and emerging HSIs (eHSIs), what we consider to be postsecondary institutions enrolling 15%-24% Latinx students, outnumber all Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), including Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs) (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). Looking at HACU’s mission “To Champion Hispanic Success in Higher Education”, HSIs are committed to foster an educational, identity-conscious, environment through the improvement of quality and access of postsecondary educational opportunities (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2017b).

With Latinx students as the focus of HSIs, these institutions are tasked with providing the professional, social, and academic support for their Latinx students. Moreover, when an institution voluntarily adopts the HSI designation and applies for financial support, institutions thereby suggest a level of commitment to their Latinx students (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). This level of commitment can look different depending on an institution’s location, institution type, organizational identity, and student perception. With an HSI defined as an institution with a minimum of 25% enrolled Latinx students, HSIs also have the possibility to be considered a Predominately White Institution (PWI). For this reason, an institution’s location will be largely impacted by the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood. Researchers argue that an institution’s geographic location is largely related to the level of student acculturation to white culture (Garcia et al., 2018). A common concern that arises from this is if Latinx students are outnumbered by their white peers at an HSI, how can institutions ensure that Latinx students are receiving the support that HSIs commit to? In addition, Pascarella (2006) asserts in his ten directions for future research on college impact that researchers must extend and expand their inquiry to students, and institutions that have historically been ignored. With support from HACU, HSIs are called to meet the needs of their Latinx students who have historically and institutionally been underserved. These institutions hold the potential to imbue academic success within their Latinx students, focus on producing strong educational outcomes for their Latinx students, and creating a culture that promotes their racial and ethnic identity development. This is the mission that HACU sets forth.

**Organizational Identity**

Institutions also grapple with the lack of familiarity and promotion of HSIs—students do not know what an HSI is, increasing the likelihood for students to overlook opportunities for growth. Researchers argue that organizational identity is “closeted, political, and idealistic, but rarely embraced or advertised” (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018, p.192). Consequently, an institution’s organizational identity is essential in the development of institutional purpose. An HSI’s purpose commonly follows as a response to the question “who are we as an organization?” It is difficult for institutions to answer this question especially since most HSIs were not originally founded for the main purpose of serving Latinx students (MacDonald, Botti, & Clark, 2007). HSIs, as
a result, must develop a revamped organizational identity to center and prioritize their Latinx students. In their research, Garcia and Dwyer (2018) show how organizational identity can increase individual outcomes, which include students’ sense of belonging, satisfaction, and performance. Organizational identity is significantly contingent on student perception. In other words, while institutions can market and promote their institutional mission as they want, its true effect comes directly from how students perceive their organizational identity. As a response, students have reported both positive and negative sentiments regarding HSIs. One student stated that classifying an institution as an HSI was exclusionary because it implied that their institution only focused on their Latinx students and disregarded students who identified as Black, Asian, Native-American, and white. This student concluded that HSIs are inherently diminishing, dismissing, and underserving other racial and ethnic student populations. Another student reported that attending an HSI is derogatory, saying that minority-serving institutions are inferior because institutions are perpetuating racial/ethnic segregation. Despite these two dissenting opinions, HSIs are not meant to be exclusionary spaces. Garcia asserts that, “...[students] should be from various racial, ethnic, cultural, national, and religious backgrounds and united by their desire to disrupt dominant structures such as white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, Christian dominance, and racist nativism” (Garcia, 2018a, p. 137). Organizational Outcomes

In her research, Garcia (2017) constructed an ideal Latinx-Serving organizational identity based on the organizational outcomes that stemmed from institutionalized ways of knowing. Exactly 47 administrators, faculty, and student affairs staff were interviewed, along with 41 undergraduate students. These interviews touched on six indicators, three of which were ideal organizational outcomes, and three of which related to an ideal organizational culture. The three indicators that reflected organizational outcomes included graduation, graduate school enrollment, and employment (Garcia, 2017). Inevitably, out of the six indicators, graduation was the most emphasized. Graduation and graduation rates, unanimously understood as the ultimate goal for all students, staff and faculty, has shown to be the most coveted aspect for HSIs. Because graduation has become a legitimized outcome for institutions (Garcia, 2017), especially considering the population that HSIs are serving, many administrators, faculty, and staff rely on these numbers to accurately assess the institution’s success. Next, participants also suggested that graduate school enrollment should be considered as an institutional component to become Latinx-Serving. In the eyes of faculty and staff, continuing an education past a baccalaureate level is a true marker of success. However, participants would be remiss to not acknowledge the social, financial, and privileged statuses needed to enter academic spaces such as graduate school. Finally, with employment being the third and last indicator in relation to ideal organizational outcomes, landing a job, internship, and professional experiences are each significant strides for Latinx students. Many of them understand college education as a pathway that leads towards a promising
career. Administrators, faculty, staff, and students all addressed and confirmed the importance of post-graduate employment. With an emphasis placed on legitimized, organizational outcomes that institutions of higher education should be producing, an HSI’s organizational identity may fall short in regard to providing a conducive environment for Latinx racial, ethnic, and cultural identity development. Institutions may continue to grapple with the meaning of having an organizational identity for serving Latinx students, however, HSIs must also be concerned with the resonance of HSI identity with students (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). Because an HSI’s organizational identity is connected with Latinx identity, campus support systems should reflect the needs of the student population and not simply focus on their professional, and educational advancement. Outcomes and culture both compliment students’ experiences. Without the inclusion of both, Latinx students do not receive as much of a holistic college experience that HSIs intend to produce.

**Organizational Culture**

As alluded to earlier, the remaining three indicators correspond to the organizational culture of the institution—otherwise known as the environment that enhances the racial and ethnic identity development of students. These three indicators include community engagement, positive campus climate, and support programs (Garcia, 2017). Fourteen participants brought up community engagement in their interviews and highlighted the importance of giving back to the nearby schools in the community. Participants stated that if nearby high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools are not performing well, then it will add yet another barrier for Latinx students to matriculate into institutions of higher education. In her book, The Power of Latino Leadership, Bordas (2013) accents the collectivist culture that Latinx families are brought up to be. True Latinx leaders are ready to serve and contribute to their communities. Leadership is understood as one among equals. She states: “In We cultures, leaders function as stewards of their communities. Latinos are therefore expanding the focus and scope of servant leadership to community stewardship…which involves may people, develops their capacities, and uses power for the public good” (Bordas, 2013, p. 137). Community engagement hits Bordas’ sixth principle of Latino leadership, Juntos (or collective community stewardship), in its absolute sense. This indicator is a prime example to show how community engagement can transcend its sole function. Latinx students are strategically taught to infuse their ethnicity and identity into their leadership.

As for positive campus climate, participants brought up how creating a “consciousness of being an HSI” will give Latinx students an atmosphere that they can thrive in. An additional piece to campus climate is the manner in which HSIs are creating what Museus (2014) calls culturally engaging campus environments. Both directly and positively correlated with a student’s individual influences (including sense of belonging, academic dispositions, and academic performance), the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model was designed to measure characteristics that are optimal for creating inclusive and equitable campus environments (Museus, 2014). Consequently, HSIs will want to focus on the methods that their campus environments are culturally relevant for their enrolled student population. In fact, many of the CECE indicators reflect a majority of the six indicators that Garcia (2017) found. CECE indicators such as culturally relevant
knowledge, cultural community service, meaningful cross-cultural engagement, cultural validation, humanized educational environments, and holistic support, all align with the six indicators of an ideal Latinx-Serving organizational identity. Moreover, research shows that HSI environments can provide spaces for Latinx students to explore their intersectional identities, take pride in their racial/ethnic backgrounds, and enhance students’ overall interactions with other Latinx identified peers and faculty who speak Spanish and have knowledge about Latinx culture (Garcia et al., 2018). Because of this, researchers also found that Latinx students who attend HSIs and eHSIs gain access to spaces, both curricular and co-curricular, that offer them opportunities to explore their identities within supportive contexts. Campus climate is arguably one of the most impactful Latinx-Serving indicators for Latinx students and their own identity development.

The last indicator Garcia (2017) found in her research was support programs for Latinx students. These support programs included co-curricular activities, student organizations, cultural awareness, campus initiatives, and mentorship and alliance programs to name a few. At its core, these are programs that retain and build community within the Latinx student population. For HSIs, retention is critical and paralleled to their responsibility and commitment to champion the success of Latinx students. These support programs serve as supplemental, yet equally educational, activities outside of their structured academic work. With the infusion of both organizational outcomes and organizational culture, Latinx students at HSIs will receive an academically promising, culturally validating, and purposeful college experience. This is what constitutes an HSI to be truly Latinx-Serving.

### Latinx-Serving Typology

Aside from the federal support and benefits that HSIs receive, our main concern is how HSIs utilize and maximize their educational, professional, and social opportunities for Latinx students to grow and succeed in a supportive, affirming environment. Rooted in institutional and cultural theories, Garcia’s (2017) Typology of HSI Organizational Identities proposes four types of HSIs based on the extent that the institution produces desirable organizational outcomes for Latinx students, and the extent that it enacts a culture that enhances the Latinx student experience (see Figure 1) (Garcia, 2018b). Similar to the ideal Latinx-Serving organizational identity indicators described earlier, these desirable organizational outcomes include graduation, post graduate job placement, and post-baccalaureate degree attainment. As for organizational culture, some examples include a positive campus climate, support services, and community engagement.

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<th>HIGH Latinx-Producing</th>
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Figure 1. Typology of HSI organizational identities (Garcia, 2018b)
Garcia states, “the typology incorporates both outcomes and culture, complicating the ways in which an organization may serve Latinx students” (Garcia, 2018b, p.114). As illustrated in the chart above, Garcia takes into consideration how organizational members construct an “ideal” HSI identity and how these indicators show up in practice. For an HSI to be classified as “Latinx-Serving”, the HSI must produce an equitable number of organizational outcomes and enacting a culture that enhances the educational and racial/ethnic experience of Latinx students (Garcia, 2018b). Simply put, HSIs should produce Latinx degree completers that reflect their Latinx enrollers and enhance Latinx students’ racial/ethnic identity development. Despite “Latinx-Serving” being the ideal typology for HSIs to employ, four out of the six midwestern HSIs that Garcia studied fit in both typologies that have a combination of one high and one low aspect of organization identity—these typologies include “Latinx-Producing” and “Latinx-Enhancing”. This significant finding corroborates the argument that most HSIs focus solely on one aspect of organizational identity and fail to infuse both to considered and classified as a “Latinx-Serving” institution. With only one out of six institutions that were studied and deemed as “Latinx-Serving”, HSIs must reevaluate how they are working to create inclusive and conducive environments that both advance their educational outcomes and culturally enrich the experience for all their Latinx students.

Conclusion

It is known that HSIs can provide Latinx students opportunities for curricular and co-curricular experiences, while also providing them a sense of belonging and pride to engage with their ethnic identity in a meaningful way (Garcia et al., 2018). Focusing on the power and influence that identity salience and academic self-concept have on Latinx students, HSIs can continue to craft and improve their organizational identity, thus increasing student engagement and satisfaction (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). Together, both academic self-concept and identity salience can be positively influenced by an institution’s organizational identity and its ability to center their support towards Latinx students. Although there is no guarantee that creating a culture that embraces Latinidad directly increases the graduation and completion rates of Latinx students at HSIs (Garcia, 2018b), these conditions ultimately have an effect on students’ persistence. Consequently, HSIs should be cognizant of the multiple aspects, indicators, and support networks that can guide institutions to effectively serve their Latinx students in congruence with a Latinx-Serving typology. It is a shared responsibility between administrators, faculty, staff, and the institution itself to zealously champion a promising, equitable, and transformative educational experience for their Latinx students.

Alejandro is a recent graduate of Indiana University’s Higher Education & Students Affairs program and an alumnus of Loyola University Chicago. He served as a Graduate Supervisor in Residential Programs and Services. He is committed to building inclusive environments for students of color, Latinx students, and first-generation students in higher education.

References


