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The Board of Regents appointed President Thomas to the helm of Nuestra University, a large and urban Hispanic-Serving University. In the first years of his presidency, Nuestra achieved important milestone in its quest to better serve and graduate students from underrepresented populations. However, Thomas's hiring and presidency has faced critical questions, especially when Thomas's new strategic plan and plans for community involvement appeared to ignore the demographics both on and off-campus. This case study focuses on the potential implications for Minority-Serving Institutions when their administration does not match the demographics of their major stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, and local school districts).

Keywords

Hispanic-Serving Institutions, leadership, universities, cultural responsiveness

Disciplines

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Comments

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Abstract

The Board of Regents appointed President Thomas to the helm of Nuestra University, a large and urban Hispanic-Serving University. In the first years of his presidency, Nuestra achieved important milestone in its quest to better serve and graduate students from underrepresented populations. However, Thomas's hiring and presidency has faced critical questions, especially when Thomas's new strategic plan and plans for community involvement appeared to ignore the demographics both on and off-campus. This case study focuses on the potential implications for Minority-Serving Institutions when their administration does not match the demographics of their major stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, local school districts).

How Hispanic Should Hispanic-Serving Institutions Be?

In the nearly 30 years since the creation of the federal institutional designation “Hispanic-Serving Institutions,” these institutions have grown in number and in the role they play in providing access to Latinx/a/o¹ students enrolled in postsecondary programs across the country (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019a). These institutions, known short-hand as “HSIs,” are 2-year and 4-year, accredited not-for-profit institutions that have a student body comprised of at least 25% Latinx/a/o students. As of 2017, HSIs constituted approximately 17% of all institutions in the United States yet enrolled 66% of all Latinx/a/o students enrolled in college or university programs (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019a). The efforts of these institutions to educate Latinx/a/o students is one that has gained greater focus in recent years (e.g., Garcia, 2019; Núñez, Hurtado & Calderón Galdeano, 2015; Perez Mendez, Bonner, Méndez-Negrete, & Palmer, 2015, among countless articles). Their abilities, and the ability of all institutions to promote the postsecondary degree and/or certificate attainment of Latinx/a/o students has significant political, societal, and economic implications for communities and the United States broadly (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017; Krogstad, 2016).

The purpose of this case study is to describe recent events at Nuestra University, an HSI in Texas. This narrative begins with the hiring of President Thomas, the institution’s most recent leader, and the unfolding of his efforts to shape the future of Nuestra. The process of Thomas’s hiring was questioned by the Latinx/a/o Stakeholder Association on campus, who has continued some criticisms of the administration. Despite the criticisms of Thomas, the university under his leadership has achieved some important milestones to support students from underrepresented backgrounds, though not always Latinx/a/o students explicitly. This case raises questions and

¹ The term “Latinx” emerged in the last few years as one to describe people of Latina/o origin in a way that is non-gender binary (Salinas & Lozano, 2019).

meaningful discussion about to what it means to be an HSI, the ways in which university administrators may reflect the values and culture of their institution, and how the development of strategic plans mirror those values to stakeholders, including business and community partners, local K-12 school districts who may work closely with the university's teacher and administrator candidates, and its alumni network.

Understanding the Hispanic-Serving Identity

As previously noted, the HSI designation is based on enrollment, not institutional characteristics or a specific mission oriented toward serving Latinx/a/o students. Given their broad definition, HSIs encompass a wide spectrum of institutional identities, including community colleges, liberal arts colleges, large universities, and more recently, campuses that are flagships within their respective university systems such as the University of Arizona. There are also HSIs in 26 states and Puerto Rico (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019a). While there are 523 HSIs currently, there are also another 328 institutions that *Excelencia in Education* refers to as "Emerging HSIs," or campuses with 15-24.9 percent Latinx/a/o student bodies (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019b). The presence of these emerging institutions signals that the number of HSIs will only continue to grow in the near future, especially in geographic areas with newer and growing Latinx/a/o populations like the Midwest.

A common argument made in the HSI literature is that HSIs have largely been "Hispanic-enrolling" rather than Hispanic-serving institutions (Calderón Galdeano, Flores, & Moder, 2012; Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008). In order to move past this trope, Garcia (2017) asked whether or not the HSI identity is driven by outcomes or culture. Interestingly, the types of outcomes that research participants in one study named as ideal outcomes for their HSI were not unique to a Latinx/a/o-serving identity; instead, they referenced a hope for increased graduation

rates, participation in graduate programs, and employment that would presumably benefit all students (Garcia, 2017). Garcia instead advocated for institutions to think of HSI identity through a cultural lens and for institutions to ask questions about who they are and the ways they create positive environments in which Latinx/a/o students may thrive. In all, Garcia (2017; 2019) reminded us that HSIs do not encompass a singular identity, and this identity may manifest itself in different ways on different campuses.

Alvarez McHatton, Schall, and Longoria Sáenz (2020) make a compelling argument that the Hispanic-Serving identity is much more than students' direct engagement with the university environment. In thinking about the connections between the HSI identity and educator preparation, the authors point out that their institution, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), draws students directly from their region who overwhelmingly identify as Latinx/a/o (Alvarez McHatton, Schall, & Longoria Sáenz, 2020). The UTRGV students who move through the educator preparation programs are likely to enter schools that are also Hispanic-Serving in their demographics. Similar arguments can be made across different occupational fields including social services, mental health fields, public health, and medical fields. Put another way, a meaningful commitment to a Hispanic-Serving designation may percolate beyond the college or university campus into the surrounding communities through education and outreach.

Representation of Latinx/a/o Faculty and Administrators

While many HSIs were not created with the explicit mission to serve Latinx/a/o students in the same way as other Minority-Serving Institutions (i.e., Tribal Colleges and Universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities), some of their programs and services have been lauded for their ability to promote long-term Latinx/a/o student success, retention, and

graduation.² However, it is important to note that even with some of these practices, many HSIs still remain embedded within a higher education structure that is historically white and rooted in histories of racism and colonialism (Garcia, 2019).

Part of this persistence of whiteness is especially evident in the faculty and administrator ranks across postsecondary institutions. Despite the growth in Latinx/a/o enrollment in colleges and universities (Krogstad, 2016), only about 4 percent of all full-time faculty identify as Latinx/a/o (Taylor & Santiago, 2017). Similarly, only 4 percent of college and university presidents identify as Latinx/a/o in 2016, and the number of presidents from racially minoritized backgrounds leading Minority-Serving Institutions decreased between 2011 and 2016 (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017). Garcia (2019) promoted the idea that HSIs need more Latinx/a/o faculty and administrators in their ranks. Further, Garcia argued that promoting Latinx/a/o professionals to administrative ranks was crucial to getting access to decision-making power as well as helping ensure that institutions at the highest levels have leaders who understand the lives of not only Latinx/a/o students but all minoritized students. This point was supported by Jackson and O’Callaghan (2009) who drew from scholarship in public administration on representative bureaucracy, a theory that posits when a leader mirrors the demographic characteristics of their constituency, the interests of the constituency will be represented.

Case Context

Nuestra University is a large Hispanic-Serving 4-year institution located in a Texas city with a current student body of over 30,000 students, over 50% of whom identify as Latinx/a/o. As part of its establishment, the state legislature noted the need of a public university in

² For examples, see *Excelencia* in Education’s annual list of “Examples of *Excelencia*” as well as their “Growing What Works” database available on their website.

Nuestra's geographic area specifically to reflect the needs of a predominantly Latinx/a/o community and to fill the gaps in access to postsecondary education in this community. Though its Hispanic-Serving identity predates the actual invention of the HSI designation in the early 1990s, its original focus was undoubtedly focused on serving an area of Texas that is majority Latinx/a/o, making it different from many HSIs who may not have a distinct historical intention to focus on Latinx/a/o students (Author, 2015, 2017; Garcia, 2019).

Throughout the course of its history, its ability to center and serve Latinx/a/o has been uneven (Author, 2015), but there are some signs of its servingness. Among the first degrees established were in bilingual-bicultural studies and Hispanic literature (Author, 2015). For nearly the first 40 years after its founding, Nuestra University remained the only public university in its large, urban community. It traditionally played a role in providing access to the city and area's college-going population, and it impacted the city's K-12 education system by being one of the largest producers of educators in the area. For decades, the university hosted a Pre-Freshman Engineering Program (PREP) to encourage minoritized K-12 students in the area to attend college and major in engineering or related fields. The university's College of Education extended its outreach by creating special programs to create more math and science teachers, bilingual educators, reading specialists, special education professionals in and out of the traditional classroom, principals and other school and district-level administrators trained specifically to understand the needs of urban schools, and community college professionals.

Among its faculty and administrator ranks, Nuestra University has not always reflected its Latinx/a/o student body or community demographics. A group of stakeholders in the 1990s called *Juntos* [Together] organized themselves toward creating a Latinx/a/o focus agenda for the institution (Author, 2017). Of the six presidents of Nuestra University since its creation, only 1

president has been Latinx/a/o. The university also faced harsh criticism over its graduation rates; as recently as 2014, Nuestra's six-year graduation rate stood at 27 percent, less than half of the national graduation rate in 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Pressures for Prestige

Higher education institutions face increasing pressure to increase their productivity and rankings such as those published annually in *U.S. News and World Report* and membership to the American Association of Universities (AAU), the latter of which only three universities in Texas are members of (O'Meara, 2007; Volkwein & Sweitzer, 2006; Zerquera, 2019). In Texas, this pressure coincided with declining state allocations to higher education while institutions have been pressured to increase graduation rates and their institutional prestige.

As part of the Closing the Gaps plan that guided the state's higher education policy between 2000-2015, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board advocated for increased institutional excellence and funded research. In part, the Coordinating Board wanted to effectively double the state's public university expenditures on research from \$1.45 billion to \$3 billion (Leal Rosales, 2010). In the 2009 legislative session, House Bill 51 (2009) incentivized its public institutions to chase "Tier One" status which entails increased admissions standards, larger research expenditures, and overall, a greater focus on prestige (Crisp, Horn, Dizinno, & Wang, 2010; Daniel, 2008). Among these incentives is the Texas Research Incentive Program (TRIP) which provides matching funds from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to institutions that receive private gifts specifically to fund research activities (Texas Administrative Code Rule §15.10, 2016). House Bill 51 also created the National Research University Fund that enabled emerging research universities who received at least \$45 million annually in restricted research funding to receive additional incentive funding from the

Coordinating Board (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2018). This incentive funds are not insignificant; the Coordinating Board reported that Texas Tech University and the University of Houston received \$17.9 million for the 2014-15 biennium and \$16.9 million for the 2016-17 biennium from the National Research University Fund (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2018).

These collective efforts to increase prestige, including increased research productivity and higher undergraduate admissions standards, are what O'Meara (2007) called "striving." Such striving activities can negatively impact institutions. For instance, Crisp, Horn, Dizinno, and Wang's (2010) analysis of two striving institutions in Texas found that these increased admissions standards disproportionately impacted students from underrepresented backgrounds, especially African American and Latinx/a/o students. Gonzales and Pacheco (2012) pointed out that the use of slogans to signal major efforts at organizational change effectively silenced important questions and critiques of such efforts to move from a regional comprehensive HSI to a nationally recognized, research-intensive university. Another study from a Texas context described the turmoil faced by faculty at a striving institution who faced increased pressure to produce research and support graduate students without additional resources (Gonzales & Rincones, 2011). While the pressures to increase prestige may be rooted in good intentions, the extant literature suggests that the actions universities take to increase their prestige may change the cultural fabric and mission of these institutions (Gonzales, 2013; O'Meara, 2007). Put another way, prestige efforts and efforts to reinforce a Hispanic-Serving identity are not mutually exclusive, but they may create conditions where these efforts are put in competition with one another for attention and resources.

Case Narrative

In 2016, the institution's first and only Latino president announced his retirement. The search for a new leader began by the Board of Regents soon after. When the Board named a sole finalist, it did so following a highly contentious process that was widely criticized for its lack of transparency and input from the on- and off-campus communities. In particular, the Latinx/a/o Stakeholders' Association pointed out that not a single Latinx/a/o faculty and administrator was included on the search committee. In addition, none of the finalists completed on-campus interviews that included public forums as had been done during the last presidential search. The Association also noted that the official job post for the President on the university's website did not describe Nuestra University as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, an update that was never made to the posting.

At the beginning of the 2017 academic year, Nuestra University installed President Thomas, a White man, as its leader. In the decade prior to his appointment at Nuestra, President Thomas held several university-level administrator positions focused on research. The intention of the Board of Regents with the choice of President Thomas was clear: his experience in supporting research activities at the university level of several major universities gave him an important background for helping Nuestra University reach its Tier One status.

Two years later, President Thomas unveiled a new strategic plan that called into question his commitment to Nuestra's HSI designation. On one hand, Nuestra announced the development of a community partnership focused on an underserved part of the city in which Nuestra is located to promote education and economic development. The website that provides information and infographics related to the strategic plan summarized the 10-year vision for the plan, stating that Nuestra would be an AAU-equivalent institution as well as a "Hispanic-thriving" institution. However, the actual text of the strategic plan focused far more on the institutional prestige of

Nuestra and how it would increase that rather than its identity as Hispanic-thriving. The plan referenced the diversity of Nuestra's community, of the need to advocate for and contribute to local communities, yet nowhere in the official plan do the words "Hispanic" or "Latino" and its variations appear anywhere in the document.

In response to the strategic plan, the Latinx/a/o Stakeholder Association drafted an online petition criticizing the plan for its failure to honor the history of Nuestra University and its original purpose and to ignore Hispanic-Serving identity. The Association did not mince its words when it said that Nuestra historically distanced itself from its HSI status unless it was exclusively seeking monetary benefits (e.g., Title V grant monies through the federal Department of Education) where that identity could be positively leveraged. It also accused the university of invoking vague terms like "inclusive excellence" rather than centering the Latinx/a/o identity of the institution reflected in the majority of the student population.

It is unclear to what extent the views of the Latinx/a/o Stakeholder Association permeate through the campus and surrounding communities. Notably, the choice to hire Thomas received praise from important business and political figures in the community who were quoted in local newspapers praising the Regent's choice and expressing support for the new president. The 2019 strategic plan included plans for economic development, community engagement, and stronger ties to the neighborhoods in which Nuestra's campuses are located.

Since Thomas's installation, Nuestra University has made strides toward its Tier One aspirations. Its ranking on a well-regarded list of universities internationally went up. Within two years, Nuestra experienced enrollment growths, record graduation numbers, and announced expansions of high-profile research efforts such as a center for the study of cybersecurity. Its six-year graduation rates that stood at 27 percent in 2014 increased to just under 40 percent by 2018,

the result of increased attention and counseling provided to first-generation students. The university also made important improvements to providing support and access to students from other underrepresented populations. As a result of one of President Thomas's initiatives, Nuestra opened a comprehensive resource center for DACA³ students and other undocumented students. In 2019, it also announced its promise program, which would give eligible students from low and middle-income backgrounds the chance to attend Nuestra tuition-free for 4 years. In a press release for the promise program, Nuestra's provost pointed out that the university had been founded to help the area's predominantly Latinx/a/o population realize and attain their hopes and dreams through education, a statement indicating the commitment of university administration to the original intention of the institution.

Teaching Notes

The story of President Thomas's still relatively new presidency opened a new chapter for Nuestra University, but it also prompted important questions about the identity and mission of this institution and its designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Case Summary

The fact that President Thomas's hiring under secretive conditions received such criticism by the Latinx/a/o Stakeholder Association was likely exacerbated by his identity as a non-Latinx/a/o White male. At the same time, Nuestra University itself is experiencing competing identities: its Hispanic-Serving designation and its intention to be among the "Tier One" institutions in the state. In unveiling the new strategic plan, Nuestra administration received critical feedback from the Latinx/a/o Stakeholder Association made up of faculty and

³ The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program began in 2012 under the Obama Administration and provided temporary relief, including work permits, for undocumented residents who could prove they had been brought to the United States as minors (American Immigration Council, 2019). It was suspended under the Trump Administration, and its continued status will likely be decided by the Supreme Court in 2020.

administrators. Briefly, they questioned the plan's erasure of the Hispanic-serving identity and called upon administrators to be better in centering the Latinx/a/o community which they argue has been central to the history of Nuestra University. However, in looking at other parts of Nuestra's recent past since Thomas's appointment as President, there have been important strides made toward increasing access and support for students from underrepresented populations (e.g., undocumented students, first-generation students, and other groups that overlap with Latinx/a/o identities) and in the institutional prestige.

The Intended Audience for This Case

This case may encourage discussion for a number of audiences. Among higher education students and practitioners, this case provokes questions about the Hispanic-serving identity, what that identity means in practice, and what implications that identity may have for leaders and leadership. This case may also prompt discussion around the activism of faculty, staff, and administration stakeholders on campus and how they may contribute to broad campus efforts like the development of an institution-wide strategic plan. For K-12 focused students, researchers, and practitioners, this case may lead to fruitful discussions about what culturally responsive leadership means in higher education contexts and what role a local university should have with its surrounding community, including its local school districts. This case would foster rich discussions in courses within K-12 education leadership programs that focus on promoting partnerships between school districts and local universities to prepare current and future school and district leaders. In the course of building a college-going culture, K-12 leaders may think about what Hispanic-serving institutional attributes or commitments promote the academic success of students after their high school graduation. District leaders may also consider the extent to which an HSI embraces a commitment to Latinx students and how that commitment

manifests itself in its educator preparation programs, especially if the district relies on that university to provide new teachers and administrators for its hiring pools.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways should a Hispanic-Serving Institution demonstrate a commitment to Latinx/a/o students? Should Nuestra University be explicit in demonstrating its HSI designation? If so, how?
2. Who plays a role in shaping how a Hispanic-serving identity manifests itself on a campus?
3. Is it important for an HSI leader to be Latinx/a/o themselves? Why or why not?
4. What role should campus stakeholders and communities have in the search for top-level administrators? Should the Board of Regents have included members of the search committee that were Latinx/a/o? Are open forums for on-campus interviews an integral part of the search process?
5. How representative should faculty and administration ranks be of their student bodies and surrounding communities? How do institutions accomplish increased diversity within their hiring efforts?
6. Should an institutional strategic plan include specific plans for particular groups of students and/or stakeholders? In this case, should the strategic plan for Nuestra University have made specific reference to Latinx/a/o students?
7. Are the missions to serve specific underrepresented communities and to increase institutional prestige mutually exclusive?

8. Is talk of “inclusive excellence” enough for institutions or should policies and plans be developed around specific populations (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, genders, other identity categories)?
9. In building a college-going culture for their districts, should school leaders (e.g., principals, teachers, counselors) think about the ways a university reflects and commits itself to a specific population, especially a university in their locality?
10. Do commitments to a specific population or community matter to building strong K-12 and higher education partnerships? Or are those relationships more important between specific departments (e.g., a Teacher Education or School Leadership program) or special programs (Upward Bound, Education Talent Search, McNair Scholars)?

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