



# Barriers to Power: Exploring the Troubled Trajectories of Latinx Executive Leaders at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

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Accepted: 28 February 2023 / Published online: 15 March 2023  
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## Abstract

Guided by Bornstein's (2003) model focused on legitimacy within leadership and Latinx critical theory (LatCrit), we explored barriers Latinx leaders encounter on their path to executive roles at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and how their race and gender shaped their professional trajectories. Our findings show that some Latinx leaders may feel the need to conform to white-coded institutional practices to secure and succeed in their roles and that raced and gendered practices may permeate their work, including their hiring. Additionally, participants encountered intragroup animosity or competitiveness *within* the Latinx community, impending and/or complicating their professional experiences and growth. Collectively, the findings encourage HSIs to (a) develop professional development opportunities for Latinxs administrators and (b) actively support their ascension to and experience in executive leadership. The findings also provide insight on how higher education institutions, more broadly, need to consider racial and gender dynamics as part of the ongoing call for leadership transformation.

**Keywords** Hispanic-Serving Institutions · HSIs, leadership · qualitative

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## Introduction

In the United States, executive leaders in higher education are the authoritative and moral voice of the institution (Manning, 2017). Executive leaders are also responsible for supporting the organization and overcoming crises, including, natural disasters and health crises. Since 2020, the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest revealed an impending leadership crisis in U.S. higher education. Alongside student activism and calls for social justice, institutions struggled with budget shortfalls, shifts to online modalities, hiring freezes, furloughs, and mass retirements (Liu et al., 2021). Scholars have also argued how the pandemic sparked historically marginalized populations to push for transformational leadership by centering social justice issues related to the police-involved death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others (Gonzalez & Griffin, 2020; Russell et al., 2021). The incredible strain the pandemic posed on executive leaders cast a much-needed light on understanding the trajectories of executive leaders across U.S. higher education.

Kerr and Gade (1987) explained that executive leaders must have the skills to move the institution's values and culture forward. As part of this multidimensional work portfolio, institutional leaders must recognize the shifting demographic landscape of the United States and higher education (Kerr & Gade, 1987). Their landmark study holds true in many ways, but the pathway and challenges of leading new institutional types, like Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), was not included. It is important to examine leadership within the HSI context because Latinxs currently make up approximately 18% of the United States total population—a rate expected to grow (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). HSIs now constitute over 500 colleges and universities and educate over two-thirds of all Latinx undergraduate students in the United States (Excelencia in Education, [Excelencia], 2022a). HSIs are accredited, degree-granting, private and public nonprofit institutions where Latinx full-time equivalent students represent at least 25% of undergraduate enrollment. Moreover, at least 50% of the institution's undergraduates qualify for federal financial aid (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008).

Despite the sheer and growing number of HSIs and the importance of Latinx students seeing themselves reflected across the institution, including leadership (Cortez, 2015), little is known about the professional trajectories of Latinx leaders at HSIs. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore Latinx leaders' barriers to executive leadership at HSIs. Specifically, employing a narrative inquiry, we asked:

1. What challenges do Latinx executive leaders encounter in securing an executive leadership role and succeeding within it?
2. How do race and gender impact Latinx leaders' path to executive leadership?

In pursuing these questions, our aim is to cast light on barriers Latinxs leaders face and offer possibilities for diversifying collegiate leadership. Diversification is critical at HSIs, considering preliminary research findings exhibit how HSIs, including their leaders, often uphold white normative standards (Cortez, 2015; Garcia et al., 2019; Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015; Scott et al., 2022). Ultimately, we see this research as an

opportunity to advance “servingsness” at HSIs or, these institution’s ability to serve Latinx students (Garcia et al., 2019).

## Literature Review

In this section, we highlight literature on executive leadership in higher education and then scholarship on how racism and sexism affect people of color’s (PoC) pursuit of, and experience in, leadership. Lastly, we briefly overview HSIs and the limited literature on leadership within the HSI context.

### Executive Leadership Roles in Higher Education

Executive leaders in higher education include deans, provosts, chancellors, vice presidents, and presidents (Manning, 2017). However, within the broad higher education literature, much of the work on leadership focuses on college and university presidents at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), although several studies consider the presidency of minority-serving institutions (e.g., Commodore, 2019; Palmer & Freeman, 2020). Among the more limited research on other types of executive leaders, a few scholars have investigated the role and influence of academic deans (Cleverly-Thompson, 2016; Wolverton et al., 2000) and provosts (Thacker & Freeman, 2021). For instance, Thacker and Freeman (2021) explored the experiences of Black provosts at PWIs, highlighting (a) barriers in their professional preparation and service and (b) strategies to support PoC pursuing executive leadership positions. Notably, they found that given their marginalized identities, these leaders often wondered if others at the university, including the board of trustees, questioned their competence and decision-making.

Other studies have examined chief diversity officers ([CDOs]; e.g., Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012; Leon, 2014; Stanley et al., 2019). For example, Leon (2014) examined strategies CDOs use to develop and maximize diversity resources and how a university’s organizational structure facilitated or constrained the work of these executive leaders. While Leon (2014) highlighted organizational barriers CDOs encountered, these barriers were *not* specific to their path to executive leadership. Additionally, he focused on CDOs within the context of PWIs. Although many HSIs arguably mirror PWIs in form and function (Abrica et al., 2020), these institutions still represent a distinct, albeit evolving, organizational context. Despite these efforts, there is a paucity of research on executive leaders, including senior leadership teams (Kezar et al., 2020) and a dearth of published work on leadership within the HSI context.

### Gender and Racial Challenges of Executive Leadership

A theme within the higher education scholarship on executive leaders’ centers on minoritized college presidents, particularly women and women of color presidents (Burmicky & McClure, 2021). Specifically, much of this work documents challenges minoritized leaders grapple with in the scope of their roles. Gasman (2011), for

example, explained that the prevalence of racism often erodes foundations, donors, and the public's confidence and trust in Black college presidents. Commodore (2019) also found that Black women presidents' qualifications are often highly scrutinized and questioned given the dominant white male culture. Similarly, Burmicky (2021) found that community college Latino male presidents experience bias and discrimination throughout their careers due to college campuses' dominant white institutional culture. Muñoz (2009) showed that community colleges were often white male organizations that downplayed Latina presidents' values and perspectives. Notably, considering the focus of this study, Burmicky and McClure (2021) surmised that extant research on presidential leadership shows that "women and people of color continue to face barriers in their efforts to reach and succeed in the college presidency" (p. 169). In brief, minoritized college presidents face challenges in *successfully doing* the job as well as in initially *securing* it.

Beyond challenges associated with minoritized college presidents, research evinces how higher education's pervasive white male culture intercedes to negatively affect women of color leaders. Relevant to this study, Velarde Pierce (2020) demonstrated that Latina female executive leaders often encounter gender stereotypes and need to work harder than their male counterparts to justify their leadership positions. Similarly, Sánchez et al. (2020) found that early-career Latina administrators felt pressured to "be the whitest version of themselves" (p. 599) or risk being perceived as unintelligent. Altogether, there is ample reason to suspect that Latinxs' path to executive leadership can be full of raced and gendered challenges.

### Hispanic-Serving Institutions and Executive Leadership

Federally recognized in 1992, HSIs educate slightly over two-thirds of Latinx undergraduate students in the United States (*Excelencia*, 2022b). This growing population of institutions is institutionally diverse, including public and private community colleges and 4-year institutions. HSIs also span across every region of the country but remain concentrated in the West and Southwest as well as Puerto Rico (*Excelencia*, 2022b). In fact, of the 559 HSIs across the country as of 2020–2021, 97 are in Texas, and this number is slated to grow considering the current 40 emerging HSIs (eHSIs) in Texas (*Excelencia*, 2022a). Collectively, this means that between HSIs and eHSIs, there are close to 140 institutions with 15% or higher Latinx undergraduate enrollment in Texas.

Within the fast-growing scholarship on HSIs, research about Latinx college leaders at HSIs remain scarce. Relatedly though, Opp and Gosetti (2002) examined changes in the proportional racial/ethnic representation of women administrators from 1991 to 1997 at U.S. community colleges. Based on their trend and predictive analyses, they found that urban Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges (HSCCs) in California were a significant positive predictor of change in the proportional representation of women of color administrators, which suggests that HSCCs serve as a potential pathway to leadership for Latina women. Meanwhile, Dayton et al. (2004) explored the experiences of chief student affairs administrators at HSIs in California and Texas to understand how HSIs met student needs. Accordingly, they were not concerned with understanding these leaders' professional trajectories or barriers, as is the case in this

study. More recently, reflecting on her experience as a Latina leader at an HSCC, de la Teja (2017) discussed what it means to be a culturally responsive leader within this context. Despite these contributions, scholarship on executive leaders broadly remains severely underdeveloped. Hence, this exploratory study is poised to offer a more nuanced understanding of powerful institutional agents, beyond college presidents. Furthermore, this study expands the HSI scholarship by highlighting executive leaders at these institutions.

## Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by Bornstein's (2003) *Legitimacy in the Academic Presidency: From Entrance to Exit* and Latinx critical theory (LatCrit). While focused on college presidents, Bornstein (2003) emphasized how achieving and maintaining legitimacy is essential for leaders and proposed a three-stage process for legitimacy: gaining legitimacy, creating legitimate change, and assuring legitimate presidential succession. Legitimacy begins with the search and transition process as effective leaders need to understand how they can respect and support the institution's culture, values, and mission (Bornstein, 2003). Additionally, leaders must foster trust among faculty and institutional stakeholders to be viewed as a "good" or legitimate fit. Leaders successful in these stages can then improve and transform their institutions.

Notably, Bornstein (2003) also explained that gender stereotypes can influence leaders' legitimacy. Specifically, women must overcome gender-based bias and discrimination that reinforce male-centric leadership. Accordingly, Bornstein's (2003) framework helps make meaning of the obstacles women, such as the Latina participants in this study, encounter in attaining legitimacy in their path to executive leadership. However, this framework does not account for the intersection of race and gender in the legitimization process.

Researchers have long argued that racism is an inextricable part of people's lives, as it is ingrained within policies, practices, and structures including those throughout the U.S. higher education system (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021). Therefore, to better understand racial challenges in Latinx professionals' path to executive leadership, we drew from LatCrit. LatCrit is a theoretical approach that flows from critical race theory ([CRT]; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) and examines the relationship of race, racism, and power for PoC (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Specifically, LatCrit complements CRT by examining the unique and intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination Latinxs face (Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). For example, LatCrit acknowledges the intersection of race with the Latinx community's social, economic, political, and legal problems (Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004).

By pairing Bornstein's (2003) work and LatCrit, we can better understand how race and gender affect Latinx leaders' path to executive roles at HSIs. Specifically, Bornstein (2003) emphasizes gender as a key influence on legitimacy, and LatCrit helps expose embedded systems of power and privilege within higher education tied to race that affect PoC's ability to secure, and succeed within, executive roles. Considering the HSI context, Garcia (2019) argued that many HSIs' organizational structures uphold white-dominant standards because these colleges and universities were

not typically developed to serve the Latinx community. Additionally, whitestream institutions' policies and practices uphold white male cultural norms, thereby limiting many minoritized leaders' professional development and success (Burmicky, 2021). Thus, by bending Bornstein's framework and LatCrit, we consider both racial and gendered dimensions of Latinx professionals' ascension to and success in executive roles—intersecting facets often ignored in prior research.

## Methods

Using narrative inquiry, we explored six Latinx leaders' path to executive leadership at HSIs, with special attention to the challenges they encountered in securing legitimacy and succeeding within these roles. Narrative inquiry focuses on participants' lived experiences to make meaning of a given phenomenon and researchers often tell participants' stories using their words (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Ye & Edwards, 2017). Additionally, narrative inquiries can be conducted with a single participant or several participants who share common experiences (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Thus, in line with narrative inquiry, we listened and read participants' stories to better understand the challenges they encountered throughout their professional trajectories and incorporate lengthy quotes from the interviews to animate the findings.

## Data Collection

In line with narrative inquiry, we utilized one-on-one interviews as the primary method of data collection, since interviews enable researchers to obtain detailed information about individuals' lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, we used open-ended questions to engage participants and gain a rich understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Interviews lasted 60–90 min, and during them, we asked participants to describe their career aspirations, challenges they encountered, experience working at an HSI in particular, and leadership skills they suggest for aspiring Latinx college leaders.

## Participants

We recruited participants using purposeful sampling—a technique that allows “inquirers to select individuals and sites for a study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 326). Specifically, we purposefully recruited individuals who met the following criteria: they (a) self-identified as Latina/o/x, (b) held an executive leadership role, and (c) worked at a Texas HSI. We selected Texas because it is home to 97 HSIs and has the second-highest number of HSIs, following only California (*Excelencia*, 2022a). Also, we focused on Texas because its large and burgeoning Latinx student population has not translated into Latinx representation in college leadership (Hazelrigg, 2019). Moreover, considering ongoing trends, Texas is a prime site for HSI research, with the implications of this work poised to support Latinxs in executive leadership at other HSIs and across higher education.

**Table 1** Participant Demographics

Name	Position	Gender	Institution Level	Institutional Control
Lorena	Vice-President of Student Development	Woman	2-year	Public
Alejandra	Dean of Enrollment Management and Student Success	Woman	2-Year	Public
Gustavo	Vice-President of Student Success	Man	2-Year	Public
Dario	Dean of Instruction	Man	2-Year	Public
Susana	Associate Vice-President of Human Resources	Woman	4-Year	Public
Sergio	Associate Vice-President of Enrollment	Man	4-Year	Public

*Note:* Pseudonyms used for participants

To recruit participants, we drew on social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Specifically, we posted a recruitment flier on social media and asked interested individuals to message us. Through these efforts, our sample ultimately consisted of six Latinx executive leaders. Of the six, four worked at public community colleges, and two worked at public 4-year institutions. Additionally, three participants identified as cisgendered Latina women, and three identified as cisgendered Latino men. To protect identities, we assigned participants pseudonyms (see Table 1).

**Data Analysis**

We audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim all interviews and coded the transcripts using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. We used Dedoose because it permitted us to simultaneously analyze data from various locations. In Dedoose, we conducted open, axial, and selective coding. During the open coding process, we (re) read the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data (Saldaña, 2021). At this time, we also considered our conceptual lens (i.e., Borstein’s conceptualization of legitimacy and LatCrit) and then identified broad codes, such as “Latinx leadership,” “racial remark/oppression,” “gender invalidation,” and “HSI-specific barrier.” We then used axial coding, developing categories by grouping codes identified in the first cycle (Saldaña, 2021). During this phase, we reviewed codes and eliminated duplicates. To note, we worked collaboratively to reduce the preliminary broad codes, which allowed us to collectively see, and agree upon, emerging themes. Finally, we used selective coding, resulting in three final themes that aligned with our conceptual framework and helped answer our research questions (Saldaña, 2021).

**Positionality**

Our interest in this research stems from our experiences as Latinx faculty and administrators at HSIs. As first-generation college students, we often discussed challenges

we experienced due to our racial and gender identities. Additionally, we each have a connection to Texas due to employment or graduate studies. The first author received his doctorate from a Texas HSI, at which point he became invested in research concerning such institutions. The second author is a professor at a Texas HSI who critically interrogates policies toward advancing equity at HSIs. The third author is a student affair professional at a Texas HSI and aspiring executive leader. The last author earned his master's from a Texas HSI. Collectively, we realized that while we worked and/or studied at HSIs in Texas, we saw a concerning lack of Latinx representation within executive leadership.

## Limitations

Regarding limitations, we focused on Latinx executive leaders at HSIs in Texas, meaning our findings may not resonate with their peers at HSIs in other states/regions. Additionally, recognizing the institutional heterogeneity of the HSI population and the tendency for HSIs to be characterized monolithically (Garcia et al., 2019), we recruited executive leaders from HSCCs and 4-year HSIs. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to make cross-institutional comparisons. Finally, while participants self-identified as Latina/o, they do not represent the full range of Latinidad, and thus, other Latinx college leaders may not fully relate to their experiences, especially with racial and gendered oppression and delegitimization.

## Findings

This study focuses on the challenges Latinx leaders encountered in their path toward executive roles at HSIs and highlights raced and gendered dimensions of this trajectory. Our participants' experiences revealed the following challenges: *White-Coded Institutional Practices and Politics*, *Racial Bias in Hiring*, and *Intragroup Animosity*.

### White-Coded Institutional Practices and Politics

To secure an executive leadership role and succeed in it, participants recognized the need to adopt *white-coded practices*—norms, rules, and expectations rooted in white and Eurocentric values and traditions (Powell et al., 2021). Multiple participants acknowledged the sentiment of white institutional politics related to the expectations of Latinx executive leaders. For example, Gustavo, a vice-president of student success, stated:

You have to be careful...a lot of times there's targets on our backs of, "Yeah, they're going to put [a Latino] in here and he's going to fail. Let's just see it, let's just watch it." So, you've got to be more professional than everyone else. I know sometimes when I'm speaking, I tend to say, "esto or estos or whatever;" I code-switch. Sometimes people take offense to that...You've got to position things in a way that brings supporters and not detractors. So, you've got to be delicate, you have to be political, and you've got to be savvy ...Some people



are waiting for you to fail, and some people are setting you up to fail, and some people are actively sabotaging everything you're doing.

Gustavo highlights how some institutions “actively sabotage” Latinx leaders, impeding them from succeeding with these positions of power. Even more, to succeed, Gustavo felt obligated to conform to dominant white standards by code-switching. For instance, he expressed how speaking Spanish can bring negative attention to Latinx leaders in certain situations. Relatedly, Susana, an assistant vice-president of human resources, explained:

Those of us that are in executive leadership roles have to be creative in how we engage our folks... There are all these hidden politics. You have some network, but you have to ensure that you're helping people see the benefits and say, “I'll scratch your back, if you scratch mine.” Nothing illegal or unethical but that stuff has to happen. Latinos are not always well aware of how those politics work because we either choose to not participate because we say, “Oh well I don't want to sell myself out.” But it's not selling out. You've got to learn the system, then tweak it to work in your favor and within your values.

According to Ogbu (2004), “selling out” refers to PoC conforming to white cultural values, behaviors, and speech in work and educational settings. Notably, other participants likewise pointed out the need to navigate white-coded politics. For instance, Dario, a dean of instruction, similarly noted:

Politics is, it runs rampant in higher education... You almost have to be as skilled as an attorney to figure out who are the wolves wearing sheepskins... It is important to know who these people are because you have to navigate them and figure out how you can lead them, even if it's not at your own advantage. Latinos don't necessarily practice politics. We're not at local politics; we're not in high school politics. We don't have this idea that the world is cruel, that leadership can be very mean... We're here to do the work and to change things, but [we] understand that there are other people that we have to influence.

In short, participants were aware or became aware of the political nature of U.S. higher education and revealed how the politics at least at their HSIs are rooted in whiteness.

### **Racial Bias in Hiring**

Despite working at an HSI, participants discussed how raced and gendered practices permeate their work, including the hiring process. For example, Gustavo acknowledged that his institution hired him based on his racial/ethnic identity. Specifically, he explained:

At my old institution, I was one of maybe two Hispanic people in the entire building. They hired me specifically because I was Hispanic because they

wanted somebody that could speak Spanish and was familiar with South Texas. At my current HSI, there were a lot of folks who look like me. But not on the staff side or student affairs side, but on the faculty side, I'd say we had above the average Hispanic faculty, but still not representative of the community.

Gustavo's HSI appears to have Latinx representation on the student and faculty side, but more limited representation among staff. In effect, hiring practices at Gustavo's previous institution reflected the campus's interest in Latinx representation, yet he noticed limited Latinx representation within the institution's executive leadership. Similarly, Lorena, the vice-president of student development at an HSCC, shared:

I think the hiring practices are filled with implicit biases across the board. I would have to attribute it to how hiring practices may be hampering mobility for the Latinx population. In some cases, it's straight up like systematic discrimination. I think some of it is still some of the good ole boys' system, like it or not, that still does exist, where people have that unconscious bias and are going to hire people like themselves.

This network hiring approach, which Lorena elevates, illustrates a form of racial and gender marginalization. Specifically, Lorena's example highlights the idea of the "good ole boy" system, a group of well-connected white men who (un)consciously prefer to hire people like themselves (Hora, 2020). In effect, the continued presence and power of "good ole boys" networks cement discriminatory hiring processes, which negatively affect the ascension of PoC, especially women of color, to executive leadership.

Furthermore, Alejandra, the dean of enrollment management and student success at another HSCC, echoed Lorena to some extent, noting how some HSIs will hire Latina women to increase the representativeness of their workforce. But again, Bornstein (2003) argued that the traditional understanding of leadership is male-centric, resulting in the delegitimization of women leaders. Upholding Bornstein's point, Alejandra reflects how Latina women are often viewed as not being leadership material. Specifically, she stated:

When you start hearing administrations talking about diversity and equity, but it doesn't sound genuine. Diversity and equity sound more like, let's make sure we have a balance of Black administrators, Hispanic administrators, white administrators... They don't say it, but you can read between the lines... I was like the token Latina. Like, "Look, we have a dean. She's Latina." So, when I first became a dean, it's like, "No, we want her to be this cute Latina dean that goes to cultural events."

Alejandra's experience highlights how an HSI can acknowledge the need for more diverse hires, but racial and gender stereotypes still permeate the workplace, effectively impeding PoC, including Latinxs, from securing positions of power and excelling within them. Moreover, pervasive raced and gendered stereotypes and assumptions resulted in Alejandra understanding that the institution only hired her

because she helped them meet their “diversity needs,” not because of her leadership expertise.

### **Intragroup Animosity**

Lastly, participants explained how sometimes Latinx leaders at HSIs tend not to advocate for other Latinxs. In U.S. society and higher education specifically, racialized groups often must compete with one another given rules established by white males (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). For instance, Dario, a dean of instruction, explained:

Have you ever heard of the Brown crab... There’s this guy fishing on the pier and he’s got three buckets of crabs. He’s got a bucket of Black crabs, a bucket of white crabs, and a bucket of Brown crabs. So, this guy walks by and he sees the Brown crabs and there’s no lid on them. He looks at the Black crabs and the white crabs and there’s lids on them. He goes, “Hey man, you’re fishing with these crabs and how come you’ve got lids on the Black ones and the white ones, but not on the Brown ones?” He goes, “Well, with the white crabs, when one gets out, he pulls the other ones out.” “Okay. What about the Black crabs?” He goes, “Well, when the Black crab gets out, it pushes over the bucket and then all the other crabs run out.” He goes, “What about the Brown ones?” He goes, “Well, when the Brown crab is trying to crawl out, the other Brown crabs pull him back down.” So, you’ve got to be careful because sometimes it’s our own people—our own people—that are hurting us.

Dario’s metaphoric story represents how the Latinx community can sometimes hinder or “sabotage” the success of other Latinx leaders. His experience resonates with Cherry-McDaniel’s (2019) study; she similarly found that leaders of color are not always culturally responsive or supportive of other PoC.

Further illustrating how Latinxs can pull others within their community down was Sergio, an associate vice-president of enrollment. Reflecting on his career path, Sergio noted:

My first year I worked for somebody who was a Latina, and she felt competition. She was 50, and I was 21... She was a horrible boss, and I had to go get another job because I wasn’t going to work for her anymore. So went to her, and gave her my resignation letter, and an hour and a half later, her boss, who was the vice president, called me into his office and said she has lost 17 admissions counselors in the last three years.

Like Dario, Sergio’s experience similarly illustrates that despite having a Latinx supervisor, he grappled with hostility at work. Relatedly, Lorena shared:

Latinos tend to be their own roadblock. I had a Latino boss who was a jerk to me. When I wanted to apply to fellowships to advance myself for executive leadership roles, he would say, “Oh, well I don’t have to pay unless you get in, right?”... I knew I bothered him in some way. It bothered him that I spoke Span-

ish, and he didn't...I think he just felt like I was trying to steal his thunder, and I was like, "Man, I am trying to make you look good. I work for you"...I just didn't understand why he wasn't trying to help me.

Importantly, these examples highlight how the Latinx community can create barriers for themselves, impeding their ascension to and success in college leadership.

## Discussion

Findings of this study provide insight into Latinx leaders' ascension to executive roles at HSIs. Aligned with our conceptual framework, we found that many of the participants felt obliged to reinforce white-coded institutional politics to secure their position and succeed within it. For example, even within the context of an HSI, Gustavo noted his need to code-switch at work. As evidenced by our participants and extant research, including Bonilla-Silva's (2003) oft-cited work, whiteness is an invisible structure that systematically privileges white-dominant standards often to the detriment of PoC. Additionally, Durkee et al. (2019) acknowledged how PoC must invalidate their culture to conform to white cultural norms. Importantly, these norms are often tacit and taken-for-granted, and as participants suggested, some Latinxs "don't necessarily practice [or know the] politics" (Dario). Problematically though, when white standards "remain subtle nebulous, and unnamed, they potentially harm the well-being, self-esteem, and academic success of those who do not share the norms of white culture" (Gusa, 2010, p. 471).

Troublingly, even racialized minoritized workplaces, like the HSIs we explored, are not immune to whiteness' grip. Indeed, many HSIs prescribe to whiteness and invalidate or undervalue the knowledge and assets of PoC (Garcia, 2019; Scott et al., 2022) also explained how HSIs can decenter Latinx needs to appease primarily white stakeholders. Our study supports this understanding, as several of the participants acknowledged that their institutions hired them based on their racial/ethnic identity yet expected them to uphold white dominant practices. Together, these findings add to the literature by highlighting that despite an institution's formal HSI designation, Latinx executive leaders at these colleges and universities may still feel pressured to conform to white dominant standards.

In terms of our second research question, we found that raced and gendered challenges peppered participants' rise to leadership at HSIs. According to Lorena and Alejandra, their respective HSIs disregarded their legitimacy as leaders, hiring them instead primarily to fulfill the institution's diversity agenda. Such a finding aligns with Bornstein's (2003) framework as it evidences the delegitimization of women of color. Relatedly, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) explain how search committees tend to view faculty of color as unqualified and, thus, as more risky hires. Subsequently, colleges and universities tend to hire white candidates. In contrast, participants' experiences show that some HSIs intentionally hire Latinx leaders—not just white men; this is promising. At the same time, however, participants' comments call into question their institution's true hiring intentions. More precisely, participants' comments discouragingly suggest that some HSIs may not necessarily hire Latinx professionals,

particularly Latina women, because they view them as legitimately qualified but as a tool to satisfy appearances and the institution's diversity agenda.

Notably, with a LatCrit lens, we identified the intersection of race and gender as a central theme in the hiring process of executive leaders. For instance, participants (i.e., Alejandra, Lorena, and Susana) stated how their institutions hired them based on their social identities and the expectation that they observe the institution's dominant white male norms. Consistent with Bornstein's (2003) framework, participants explained how they were expected to be an image for the institution at cultural events, not leaders. This finding also resonates Kezar et al.'s (2020) study that found that women often encounter gender bias and are less likely to be selected for university leadership. Furthermore, their experiences relate to previous research on Latina women administrators, which shows how they encounter sexism, with their colleagues questioning their career and leadership credibility compared to their male counterparts (Espino & Camarillo, 2021; Garcia, 2020).

Finally, some participants' path to executive leadership revealed animosity and competitiveness within the Latinx community. Chang et al. (2005) explains the concept of "magical thinking," the notion that racially/ethnically diverse institutions will simply solve racism and racial hostility. Indeed, our findings suggest this is a "magical" way of thinking, with several participants noting how having a supervisor who shared their racial/ethnic identity *did not* translate into empowerment in their professional journey. Per participants' accounts, some Latinxs served as detractors to their success, rather than as a helping hand. Hence, while prior research has theorized that Latinx leadership can lead to positive decision-making at HSIs (Garcia, 2018; Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015), our findings revealed that not all Latinxs are supportive of the success of others within their community. In other words, we found that sometimes it is not only white males, but also Latinxs who might be hostile toward other Latinxs, even within the HSI context. Engulfed within such hypercompetitive spaces, Latinx executive leaders in our study came to understand that some Latinxs would harm their professional development and attempt to undermine their success.

## Implications

### Implications for Practice

Findings from this study offer implications for practice. First, although most HSIs were not created with the explicit mission to serve Latinx students and, thus, the notion of an HSI organizational identity is often contested and in flux, we still urge HSIs to embrace the possibilities this designation presents. Specifically, our findings underline the need for HSIs to disrupt white-coded institutional practices and politics. In California, Texas, and Florida where are many HSIs given the state's large Latinx population, we especially encourage HSIs to increase Latinx representation among executive leadership, particularly since these institutions still often resemble PWIs. Such representation can serve to reassure Latinx students and working professionals that they can achieve high-level positions (León & Nevarez, 2007). Even more, these institutional agents can help support Latinx student success and ultimately advance servingness at HSIs (Garcia, 2019).

Considering participants' experiences with delegitimization, HSIs should develop counter-spaces to serve as sites where Latinx students, faculty, and administrators can find validation and affirmation on campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). Counter-spaces can foster critical resilience against the dominant white male culture (Solórzano et al., 2000) and can help Latinx students, faculty, and administrators form connections and, thus, support them in navigating racism (and perhaps sexism) on campus (Garcia, 2018; Solórzano et al., 2000). Additionally, considering our findings, we suggest that within these counter-spaces, HSI leaders grapple with gender-based oppression and how this impacts the academic and professional experiences and success of Latinas. In sum, it is important within these counter-spaces to address how race, gender, and other identities impact Latinxs' paths to executive leadership roles.

Finally, our findings underline the need for professional development for Latinx lower- and middle-level administrators interested in executive leadership at HSIs. Furthermore, considering other research showing how current power structures within higher education prevent PoC from moving into leadership roles from the lower ranks (Burmicky, 2021; Sánchez et al., 2020), we recommend HSIs develop workshops validating the racial and gendered experiences of aspiring Latinx executive leaders. We also encourage workshops that discuss issues related to intergroup animosity and encourage a culture of care, emphasizing how Latinxs can uplift each other and celebrate collective wins. Latinx executive leaders are underrepresented across higher education, and to remedy this inequity, it is important for them to serve as role models and assist other marginalized professionals in securing—and succeeding in—these leadership roles (Velarde-Pierce, 2020). Notably, these opportunities can complement the efforts of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), which offers workshops designed to develop Latinx college presidents (HACU, 2022).

### Implications for Research

Considering the findings and gaps in the literature, we suggest several directions for future research. For instance, future studies should examine how search committees at HSIs challenge (or uphold) white-dominant practices when hiring executive leaders. Through his study of faculty search committees, Liera (2020) emphasized the need for equity-minded advocates to address racial and gender inequities and disrupt white institutional standards during the hiring process. Similarly, we encourage researchers to investigate ways search committees can actively diversify college leadership.

Finally, we urge researchers to consider participants' sexual orientation and gender expression since these lines of inquiry were outside the scope of our study. Specifically, we encourage researchers to apply a LatCrit lens to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) Latinx executive leaders. The under examination of LGBTQ+ student affairs professionals' experiences lead to barriers for institutional advocacy (Rankin & Garvey, 2015). Furthermore, as Cataño and Gonzalez (2021) suggest, greater LGBTQ+Latinx representation within leadership at HSIs can help enhance cultural awareness. Towards diversifying leadership, bet-

ter understanding LGBTQ+ leaders' professional paths and roadblocks is essential. Ultimately, we encourage future researchers to further examine how the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation can impact Latinx executive leaders.

## Conclusion

As HSIs continue to emerge, it is important they proactively support and advocate for greater Latinx representation in leadership and build professional pathways for such leaders. Latinx executive leaders can advance equity and justice and HSIs by fostering learning environments that acknowledge Latinx students' cultural backgrounds (Hazelrigg, 2019) and ultimately help advance servingness. However, the six Latinx executive HSI leaders in this study highlighted various professional barriers, revealing how they navigated white-coded institutional politics; racial and gender biases; and intragroup animosity. Additionally, the findings illuminate the need for institutions to consider racial and gender dynamics as part of ongoing call for leadership transformation. By understanding their experiences, we invite HSIs to develop approaches to enhance Latinx representation especially within executive leadership.

**Authors' Contribution** All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Guillermo Ortega, Stephanie Aguilar-Smith, Gil Lizalde, and Chris Porras. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Guillermo Ortega and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Please see below for contribution details:

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Implications and Conclusion: Guillermo Ortega, Stephanie Aguilar-Smith.

Writing - review and editing: Guillermo Ortega, Stephanie Aguilar-Smith, Gil Lizalde, Chris Porras.

**Funding** Not applicable.

**Data Availability** This is a qualitative study and data was conducted through one-on-one interviews. In the study, pseudonyms were given to each participant to contain confidentiality of the research participants.

**Code Availability** Interviews were used in this study. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest/Competing Interests** Not applicable.

**Ethics Approval** This study was reviewed and approved by IRB. All results are presented clearly, honestly, and without fabrication, falsification, or inappropriate data manipulation.

**Consent to Participate** As part of IRB approval, all participants were provided a consent to participate and were aware of all risks and benefits of their participation in the study. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym.

**Consent for Publication** All authors give the Publisher the permission to publish the work.



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