An Inquiry to Discover Hispanic Serving Institution Experiences on Serving Hispanic Students

María D. Vásquez-Colina
Florida Atlantic University

Leisha Cali
Hodges University

Bret Danilowicz
Florida Atlantic University

Sunem Beaton-Garcia
Broward College

S. Kent Butler
University of Central Florida

Joaquin Martinez
Miami Dade College

Jeremy Moreland
St. Thomas University

Meline Kevorkian
Nova Southeastern University

Abstract

In this article, a panel of administrators and faculty describe and analyze their institutional experiences across seven Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI). While there is growing research on HSIs in the United States, there is limited published evidence of HSIs discussing their identity. As the Hispanic population increases, scholarly initiatives and student services have an opportunity to focus on Hispanic college enrollment and retention, as well as on fostering cultures representative of Hispanic students' cultures. The question that guided this panel discussion was: How has HSI status shaped your institution's organizational identity and initiatives? The inquiry revealed five interrelated elements that compose an HSI identity: institutional aims, student body, campus culture, community connections, and faculty and staff initiatives. A discussion on HSI literacy is offered as a notion to include in the HSI research literature.

Keywords: Hispanic-serving institution, panel inquiry, institutional identity, HSI literacy, culture

Research on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) has focused on the need to explore HSI organizational identity and how it meets the needs of students and their communities (Arroyo et al., 2019; Vargas et al., 2020). In the United States, HSI designation states that institutions may become HSIs if at least 25% of Hispanic students are enrolled as undergraduate full-time students (US Department of Education, 2020). While this explanation may attempt to standardize the notion of HSIs, the reality is that HSIs are diverse in that some HSIs slightly meet the 25%

requirement while others exceed 90% of students identifying as Hispanics (Arroyo et al., 2019). Thus, this inquiry explores the organizational initiatives and identities at different HSIs to serve students.

In 80% of the cases, HSIs are located in urban areas or near urban centers. The rest of HSIs are in rural areas or small towns (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). The number of HSIs have been reported to be 523, and they serve over 1.3 million Hispanic/Latino/a/x students (Excelencia, 2020b.), namely serving the educational needs of a diverse and growing population. The relationship between the HSI and its surrounding community, therefore, is critical to its identity. Another theme in the HSI literature is faculty-student representation. Scholars suggested that higher education institutions should make greater efforts to systematically recruit and retain Hispanic/Latino/a/x faculty to reduce ethnic/racial inequalities (Vargas et al. 2020), thereby increasing cultural and linguistic representation of and for students (Quezada & Louque, 2004). Vargas et al. (2020) found that the average Hispanic/Latino/a/x-student to Hispanic/Latino/a/x-faculty ratio is 146 to 1, whereas the White-student to White-faculty ratio is 10 to 1. This disparity suggests the need for the training of White faculty to "become more culturally aware and culturally engaged" (Vargas et al., p. 39).

Our inquiry used a panel forum as a method to collect and analyze the experiences of individuals representing HSIs to examine organizational initiatives, reflections, and views related to their HSI's status quo. This paper is significant to the growing literature of HSIs in the United States and higher education since it reveals how institutions conceptualize their HSI organizational identity and what they believe they know about being an HSI. The guiding question was: How has the HSI status shaped your institution's organizational identity and initiatives? The U.S. Census Bureau states that an individual is considered Hispanic if she/he self-identifies as one (Lopez et al., 2019). In this manuscript, we used the self-identification notion and the term "Hispanic" is used as a synonym of Latino, Latina, or Latinx.

Positionality Statement

While HSI literature is increasing, current literature calls for scholars to explore the existing differences among HSIs and examine HSIs' self-identification. The purpose of this inquiry essay is to present a portrayal of HSI initiatives in Florida. As the first author and a professor of measurement and research methodology, I believe it is essential to create inclusive spaces and dialogues, as known retention strategies, to provide opportunities and mentorship for international and minority students. As I recall being the only Latina student at a predominantly White university in the Midwest, I believe uncovering stories enables opportunities to add to self-knowledge and experiencing the world. This is my first study conceptualizing an HSI identity in Florida, and I chose to use the pronoun "we" in this inquiry paper to express all authors' voices.

The Need to Conceptualize an HSI Identity and Student Success at HSIs

Because the Hispanic population is the largest ethnic/racial minority in the United States (58.9 million, or 18.3 %, of the total population) (U.S. Census, 2018), there is a need to understand educational opportunities and institutions that support Hispanic students. This study was positioned in the theoretical framework of HSI organizational identity (Garcia, 2017) and critical dialogue (Freire, 1993) as lenses to theorize the experiences of becoming HSIs and understanding what it means to be an HSI.

Conceptualization of an HSI Identity

As HSIs increase in the United States, so does the need to theorize the meaning of having an HSI identity. The federal government defines an institution's eligibility for HSI designation as having

an enrollment of at least 25% undergraduate full-time equivalent Hispanic students by the end of the award year (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2020). Consequently, as more education institutions become either emerging Hispanic serving institutions (15 to 24% FTE Hispanic enrollment) (Excelencia in Education, 2020a) or Hispanic serving institutions, there is an urge to explore the notion of HSI identity. Garcia (2019) stated that if HSIs desire to reach full potential, they have to conceptualize measurable and tangible constructs that can be operationalized in research and practice. Garcia (2017) defined four types of identity referring to organizational outcomes and organizational culture at HSIs. "Latinx-enrolling identity" refers to an institution that enrolls the minimum 25% students to obtain the HSI federal designation but does not produce equitable outcomes for Latinx students. The "Latinx-producing identity" refers to an institution that enrolls at least 25% Latinx students and produces a significant number of outcomes for Latinx students without having a supporting Latinx culture on campus. The "Latinx-enhancing identity" enrolls a minimum of 25% Latinx students and enacts a culture that enhances the educational ethnic/racial experiences of Latinx students; nevertheless, the outcomes for Latinx students may not be equitable. The "Latinx-serving identity" denotes an institution that enrolls 25% Hispanic students, produces measurable, equitable outcomes for Hispanic students, and enacts an institutional culture to enhance both the educational and ethnic/racial experience of Hispanic students (Garcia, 2017).

"Knowing" What Supports Student Success at HSIs

We borrow Freire's (1983) notion of literacy to understand better what it means to be an HSI. Freire (1993) emphasized an individual's ability not just to read the world, but first to experience the world, so that reading can become active, dialogical, and critical (Smidt, 2014). Thus, a Freirean concept of literacy highlights the need for individuals to experience the world through interactions. In this case, the first author was interested in knowing how participants reflect upon their HSI realities as an HSI identity. Through questioning, we explored how interactions and collaborations between different units at an institution yield knowledge to support student success (Arroyo et al., 2019).

To know what works to support student success, institutions can look at two types of data (Arroyo et al., 2019). The first type refers to measures that describe student graduation rates and retention rates. The second type refers to measures that include non-cognitive factors, such as campus cultural connections and students' sense of belonging. Current initiatives in successful HSI programs, for example, involve faculty-student mentorship (Estepp et al., 2016), culturally relevant courses (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015) and programs that cultivate a sense of belonging and representation (Cervantes, 2015; Maestas et al., 2007). To be literate in faculty-student mentorship means that one understands that this mentorship is more meaningful when the mentor understands the student's culture, shares worldviews, and has experienced cross-cultural adaptations (Vásquez-Colina, 2020). As Franco and Hernández (2018) suggest, the ethnic/racial composition of faculty and staff is a critical aspect of an institution's commitment to diversity. Thus, the purpose of this inquiry was to unveil the HSI organizational identities and what the participants believe they know about being an HSI.

Inquiry Design

The inquiry grew out of a conversation about how higher education institutions serving Hispanic students and other minorities shape their identity and initiatives related to that identity. A symposium in Florida provided a space for this dialogue with Florida having the 3rd largest Hispanic population in the United States (Excelencia in Education, 2020). This symposium was designed to voice HSIs' practices, concerns, and organizational initiatives that relate to student success and services. This conversation had three levels of inquiry: planning, on-site discussion, and post discussion.

Planning

Four months prior to the symposium, the first author invited all 12 HSI institution chief academic offices in the state to participate. After multiple email exchanges, institutional representatives agreed to participate and received the seven questions ahead of time to prepare their own unique answers related to their institutions' initiatives. The questions asked about each institution's journey, goals, and needs as an HSI; for example, one question asked, "Thinking beyond enrolling students, how is your institution 'meeting the needs' of Hispanic students, staff, faculty and community?" Another question asked about institutional initiatives embarked on (since becoming an HSI) to broaden the participation of underrepresented groups.

On-Site Discussion

A symposium was facilitated on the topics of HSI initiatives, scholarship, and student services for one hour and 45 minutes. Synergy, and spontaneity took place among the participants as they interacted with each other before, during, and after the symposium. They shared their views on their institutions' perspectives and experiences in relationship to being an HSI. As the facilitator, the first author noted the panelists' comments and audience's questions. The notes were used as a data source for the inquiry.

Post Discussion

After the symposium, the participants exchanged emails and their positive perceptions of the symposium discussion. They also agreed to email their responses to the questions to the first author to collectively construct this inquiry. The email responses were used as a data source for the inquiry.

Description of the Inquiry Context

The context of the inquiry was a panel symposium at a state educational research conference in the South. Attendees of the conference included university professors, school district administrators, graduate students, state education administrators, and teachers (FERA, 2020).

The dialogic inquiry was guided by the effort to uncover initiatives that shape HSI organizational identity. The dialogue occurred from May 2019 through February 2020. The panelists of this inquiry are a group of individuals ($N = 7$) of varying positions within their institution: five chief academic officers, one chief executive officer and one center director. Two of the panelists were bilingual and bicultural in Spanish, three had some or limited skills in the Spanish language while one was neither bilingual nor bicultural. Of the HSIs represented, four were public institutions and three were private institutions. These institutions are located in the southeast, southwest, and center of the state. Almost half of the participants indicated that they were a research-focused institution while others indicated that research was not a main part of their mission. Table 1 outlines the participating HSIs that were the focus of this discussion. They are two-year granting degree ($n = 2$) and four-year granting degree ($n = 5$), and most have multiple campuses in state in the United States. Table 1 includes percentage of Hispanic students and recipients of Pell grant recipients. All data were collected from participants, and analysis followed a thematic approach, including data familiarization, coding, and defining themes.

Table 1. *HSI Descriptions*

	% Undergraduate Enrollment	% Hispanic Enrollment	% Pell Grants
HSI 1	na	na	na
HSI 2**	77.9	26.8	31.1
HSI 3	100	42	na
HSI 4*	81	41	72
HSI 5	na	39	na
HSI 6	na	na	na
HSI 7***	100	74.8	84.3

* 2017 data. ** 2018 data. *** 2019 data.

Findings

The overarching research question asked how the HSI status shaped the institution's organizational identity and initiatives. The findings indicated that the participants perceived that their institutional actions and initiatives were meeting students' academic needs as HSIs. Each participant indicated a desire to continue the dialogue with their HSI counterparts and HSI and programs, services, and partnerships and to seek resources that could facilitate the implementation of their goals. Four salient, recurrent, and interrelated themes emerged from the data analyses. They are presented with supporting excerpts exhibiting how the participating organizations recognize and characterize their HSI identity (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Elements Defining an HSI Identity
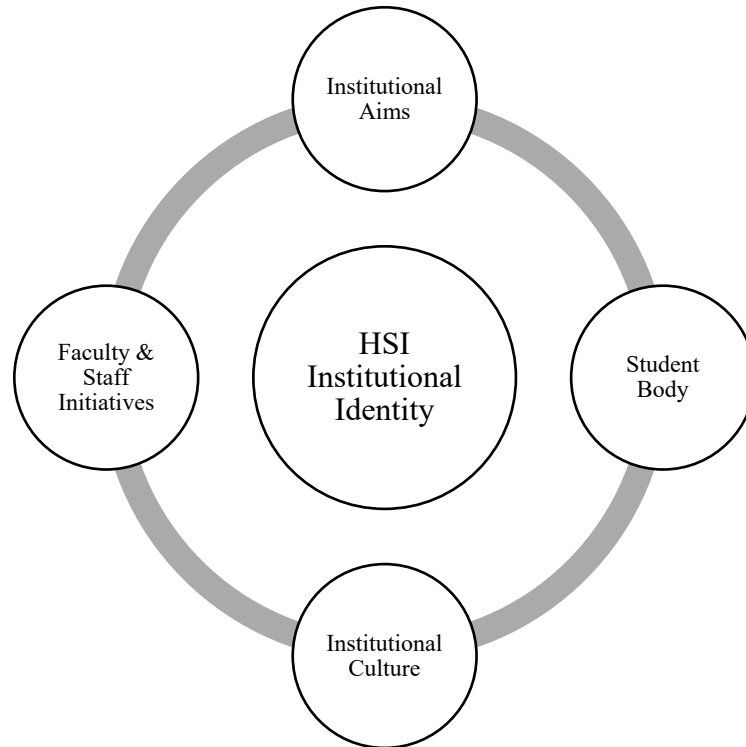
Note. This figure demonstrates the elements that emerged from the discussion of being an HSI among participants.

Institutional Aims

This first major theme centralized the identity of HSIs highlighting the institutional outcomes and goals. "Outcomes" involved retention rates, graduation rates, first-generation rates, and initiatives to encourage the success of underrepresented groups. One outcome involved the number of degrees produced as one participant referred to being the "top producer of associate degrees." Another outcome regarded accessing federal monies designation. Another outcome referred to not having achievement gaps in "retention or graduation rate . . . for our underrepresented minority students." Another participant said that their outcomes included retaining "65% of first-, full- and part-time students who returned the subsequent fall term after their first-year enrollment." Prestige was also considered an outcome; participants reported that their institutions had national recognition. One participant said, "We are ranked nationally . . . for degrees awarded to minorities." Another added that their long-term goal was "to become Latin America's destination of choice for co-innovation and co-development." Participants said their HSI initiatives were aligned to their institutional goals since their HSI status directed them to find "innovative ways to support Hispanic and Latinx faculty, staff, and students." A goal was intended to support success as one participant stated, "Opportunity changes everything," suggesting that a student can succeed when offered "access to high-quality, affordable educational opportunities."

Student Body

This major theme refers to students. The participants expressed the importance of a cultural and linguistic representation in their student body. One participant mentioned that their student body "truly presents our community." Other participants used the word "immigrants" to describe students who had arrived to their community to indicate how the institution had adapted to meet students' needs. Student diversity played a role in their conceptualization of an HSI institutional identity as most of the participants referred to their organization's diversity demographics. Another participant referred to seeking "grants to better prepare Hispanic and low-income undergraduate students for meaningful careers in areas of strategic emphasis and increase their post-graduate employment rate."

Institutional Culture

This theme refers to initiatives or services created to support students' non-academic needs such as the creation of cultural clubs or associations and minority student engagement activities. Some of these initiatives used a Spanish acronym and aimed to support Hispanic and other minority students; one participant mentioned that these initiatives were important to retain the HSI designation. One participant said, "Hispanic culture and traditions permeate throughout our campus, where Spanish is often heard as a conversational language of choice and, when not, Spanish expressions are used, along with Cuban *cafecito*." Another said that they were "identifying and implementing key strategies that will promote an inclusive HSI campus culture." One talked about engaging Hispanic students through initiatives to close achievement gaps, such as "The Minority Male Initiative" supporting completion goals, persistence, and retention rates."

Community Connections

The theme of institutional culture was supported by a subtheme of community connections. Community connections refers to initiatives that involve serving, engaging, or collaborating with community partners. There were many references of having a visible Hispanic community on campus that reflected the growing surrounding community, including the importance of engaging with a diverse community. Some institutions had multiple campuses in different cities or counties; thus, the HSI responded to the needs of their geographical location. For example, one participant stated, "We are directly linked to the community as it changes. We are malleable and responsive to the demographic and economic development." In many cases, participants indicated

that their organizations had developed various initiatives and programs to meet the needs of the surrounding Hispanic communities. These connections were linked to students' families. One participant said that they provided university guidance to families' understanding so that their students might represent the first generation to attend college. Data also indicated the intention to connect and benefit students and community stakeholders; as one participant explained, they aspired to be the "leader in student learning, achievement, and success while enriching our community."

Faculty and Staff Initiatives

One individual implied that faculty members, including instructors and researchers, should be engaged to provide student support and "pilot innovative grant-funded programs . . . to close achievement gaps." Another initiative referred to the creation of a faculty HSI research group that encouraged research activities and offered student assistance. A participant mentioned that the institution not only employed a diverse faculty body, but also that most of the faculty were bilingual and had experienced another culture abroad; this participant stated they had "yearly cultural competency training." The creation of groups and teams to support HSI initiatives were mentioned often, such as focus groups to seek HSI grants and the HSI culture group. A participant referred to having heavy emphasis on bilingual training and having "a Spanish-language media team" to highlight the Latino community. Another said their faculty were "trained on universal design for equal access."

Discussion

The analysis revealed that this conversation was evocative as participants recalled their institutional journeys of becoming an HSI. While we found different stories of becoming an HSI, we also found similar ways of thinking about the opportunities of servicing students and the community, which is supported by the literature in terms of HSIs' being different in their "servingness" (Franco & Hernández, 2018). There was evidence that the participating organizations wanted to highlight how being an HSI made the institution reflect on attracting, retaining, and providing services to Hispanic students. HSIs could benefit from incorporating Freirean principles of dialogical education in the development of initiatives to support success, engage communities, and create a cultural and linguistic representation.

The guiding questions asked how the HSI status shaped the institution's organizational identity and initiatives. The results suggested that HSI status granted opportunities to assist students in different ways, including the creation of initiatives and services as well as accessing financial incentives. For some of the participating organizations, the origin of the institution was deeply rooted in meeting the needs of an existing or growing Hispanic community. Each defined their context and their institutional initiatives to meet student and community needs. Garcia's (2019) framework helps the individuals representing HSIs to understand the need to refer to measurable and tangible constructs within their context when describing their practices and research initiatives. The themes align with Garcia's (2017) typology regarding academic outcomes, nonacademic outcomes, and institutional ability to offer a culture supporting racial and ethnic experiences. Our findings also showed some initiatives to enhance the educational/ racial experience of Hispanic students and to enact an organizational identity for this purpose as well (Garcia, 2019).

The participating HSIs define themselves via location, such as being near or within an established Hispanic community. Others reinvented or adapted themselves in response to demographic changes. This inquiry essay allows reflection on how institutions serve their student body and more specifically Hispanic students. Institutions attempting to know more about what it means to be an HSI focus more on their strengths and needs. The uniqueness of this panel inquiry exercise

was to allow for a dialogue among individuals based on their HSI experiences while enabling exchange and interaction among participants. Dialogic themes suggested that an HSI identity should include the understanding of what it means to be an immigrant, non-native speaker of English, a minority, and a first-generation student. Thus, we suggest an HSI knowledge or literacy.

A limitation of our inquiry is that the analysis used anecdotal data to describe organizational outcomes, practices, and initiatives of each participating HSI. The data also came from individuals with access to institutional data. It is not our intention to generalize to HSIs but to better understand how institutions conceptualize their organizational identity based on what they believe they know about being an HSI.

In sum, understanding HSIs today is both relevant and complex. This inquiry presents the voices of HSI leaders who participated in a dialogue to become more "HSI literate" while dialoguing on HSI initiatives and student success. Inquiries like this provide data-driven portrayals of being an HSI and its work to meet the educational needs of all students, especially the marginalized. This inquiry contributes to the consideration of an HSI literacy in HSI research. HSI literacy refers to what the organization knows about being an HSI and what they need to know to meet goals and students' needs. Future related inquiries might include other stakeholders' inquiries, such as students and faculty.

References

Corresponding Author: María D. Vásquez-Colina
Author Contact Information: mvasque3@fau.edu

Arroyo, A. T., Maramba, D. C., Allen, T. O., Khalil, D., Palmer, R. T., Thompson, M. L., & Calderon Galdeano, E. (2019). Guidelines for fostering student affairs—Academic affairs partnerships in Hispanic-serving institutions. *New Directions for Student Services*, (167), 75. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20322

Benitez, M.*,* & DeAro, J. (2004*).* Realizing student success at Hispanic serving institutions*.* In B. V. Laden (Ed.), Serving Minority Populations. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 127*, 35–48*.*

Cervantes, M. (2015). Culturally relevant performance pedagogies: Exploring the value of AfroLatina/o music performance projects at a Hispanic-serving institution. *AMAE Journal*, *9*(2), 69–77.

Colby, S. L., & Ortman, J. M. (2015). *Projections of the size and composition of the U.S. population: 2014 to 2060* (Current Population Reports, P25-1143). U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf

Estepp, C.*,* Velasco, J.*,* Culbertson, A.*,* & Conner, N. (2016*).* An investigation into mentoring practices of faculty who mentor undergraduate researchers at a Hispanic serving institution*. Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 16*(*4*), 338–358*.* https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192716661906

Excelencia in Education. (n.d.). *Emerging Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs).* Retrieved August 15, 2020 from https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/series/emerging-hispanic-serving-institutions

Excelencia in Education. (2020). *Latino college completion–Florida.* https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/latino-college-completion/florida

Excelencia in Education. (2020b, August 14). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions Fact Sheets 2017-2018*. https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/fact-sheets/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis-fact-sheet-2017-2018

Florida Educational Research Association (FERA). (2020). *Home*. https://feraonline.org/

Franco, M. A. & Hernández, S. (2018). Assessing the capacity of Hispanic Serving Institutions to serve Latinx students: Moving beyond compositional diversity. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, *2018*(177), 57–71. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20256

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Garcia, G. (2017). What does it mean to be Latinx-serving? Testing the utility of the typology of HSI organizational identities. *Association of Mexican American Education (AMAE) Journal, 11*(3), 109–138,

Garcia, G. A. (2019). *Becoming Hispanic-serving institutions: Opportunities for colleges and universities*. Johns Hopkins University Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fau/detail.action?docID=5639709.

Garcia, G.*,* & Okhidoi, O. (2015*).* Culturally relevant practices that "serve" students at a Hispanic serving institution*. Innovative Higher Education, 40*(*4*), 345–357*.*

Lopez, M. H., Krogstad, J. M. & Passel, J. S. (2019, November 11). *Who is Hispanic?* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/11/who-is-hispanic/

Maestas, R*.,* Vaquera, G. S*.,* & Muñoz Zehr, L. (2007*).* Factors impacting sense of belonging at a Hispanic-Serving Institution*. Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 6(3)*, 237–256*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192707302801

Quezada, R. L., & Louque, A. (2004). The absence of diversity in the academy: Faculty of color in educational administration programs. *Education*, *125*(2), 213–221.

Smidt, S. (2014). *Introducing Freire: A Guide for Students, Teachers and Practitioners*. Routledge.

U.S. Census (n.d.) *Hispanic Heritage Month 2019*. Retrieved August 15, 2020 from https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2019/hispanic-heritage-month.html

U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). *Federal Pell Grant Program*. Retrieved August 14, 2020 from https://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html

U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). Hispanic-Serving Institutions. White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. Retrieved August 15, 2020 from https://sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis/

Vargas, N., Villa-Palomino, J., & Davis, E. (2020). Latinx faculty representation and resource allocation at Hispanic serving institutions. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 23*(1), 39–54.

Vásquez-Colina, M. (2020, April XX). A story of a Latina professor: Predicting success through inquiry. In M. Y. Barakat & M. Rodriguez. (Chairs), *Perpetual seekers of understanding: Stories of immigrant professors of education in the USA* [Symposium]*.* 2020 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA.