

**Is “Business as Usual” Enough to be Hispanic-Serving?  
Becoming a Hispanic-Serving Research Institution**

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## Introduction

In 2016 the U.S. Latino/a population grew to nearly 58 million people, serving as “the principal driver of U.S. demographic growth [and] accounting for half of the national population growth since 2000” (Flores, 2017, para. 1). Further, demonstrating a 2% growth rate from 2015 to 2016, Latinos/as are the second fastest-growing racial/ethnic group in the U.S (para. 4). Focusing specifically on education, “over the past decade, the Hispanic high school dropout rate has declined and college enrollment has increased” (Krogstad, 2016, para. 1). As a result of these changing demographics, the number and type of Hispanic-Serving Institutions<sup>1</sup> (HSIs) has continued to increase.

In 2000, 229 institutions were identified as HSIs. Just over 15 years later that number more than doubled to 472 institutions; combined these colleges and universities enroll 1,973,344 Latino/a students in 21 states and Puerto Rico (Excelencia in Education [Excelencia], 2018b). HSIs, which represent only 15% of non-profit colleges and universities, enroll 65% of Latino/a undergraduates (Excelencia, 2018b), demonstrating the significant role they have come to play in a relatively short period of time (Hirt, 2006) not only for Latino/a students but for higher education broadly. Exploring the list of HSIs further, of the 472 HSIs, 192 (41%) offer graduate degrees and 60% of those, or 115 institutions, offer doctoral degrees (Excelencia, 2018c). This is notable as “historically the vast majority of HSIs have included community colleges and teaching-focused comprehensive universities” (Marin & Pereschica, 2017, p. 155). Ultimately, these data highlight not only the increase in the number of HSIs but also the changing nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Hispanic-Serving Institutions are identified in the Higher Education Act as degree-granting, public or private nonprofit institutions with full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollments of at least 25% Latino/a students (HACU, 2017). Institutions with an HSI designation do not automatically receive additional resources or benefits. Instead, they are eligible to apply for federal grants established to support Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

HSIs, offering important reasons to better understand this evolving group of higher education institutions.

In addition to the current list of HSIs, 333 institutions in 36 states and Washington, DC are described as “emerging HSIs”—institutions with 15–24% undergraduate FTE Latino/a enrollment that, with continued enrollment increases, have the potential to become HSIs (Excelencia, 2018a). This means there are 805 institutions that are either an HSI or an emerging HSI. Notably, there are only 14 states in which there is neither an HSI nor an emerging HSI; 15 states and Washington, DC that only have emerging HSIs; and 21 states that have both HSIs and emerging HSIs. Emerging HSIs are, therefore, an important part of the broader HSI conversation as they offer an understanding of a shifting higher education landscape. For example, although currently HSIs are fairly evenly split between two- and four-year institutions, 66% of emerging HSIs are four-year institutions (Excelencia, 2018a). In addition, although 53% of all emerging HSIs are public institutions, four-year private institutions accounted for 44% of emerging HSIs while four-year public institutions accounted for only 22% of emerging HSIs. These emerging HSIs give us a glimpse into the future in which Hispanic-Serving Institutions continue to grow and diversify (Núñez, 2017).

As institutions from all sectors of higher education continue to join the HSI ranks (Hirt, 2006), it is essential to expand our understanding of what it means to be a Hispanic-Serving Institution. This includes considering whether our current understanding is broad enough to encompass all the institutions that now, and in the future, fit under this umbrella. This is especially important as “policy, practice, and research conversations [about HSIs] have primarily centered on institutions that are under-resourced, broad access institutions” (Marin & Pereschica,

2017, p. 155), offering a limited understanding of what is now a wider range of institutions. Described as being “in a state of identity development as a diverse institutional cohort” (Ballysingh, Zerquera, Turner, & Sáenz, 2017, p. 6), scholars must abandon previous descriptions of HSIs that present them as a monolithic group and, instead, develop narratives that more accurately reflect the distinctions and nuances that exist among these institutions. This will allow institutions that become HSIs to understand “the implications of this change within the existing institutional context” (Marin & Pereschica, 2017, p. 155) and “incorporate the HSI designation into their identity and best serve [their students]” (p. 155).

To contribute to the HSI literature, this study focuses on an emerging Hispanic-Serving Research Institution (Marin & Pereschica, 2017), a newer institution type within the HSI community, and seeks to understand its institutional HSI identity as seen through the eyes of senior campus administrators. In doing so, this study combines the call from Núñez, Hurtado, and Galdeano (2015) for scholars to better understand the diversity of HSIs as well as the ongoing “debate about what it means for institutions to have an organizational identity for serving” Latino/a students (Garcia, 2017b, p. 109). To engage this topic, the article begins with a discussion of the term Hispanic-Serving Institution and its link to an institution’s organizational identity. Next, the article presents Garcia’s (2013) Framework for Studying HSI Organizational Identity that informs the study. After describing the methodology, the article presents and discusses the findings by themes. The article concludes by emphasizing the need to further expand the HSI narrative to include an understanding of unique Hispanic-serving identities across institutions.

## **Hispanic-Serving Institutions and Organizational Identity**

The term Hispanic-Serving Institution was incorporated into federal policy in 1992 after many years of legislative attempts of education leaders and activists to have this designation recognized. Advocates thought it essential to acknowledge that large percentages of Latino/a undergraduates were enrolled in a small number of inadequately funded institutions. These colleges and universities, despite being under-resourced, carried a great responsibility to provide Latino/a students with a quality education (Santiago, 2006), thereby generating the idea of “Hispanic-serving” institutions. Responding to the existing context, the goal of the federal policy was to provide HSIs an opportunity to apply for needed funding to support their institutional development.

Continued demographic changes led to increases in Latino/a undergraduate enrollment in institutions across higher education sectors. These HSIs were not created as a result of a “particular organizational agenda” (Ballysingh et al., 2017, p. 13) or “to serve a given population” (p. 13) as Historically Black Colleges and Universities were created to do. Instead, existing institutions obtained HSI designations simply based on numbers. As a result, “the majority of HSIs do not overtly express a mission focused on serving Latinx students” (p. 13) but, instead, remain centered on the mission that preceded their HSI designation. Some scholars suggest, therefore, that many HSIs are not Hispanic *serv*ing “simply because they operate like traditionally white institutions” (Garcia, 2017, p. 110). Ultimately, these complex conditions suggest that the development of HSIs is contextualized and can lead to unique institutional identities.

The identification and growth of HSIs led to the scholarly study of these institutions. HSI scholars, however, have been wrestling with the term Hispanic-Serving Institution and the implied organizational identity for many years and yet this identity still “has not been clearly defined in higher education research” (Garcia, 2017a, p. 112S). As the number of HSIs increases and their role in higher education grows, “there is continual pressure to define what it means for postsecondary institutions to be ‘Hispanic-serving’” (Garcia, 2018). Because the designation is based on enrollment, scholars and others have questioned whether it is enough to only enroll these students, asking what it means to truly be a Hispanic-*serv*ing institution (Garcia, 2017a, 2017b; Santiago, 2012) and what impact would (or should) such a designation carry on a host of institutional and student outcomes (see, for example, Contreras, Malcolm, & Bensimon, 2008). Going beyond outcomes, some scholars have articulated the importance of a Hispanic-serving culture as an indicator of an HSI identity (Garcia, 2017a), while others have argued for the need for institutional structures that support Hispanic students (Contreras et al., 2008) as well as campus administrators who serve as “change agents” (Hirt, 2006, p. 159) or “empowerment agents” (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018, p. 365). To add to the conversation, as “newer organizational forms” (Garcia, 2017b, p. 110) that have grown into their designation due to demographic changes, many HSIs “do not have extensive histories or organizational sagas from which to construct an organizational identity” (p. 110). Complicating matters further, these institutions are quite diverse in terms of sector, control, enrollment, size and geographic location (Excelencia, 2018b), making a conversation about the organizational identity of HSIs even more challenging (Garcia, 2017a).

Acknowledging the complicated nature of an HSI identity, Contreras, Malcolm and Bensimon (2008) described Hispanic-Serving as a “manufactured identity that is highly variable” (p. 74). This framing was guided by the fact that institutions can gain an HSI designation “from one year to the next if there is an increase in the percentage of Latino/a students, [and] it can also lose its HSI designation if it experiences a decline of Latino/a enrollment” (p. 74). Describing the HSI identity as “unplanned and unstable” (p. 74) raises questions about the “importance and influence” (p. 74) of this identity to the institution. With this in mind, Contreras et al. (2008) examined the institutional missions and educational outcomes for Latino/a students at 10 HSIs to consider the impact of their HSI identity on these two factors. Ultimately, the authors “were not able to discern a Latino/a agenda across the Hispanic-serving institutions assessed” (p. 78). Using IPEDS data they further concluded “that HSIs add value to Latinos/as by providing them with access to higher education” (p. 83), however, they experience unequal outcomes with regard to degree attainment. Contreras and her colleagues concluded by asking “why is the Hispanic identity of HSIs invisible?” (2008, p. 85). The Contreras et al. study suggests that the HSI designation may not be “authentic nor universally understood” (Doran & Medina, 2017, p. 30).

Additional studies have also taken up the institutional identity of HSIs. Garcia (2017a; 2017b), for example, presents and applies a typology that acknowledges both outcomes and culture in an institution’s Hispanic-serving identity. This typology “suggests there are multiple ways for an institution to serve Latinx students” (Garcia, 2017b, p. 109) beyond enrollment.

Rather than assuming that there is one way to be Latinx-serving, this typology views organizational identities of HSIs as constructed along two axes: one focused on institutional measures of success (organizational outcomes for Latinx students) and one

focused on deeply embedded assumptions and values (organizational culture that facilitates outcomes for Latinx students). (Garcia, 2017a, p. 121S)

Ultimately, Garcia's goal is to offer a framework to "better understand the multifaceted nature of an HSI identity" (p. 130S).

In related work, Doran and Medina (2017), employing a transformational change framework, studied the histories of two institutions as they developed over time into HSIs. Findings indicate that these HSIs were each influenced by local context and their student population. Further, the authors note "the transformation process to serving Latinx students was long and faced setbacks; and that their successes came in different forms" (p. 29). Comparing the two institutions, Doran and Medina describe one as an "intentional HSI" and the other as a "grassroots HSI," identifying the different paths and responses for each university to its designation. They conclude that the HSI "designation is one that is developed over time and is not without controversy" (p. 46). Overall, then, the current literature suggests that it may not be feasible to settle on one identity for HSIs.

### **Framework for Studying HSI Organizational Identity**

Guided by the call for research to "explore the construction of a Latinx-serving identity in a nuanced way" (Garcia, 2017a, p. 111S) as well as related scholarship (Garcia, 2013; 2016; 2017a; 2017b), this study seeks to explore how campus administrators at an emerging Hispanic-Serving Research Institution (HSRI) understand their campus' Hispanic-serving identity. Specifically, this study employs Garcia's (2013) Framework for Studying Organizational Identity of HSIs. This framework stems from the idea that HSIs are an "emerging institutional form" (p. 229) and, as such, are "undergoing the process of establishing a clear set of normative



behaviors and values” (p. 229) to determine what it really means to *serve* Latina/o students. The framework is the result of Garcia’s study that sought to “determine the ways in which various members of a postsecondary institution co-construct their organizational identity as a HSI” (2013, p. 230). Instead of identifying “a generalizable way for all institutions to define themselves as HSIs” (p. 230), Garcia “contributes to a theoretical understanding of organizational identity construction” (p. 230) and provides an alternative viewpoint to the Contreras et al. (2008) notion of a manufactured identity. Garcia, therefore, allows for a more complex way to understand an institution’s HSI identity.

Garcia’s framework suggests “that the process of identification is ongoing and inclusive of member’s perceptions of the integrated values of the organization, the organizational structures that are Latina/a-serving, and the organizational processes specific to becoming an HSI” (p. 237). In this model, organizational values include factors such as a geographic focus, community commitment, dedication to access and diverse-serving. Organizational structures include components such as curriculum, pedagogy and services that are culturally relevant, practices that are historically embedded, and faculty, staff and administrators who are diverse. Finally, organizational processes identified as integral to becoming an HSI include building awareness, advocating for Latino/a students as well as an HSI identity, and acquiring grants to enhance institutional structures. Using this framework provides an opportunity to contribute to the literature interested in understanding the impact of the HSI designation on institutions “to gauge how HSIs engage their HSI identity” (Doran & Medina, 2017, p. 45) and to examine them beyond enrollment.

## **Methodology, Data & Analysis**

This study is interested in how senior administrators at an emerging HSRI understand their institution's Hispanic-serving identity. The researcher is a Latina who has worked in higher education and engages in higher education scholarship. This study resulted from her commitment to issues affecting the Latino/a community in higher education. Specifically, her interest in HSIs and the changing nature of the sector raised questions about how, or whether, an emerging HSRI incorporates a Hispanic-serving identity into its existing one.

The study employs a qualitative design. First, the researcher used purposive sampling to identify an emerging Hispanic-Serving Research Institution.<sup>2</sup> This allowed for the examination of an institution on the path to becoming an HSI. In fact, when the research was conducted, the institution was on the cusp of reaching 25% Latino/a undergraduate enrollment. With an identified institution, the researcher examined the organization chart of the university to identify the institution's senior administrators. These individuals were then invited by the researcher or key gatekeepers to participate in the study. Email invitations indicated that the study was about the institution's HSI status. In addition, during interviews, participants were asked who else should be contacted to discuss this topic. This was done with an understanding that individuals not officially included on an organization chart often play key roles within the institution. The researcher followed up on these recommendations and emailed additional individuals to invite them to participate in the study. Ultimately, 12 key senior administrators participated in the study via 60-minute, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the researcher; one participant chose to submit responses to the interview protocol in writing. Of the 13 participants, seven identified

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<sup>2</sup> To maintain confidentiality promised to participants, the author does not identify the institution by name and minimizes providing identifying characteristics.

as women and six identified as men; further, four identified as Latino/a, one as African American, two as Asian/Asian American and six as White.

The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to explore senior administrators' understanding of their institution's Hispanic-serving identity. First, participants were asked to talk about their current role at the university, as well as any other roles they had during their time at the institution. This allowed the researcher to gain background information and establish a rapport with each interviewee, especially in instances in which the two were meeting for the first time. The conversation then transitioned to questions about the institution's current students and climate (e.g., How would you describe the campus climate for students in general at your institution? Can you provide specific examples?). Next, participants were asked specifically about HSIs, their knowledge of the designation, and how it might affect the institution (e.g., If your institution were to become an Hispanic-Serving Institution, how might this affect students? student services? the broader community?). The researcher used prompts to encourage participants to discuss organizational values, structures and processes as included in Garcia's (2013) Framework for Studying Organizational Identity of HSIs. Questions allowed participants to compare and contrast potential changes to a research institution that they thought should, or should not, occur as the institution became an HSI (see the Appendix for the interview protocol).

Interviews were transcribed and then coded. According to Saldaña (2013), "a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). This code "is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection,

categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes” (p. 4). For this study, coding started with the data, versus pre-established categories, allowing “new insights to emerge” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). Coded data were then categorized, or grouped together, based on an identified shared characteristic, and unique definitions were given to each category to clearly specify which coded excerpts belonged in a category and which did not. After the first round of coding was completed, the researcher reviewed the codes in each category to ensure internal consistency of codes. If the researcher determined a code did not fit the definition of its category, the coded excerpt was either moved to an alternate category or a new category was created. In addition, the reviewer created subcategories, where needed, to highlight relationships across excerpts in an overall category while also highlighting their uniqueness. The reviewer also compared categories to make sure that each was unique and without overlap. Once categories were finalized, the researcher used participant quotes that reflected the definition of each category to name them. Ultimately, categories were used to interpret senior administrators’ understanding of their institution’s Hispanic-serving identity.

## **Findings**

As senior administrators considered the institutional identity of their emerging Hispanic-Serving Research Institution, many started by discussing institutional context and values. As the conversations continued, administrators identified a range of institutional factors that were leading to its HSI designation. Ultimately, administrators offered their perspective on the institution’s HSI identity. In this section, then, the author discusses the three categories she identified that illuminate the perspectives of the administrators she interviewed: “Business as Usual,” “From the Very Top,” and “It’s No Single Thing.” These inter-related categories reflect

administrator perspectives on their institution's identity with regard to institutional context, values, leadership and practice. It is important to note that each administrator did not fit into one category; instead, administrators' perspectives fell across categories.

### **Institutional Context and Values: "Business as Usual"**

In talking about their institution, administrators identified several aspects of the institution's context as central to its identity as an HSI and, more specifically, the reason their university was approaching an HSI designation. Perspectives included in this category reflect the reasons administrators believe it made perfect sense for their institution to become an HSI. These statements focused on the institution's history, values and context. Therefore, a participant's quote, "business as usual," is used to name the category.

First, in describing the institution, administrators talked about the fact that it is a relatively small, non-urban campus near Latino communities. As one participant commented, "initially, because of where we are situated, I think that Latino families found this to be a more acceptable place for their kids to go [compared to other choices]." Participants also referenced the strong history and presence of the Chicano/a community at the institution, including a Chicano Studies department, and the role of Latinos/as in key campus leadership positions as essential factors that made the institution attractive to the Latino community and contributed to its identity.

From an organizational perspective, participants talked about both internal and external factors that they believe led the institution to its emerging HSI status. One participant, for example, acknowledged budget decisions made by the state government as a result of higher education and state policy: "so what happened is that the legislature infused the system, really all

of the sudden, with vast amounts of money to work on K–12 outreach.” While they acknowledge these access efforts were not solely targeted at Latino/a students, this allowed the institution the financial capacity to increase its outreach efforts, which included more outreach to the Latino/a community.

Internally, participants credited “a history of intense faculty engagement with diversity” as part of the institutional identity. More broadly, participants described an “inside/outside” structure within the institution. This referred to institutional values in which responsibility for minoritized students was not solely in the hands of the multicultural center and similarly titled/missioned offices. Instead, the responsibility was everyone’s. This resulted in the entire institution being responsible for serving a diverse student body, not just select segments within the institution.

Encompassing all of the institutional factors, participants described an institutional value in “excellence *and* diversity”—not one or the other—as well as an understanding that all students benefit from institutional diversity. Ultimately, participants said that it was simply “business as usual,” or going about their normal operations, that resulted in the institution being an emerging HSI on the path to an HSI designation. In considering its HSI identity, one participant, reflecting the comments of many participants, described it as being “in our DNA.” In other words, participants believed that existing organizational values and structures not only led to increased Latino/a enrollment but reflected a natural context for a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Although administrators were not proposing changes to organizational values and structures, they believed this was not because of ignoring a Hispanic-serving identity; instead it was because of their belief that existing efforts were appropriate and sufficient.

## **Institutional Leadership: “From the Very Top”**

In addition to the “business as usual” perspective describing existing context and values of the institution, participants identified institutional leadership as key to the institution’s HSI identity. In particular, perspectives in this category included administrator acknowledgement of the role the university president played in the institution becoming an HSI. Therefore, the participant quote, “from the very top,” is used to name the category.

In talking about the president, one administrator said, “he really decided he wanted to win this one, and if anybody is responsible for HSI, it’s him...my view...because he took that on.” Supporting this idea, another participant said, “I think [the president’s] been very adamant about HSIs in a very positive way as an asset to quality and to our standing as a university.” Ultimately, interviewed administrators indicated that this path to an HSI designation “does come from the very top.” This included figuring “out what institutional diversity would look like, and the pathway to it” and then talking about it in all settings. For example, one participant said, “I know firsthand [of] many opportunities where [the president] has invoked that goal into speeches or addresses that he’s made to internal and external groups.” In addition, participants described how these conversations then filtered from the president to other administrators. One participant, speaking about himself, said, “Well, I talk about it whenever there’s an opportunity to do so, because I think it is something people should know about. I talk about it.” Another administrator reflected that the president’s advisory board talks “about HSI status at every one of our meetings...Diversity is one of the elements that’s important in our strategic academic plan and our long-range development plan. Achieving [HSI] status is part of that overall objective.” Ultimately, while crediting the institution’s leadership as essential to its HSI identity, it was clear

that this factor was mostly, as one administrator said, about “talking the talk”—setting goals for others to implement at the local level. In fact, during interviews administrators also started to identify a range of factors reflecting institutional practice that also play a role in the institution’s HSI identity.

### **Institutional Practice: “It’s No Single Thing”**

The final category identified in the study relates to institutional practice. Perspectives included in this category reflect administrator statements about the range of practices in place that they believe resulted in their institution approaching an HSI designation, as well as the philosophical approach behind the institutional practice. Because of the broad array of practices discussed by participants, the participant quote, “it’s no single thing,” is used to name the category.

As administrators continued to think about the institution’s HSI identity beyond institutional context, values and leadership, one administrator suggested: “it’s no single thing, and no, it wasn’t just ‘eureka.’ But the goal, as I said, the diversity goal has been there, has been long-standing in the university’s language, and in the goal of all the admissions offices.” Another administrator offered: “You get to that level, not just because a few departments are very aggressive, the entire university is aggressive.” Offering specifics that point to the institution’s HSI identity, administrators talked about 1) focusing on campus climate, 2) expanding the circle and 3) using new tools to achieve ongoing goals. In describing a general philosophy regarding institutional practice, administrators highlighted 1) the importance of intentionality and continuity and 2) working toward the unremarkable.



**Focusing on campus climate.** Participants generally agreed that the institution had a positive campus climate that served as an attraction to potential students and was part of its identity.

I think there's been a supportive environment for students, and I think that they're happy, and that they go back to their families and their friends, and talk about it and whatnot, but I think a lot of it is the tone that the Division has set for student services across the campus. You know? Everyone is accepted, everyone's valued.

Such an environment has helped "in terms of recruiting students, because they know their friends are happy here."

**Expanding the circle.** Building upon the institutional context of the "inside/outside" model, administrators talked about the importance of continuing to expand the circle of individuals involved and committed to the goal of becoming an HSI. As one administrator framed it, "I think it wasn't about working harder, it was about more people working." Some administrators also talked about employing approaches that generated more buy-in from members of the campus, such as a focus on outreach: "I think that, for some, [outreach] was more palatable. They could picture themselves doing the work." Ultimately, as a result of ongoing efforts to clearly communicate the goal and expand the number of people involved, one administrator commented, "I'm amused at times, when I hear people say things about Hispanic enrollment, and now I don't even have to say anything anymore. It's around enough that other people are saying it, which is great." According to these administrators, increasing awareness of the institution's status and getting more members of the community involved in related institutional practice, then, has become part of its identity.

**Same goals, new tools.** Because the institution is in a state that has barred the use of race/ethnicity in decision making, administrators spoke often about staying true to the institution's goals within the context of existing restrictions:

We had to look at ways of achieving our goals without using ethnicity and gender, and so at that time we started spending a lot more time on the outreach side to make sure students were prepared, were applying, and that we could encourage them to come to the campus.

Assessing these efforts, one administrator concluded:

Trying harder and looking at other means of recruitment and not really going the easy route has really paid off, especially with students. As you can see, we have still been very successful. So I think that where there's a will, there's a way. And I think we have been very successful in finding ways to be successful in spite of the restrictions placed [on us].

Continuing and expanding concrete access efforts, despite policy that might create barriers to becoming an HSI, have become a part of the institution's identity. As with previous practices, however, these efforts weren't targeted solely at Latino/a students but at all students.

**Intentionality and continuity.** In contemplating how their institution came to be approaching an HSI designation, in addition to highlighting the need for multiple efforts, administrators often reflected on the need for institutional practice to be intentional and ongoing. One participant suggested, "I think that you can say all the words you want, but you actually have to do something. And that is a process in my view that's been well under way for many years." Another administrator said, "If we become an HSI, which we're darn close to, it would be because we went after that as a mission." Finally, someone offered,

The rhetoric of course is important, don't get me wrong, but talk is cheap. If you don't find ways to support communities then you can talk about how welcome they are but if they don't feel that, that's not their experience.

In the end, administrators noted that this intentionality and continuity took time: "it doesn't happen overnight."

**Working toward the unremarkable.** Finally, in framing the overall goal, one participant described the importance of the changes in practice becoming the norm. "When it gets to the point where it's unremarkable, that is when I think you've created an environment where people feel they have a place, they have a spot." Specifically, the idea, for example, that it wouldn't be surprising to see a Latino student body president or Latinas leading new student orientation, would mean the institution had successfully incorporated its HSI designation into its identity. As one administrator articulated, "[diversity] gets easier the more it becomes the norm."

## Discussion

Responding to the need to understand the complexity of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, this study is interested in how senior administrators at an emerging HSRI understand their institution's Hispanic-serving identity. In efforts to examine this HSRI beyond enrollment and "to gauge how [it] engage[s] [its] HSI identity" (Doran & Medina, 2017, p. 45), the researcher first considers participant responses in the context of Garcia's (2013) Framework for Studying Organizational Identity of HSIs. During the researcher's conversations with administrators they reflected on the organizational values, structures and processes Garcia includes in her framework. In terms of values, administrators talked about prioritizing serving a diverse student body and emphasized a positive climate for all students. Further, they highlighted an institutional

belief that excellence and diversity go hand in hand and are not in opposition to each other.

Administrators also described a dedication to issues of access broadly that did not prioritize Latino/a students but certainly included and benefited them. While they did acknowledge the presence of a local Latino community, they considered it a draw for Latino/a students and did not indicate any particular commitment to or involvement with it as an institution.

In terms of organizational structures, administrators talked about the importance of the history of the Chicano/a community within the institution and the involvement of Latino/a administrators in key positions. These both contributed to the institution's Hispanic-serving identity. Similarly, the longstanding practice that everyone at the institution was responsible for all students insured that Latino/a students were not marginalized within the institution in terms of programs and services. Again, while not specific to Latino/a students, these students certainly benefited along with other minoritized groups.

Regarding organizational processes, administrators talked about the ongoing awareness building that was occurring at the institution. The president's advisory board, for example, regularly talked about the institution's HSI status. This practice spread to other administrators and was common among senior leadership. In terms of awareness and advocacy, however, administrators acknowledged an intentional strategy of framing the institution's identity as one focused on outreach to bring those opposed to an HSI identity into the fold.

Administrators identified institutional leadership, particularly from the president, as an essential component of the institution's Hispanic-serving identity. Not specified in Garcia's (2013) framework, leadership is a factor that, as described by participants, touches on all of the other areas that comprise an individual's perception of an organizational identity. Repeatedly

administrators referenced the institution's president as someone who sent clear messages about the intentionality of becoming an HSI, as well as the benefit becoming an HSI would be for the institution. These clear, positive messages, then, affect the values, structures and processes of the institution.

Conversations with administrators pointed to a clear impression that the institution's existing values, structures, processes and leadership not only were responsible for the institution's increased Latino/a enrollment but also were natural components of its HSI identity. In fact, administrators seemed to suggest it was a natural progression for the institution to become an HSI and talked about little that would need to change institutionally. This perspective, however, might be met with mixed reactions. On the one hand, embracing the new HSI identity and related commitment to its Latino/a students should be a noteworthy reaction from the institution. On the other hand, others might challenge what appears to be a lack of awareness that institutional change may be a critical part of responding to the needs of a changing student body. For example, the "business as usual" framing was offered as a way to suggest the institution already operated in such a way that it would transition seamlessly into an HSI identity that administrators welcomed. To the ears of others, this framing, however, might be perceived as the exact opposite—a way to suggest the institution would not change to serve Latino/a students any differently but would continue to be the institution that it has been. Further, the perspective that the institution was "working toward the unremarkable" might be met with the same mixed reactions. Operating as if the presence of Latino/a students should be unremarkable might suggest a colorblind approach that seeks to treat all students in the same way regardless of their

unique attributes and needs. This recalls Garcia's statement that "the extent to which HSIs have adopted an identity for serving Latina/o students is debatable" (2016, p. 119).

As HSI scholars seek to discover the differences across HSIs and their Hispanic-serving identities, it is essential to remember that as institutions first obtain an HSI designation, they have a longer history *not* being an HSI and have a student enrollment that is approximately 75% non-Latino/a. Specifically, the institution in this study is an historically White research institution with a longstanding related identity. Considering how slow higher education is to change, a complete identity turnaround may not be possible—at least not immediately. This is echoed by participants who indicate that this process "doesn't happen overnight" and is supported by Doran and Medina's (2017) suggestion that HSIs develop over time.

The lack of direct incorporation of a named Hispanic-serving identity, versus a broad student-serving identity, aligns with existing literature that has suggested that many HSIs "do not overtly express a mission focused on serving Latinx students" (Ballysingh et al., 2017, p. 13) but continue to operate as they had been operating prior to the designation. While for some this might raise concerns as to a lack of a Hispanic-serving agenda, in this case there does seem to be more planning and acknowledgement of the identity. The question is, then, is this as far as the institution is willing or able to go or is this part of its identity evolution? If the latter, what will it take for the institution to more directly embrace a Hispanic-serving identity instead of, as indicated by Contreras et al. (2008), make their Hispanic-serving identity invisible.

Bringing to the fore the centrality of context, it must again be noted that this institution is in a state that prohibits the use of race or ethnicity in decision-making. As such, the institution has had to acknowledge and operate within these legal constraints in all areas related to

race/ethnicity. In this instance, then, as is the case in several states with high Latino/a populations, the institution's actions are somewhat restricted. This may have an impact on changes related to its Hispanic-serving processes and structures in particular.

In effort to expand our understanding of HSIs and their Hispanic-serving identity, this study offers some insight into the complexity of this identity development for institutions. Historically the literature has described these institutions in somewhat of a uniform and dichotomous manner—either an institution is Hispanic-serving or it is not. In effect, the emerging HSRI studied here sits somewhere between a fully embraced and articulated Hispanic-serving identity and an invisible one. Therefore, instead of asking whether an institution is Hispanic-serving, it may be more appropriate to ask about the extent to which an institution is Hispanic-serving, acknowledging the ongoing identity development that may be required and the many ways Hispanic-serving can be conveyed. In fact, in an attempt to offer concrete metrics to capture how institutions are doing serving Latino/a students, Excelencia in Education, a nonprofit organization focused on improving the outcomes for Latino/a students, will soon be awarding institutions the Seal of Excelencia.

The seal will challenge colleges to reach a set of data, practice and leadership benchmarks that demonstrate their institutional commitment to helping Latinx students succeed, not just by upping Latinx enrollment, but by ensuring that all parts of the college...contribute to Latinx student success. (Whitford, 2018, para. 3)

Although not exclusively targeted at HSIs, external efforts such as this one will contribute to a closer examination of HSIs and their practices and allow for a greater understanding of the complexities of Hispanic-Serving identities. In particular, highlighting institutions “that go above

and beyond to help Latino students excel” (Smith-Barrow, 2018, para. 26) will provide an opportunity to deepen the definition of what it means to serve Latino/a students beyond enrollment to measures of retention, completion, financial support, and Latino/a representation in faculty, staff, and administrative positions (Whitford, 2018).

As the institution during the study was an emerging HSRI, it has a long road ahead to learn and fully develop and come into its Hispanic-serving identity. This is not to say that there is an end goal for these institutions but simply to suggest that Hispanic-serving identities may fall more on a continuum that reflect a range of potential factors while also incorporating the other identities held by the institution. Additional research, then, might examine a larger set of institutions to create an HSI continuum that would more accurately depict HSIs and the “serving” component of their identity, as well as demonstrate the complexity of such a designation.

## **Conclusion**

With continued demographic shifts, a range of higher education institutions across sectors will continue to become Hispanic-Serving Institutions. These institutions each come with their own history and context and will need time to determine how, or in some cases whether, to incorporate a Hispanic-serving identity into their existing identities. To alter prevailing understandings of these institutions, then, it is essential to come to know what it means for them to be Hispanic-serving beyond enrollment and to realize that this term might require a broader definition than is currently attributed. Practically speaking, by continuing to expand the HSI narrative, higher education leaders will be able to “better understand the multifaceted nature of an HSI identity” (Garcia, 2017a, p. 130S), understand the institutional change they are



experiencing, and ultimately determine the choices and decisions that must be made to best serve their students.

## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about the mission of your [office/division/college].
2. Describe your current role(s) as [title/position].
3. How long have you been at this institution? Briefly describe any other roles you have or have had here.
4. Do you interact with students on a regular basis? In what ways/context?
5. How would you describe the campus climate for students in general at your institution? Can you provide specific examples?
6. How would you describe the campus climate for Hispanic/Latinx/Latin@/Chican@ students? Can you provide specific examples?
7. What knowledge, if any, do you have about Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)? What does it mean for an institution to be an HSI?
8. Have you ever read about or heard campus leaders discussing this institution becoming an HSI (e.g., during meetings, speeches, newsletters, emails, etc.)? What message(s) or information did they convey?
9. Have you ever discussed [with campus leaders, staff, etc.] this institution becoming an HSI? What message(s) or information did you convey?
10. What would becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution mean for this institution? What would it mean considering this is a research institution? What would attaining HSI status mean for campus leaders? Should campus leaders be involved in the process of becoming an HSI?
11. If your institution were to become an HSI, how might this affect students? student services? the broader community?
12. As we close this interview, are there other individuals on campus you think I should interview for this study?
13. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share?

Thank you for your participation.

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