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The Batey as HSI Laboratory: TransIndigenous Epistemologies for Culturally Responsive Pedagogies in Puerto Rican Higher Education

Dr. Armen Álvarez, PhD

Abstract

This conceptual paper theorizes how Puerto Rican Bomba traditions offer transformative frameworks for advancing equity and culturally responsive pedagogies within Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Drawing from “Bombazo epistemology”—a performative methodology rooted in the 500-year TransIndigenous alliance between Taíno and African Black Indigenous peoples—I develop a theoretical framework demonstrating how ancestral knowledge systems can inform institutional transformation. Through conceptual analysis supported by illustrative cases from Puerto Rico’s 2019 protests and COVID-19 digital adaptations, this paper argues that the Batey (sacred ceremonial space) provides a model for creating inclusive learning environments that honor Latino/a/e students’ multiple epistemologies. The framework reveals how HSIs can transcend demographic designation toward operational servingness by implementing pedagogical practices that recognize rhythm, movement, and collective voice as legitimate knowledge production methods. This theoretical contribution challenges Eurocentric academic paradigms while offering concrete strategies for institutional transformation that serves the 67% of Latino students attending HSIs nationwide. Implications for policy, practice, and future research in HSI contexts are discussed.

Keywords: Hispanic-Serving Institutions, culturally responsive pedagogy, TransIndigenous methodology, decolonial epistemology, Puerto Rican higher education, operational servingness, Bombazo epistemology

The Batey as HSI Laboratory: TransIndigenous Epistemologies for Culturally Responsive Pedagogies in Puerto Rican Higher Education

Introduction

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) stand at a critical juncture in American higher education. With over 600 institutions serving approximately 67% of all Latino college students nationwide, HSIs represent both tremendous opportunity and significant challenge for educational equity (Excelencia in Education, 2023). Yet despite this demographic reality, most HSIs continue operating within Eurocentric frameworks that fundamentally misalign with the epistemological traditions their students embody (Garcia, 2019). This misalignment manifests in persistent equity gaps, with Latino/a/e students experiencing lower retention and graduation rates compared to their white peers, even within institutions ostensibly designed to serve them (Contreras & Contreras, 2015).

The central problem this paper addresses is the disconnect between HSIs' demographic designation and their operational servingness—the actual practices, pedagogies, and policies that create conditions for Latino/a/e student success (Garcia et al., 2019). While federal designation requires only 25% Latino enrollment, genuine servingness demands fundamental transformation of institutional structures, pedagogical approaches, and epistemological frameworks (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). This transformation cannot emerge from incremental reforms or surface-level cultural additions; it requires reimagining the university through knowledge systems that have sustained Latino/a/e communities across centuries of colonial oppression.

This conceptual paper introduces Bombazo epistemology—a performative methodology emerging from 500 years of TransIndigenous collaboration in Puerto Rico (Álvarez, 2023)—as a theoretical framework for advancing culturally responsive pedagogies within HSIs. By examining how Taíno and African Black Indigenous peoples created sophisticated knowledge systems through strategic alliance, I develop a framework demonstrating how HSIs can transform from demographically designated to operationally serving institutions. The Batey, as both physical ceremonial space and metaphorical model, offers blueprints for creating inclusive learning environments where multiple epistemologies converge without hierarchical domination.

The significance of this theoretical contribution extends beyond individual institutional improvement. As Latino/a/e populations become increasingly central to American higher education's future, the success or failure of HSIs will largely determine whether the nation achieves its educational equity goals (Santiago et al., 2015). This paper's framework provides actionable strategies for institutional transformation while challenging fundamental assumptions about legitimate knowledge production in academic spaces. By centering epistemologies that predate American universities by centuries, this work repositions HSIs not as remedial institutions serving "underprepared" students, but as sites of epistemological innovation that can lead higher education toward more inclusive futures.

Literature Review

HSIs: From Demographic Designation to Operational Servingness

The scholarly discourse on Hispanic-Serving Institutions has evolved significantly since their federal recognition in 1992, moving from descriptive accounts of demographic shifts toward critical examinations of institutional transformation (Laden, 2001; Núñez et al., 2016). Early HSI scholarship focused primarily on enrollment patterns and federal funding mechanisms, treating these institutions as passive recipients of demographic change rather than active agents of educational transformation (Benitez, 2010). This demographic determinism overlooked the complex work required to serve Latino/a/e students effectively, reducing servingness to numerical representation rather than pedagogical practice.

Garcia's (2019) groundbreaking work on "becoming" Hispanic-serving institutions marked a paradigm shift in HSI scholarship, distinguishing between enrollment-based designation and identity-based transformation. This framework identifies multiple organizational identities—Latino-enrolling, Latino-serving, Latino-enhancing—that reflect varying degrees of institutional commitment to Latino/a/e student success. Garcia et al. (2019) further developed this taxonomy through multidimensional analysis of servingness, identifying key indicators including compositional diversity, organizational culture, and student outcomes. Their research reveals that many HSIs remain "Hispanic-enrolling" rather than truly serving, maintaining traditional structures while expecting Latino/a/e students to assimilate to existing norms.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes the racialized organizational context of HSIs, examining how institutional structures perpetuate inequity even within minority-serving institutions (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018).

This critical turn challenges deficit narratives about Latino/a/e students while interrogating institutional responsibilities for transformation. Scholars argue that genuine servingness requires confronting white supremacist foundations of American higher education, not merely adding cultural programming to existing structures (Valdez, 2015). This literature establishes theoretical groundwork for understanding HSIs as sites of potential epistemological transformation rather than demographic categories.

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogies in Higher Education

The evolution from culturally relevant to culturally sustaining pedagogies represents a critical theoretical advancement with particular relevance for HSI contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). While culturally relevant pedagogy sought to bridge home and school cultures, culturally sustaining pedagogy explicitly commits to maintaining and fostering linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of democratic schooling (Paris, 2012). This shift from relevance to sustenance acknowledges that marginalized communities possess sophisticated knowledge systems worthy of preservation and development, not merely accommodation within dominant frameworks.

Within higher education contexts, culturally responsive pedagogies face unique challenges related to disciplinary traditions, faculty preparation, and institutional inertia (Hurtado et al., 2012). Research demonstrates that Latino/a/e students thrive in learning environments that validate their cultural knowledge, incorporate collaborative learning structures, and connect academic content to community concerns (Rendón, 1994; Yosso, 2005). However, implementation remains inconsistent, with many institutions treating cultural responsiveness as supplementary rather than foundational to academic excellence (Museus et al., 2018).

The concept of community cultural wealth provides crucial theoretical foundation for understanding Latino/a/e students' epistemological resources (Yosso, 2005). This framework identifies six forms of capital—aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant—that students of color bring to educational settings. Rather than viewing Latino/a/e students through deficit lenses that emphasize what they lack, community cultural wealth recognizes the sophisticated knowledge systems developed through navigating marginalized positions. This asset-based approach aligns with decolonial pedagogies that challenge Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies while centering Indigenous and diasporic epistemologies (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Decolonial Methodologies and Indigenous Epistemologies

Decolonial scholarship provides essential theoretical tools for understanding how coloniality shapes contemporary educational institutions, including HSIs (Grosfoguel, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000). The coloniality of power, knowledge, and being continues structuring university spaces through epistemic racism that privileges Western ways of knowing while marginalizing Indigenous, African, and other non-European epistemologies (Castro-Gómez, 2007). This epistemic violence manifests in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and research methodologies that systematically exclude knowledge systems carried by Latino/a/e students.

Indigenous methodologies offer alternative frameworks for knowledge production that center relational accountability, ceremonial protocols, and land-based epistemologies (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009). These approaches challenge Western academic assumptions about objectivity, individual authorship, and textual authority while demonstrating sophisticated research methods developed over millennia. Within Latino/a/e contexts, Indigenous methodologies become particularly complex given the TransIndigenous nature of many Latino identities, incorporating both Indigenous American and African diasporic traditions (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981).

Recent scholarship on “epistemic disobedience” and “border thinking” provides frameworks for understanding how marginalized communities create knowledge at the intersections of multiple epistemological traditions (Mignolo, 2009; Anzaldúa, 1987). These theoretical contributions demonstrate that syncretism and hybridity need not represent cultural loss but can generate new epistemological possibilities that transcend binary oppositions. For HSIs, this scholarship suggests pathways toward institutional transformation that honor multiple knowledge systems without requiring assimilation into dominant frameworks.

Theoretical Framework: Bombazo Epistemology

Bombazo epistemology, as theorized in my doctoral dissertation (Álvarez, 2023), emerges from five centuries of TransIndigenous knowledge production in Puerto Rico, offering a sophisticated framework for understanding how marginalized communities create, validate, and transmit knowledge outside dominant academic structures. This theoretical framework builds upon decolonial theory (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), Indigenous methodologies (Smith, 2012), and performance studies (Taylor, 2003) to articulate how aesthetic

intervention functions as analytical method. The framework's core proposition is that beauty, rhythm, and collective embodiment constitute legitimate research methodologies that produce knowledge equal in sophistication to Western academic approaches (Álvarez, 2023, 2025).

The theoretical architecture of Bombazo epistemology rests on three foundational pillars that emerged from the historical alliance between Taíno and African Black Indigenous peoples (Álvarez, 2023). First, ceremonial protocols as research methodology positions the Batey—the circular ceremonial space—as a laboratory for knowledge production where spatial arrangements, temporal rhythms, and participatory structures generate collective understanding. Second, aesthetic intervention as analysis recognizes that artistic expression carries analytical weight, with drum patterns serving as data processing systems and dance movements functioning as embodied theorization (Álvarez, 2025). Third, collective validation through community resonance replaces individual peer review with communal recognition of truth, where knowledge gains legitimacy through its ability to generate collective response rather than expert certification.

This framework directly acknowledges what Santos (2014) terms “epistemicide”—the systematic destruction of knowledge systems that exist outside Western academic traditions—while demonstrating the remarkable resilience of Indigenous and African diasporic epistemologies. By theorizing how Bomba practitioners conduct sophisticated analysis through ceremonial gatherings, this framework reveals that communities possess research methodologies that not only survived epistemicidal violence but continue to thrive in parallel to Western academic approaches. This coexistence of knowledge systems resonates with Said's (1978) theorization in **Orientalism**, which demonstrates how subaltern epistemologies persist alongside and in tension with hegemonic structures, creating what he terms “contrapuntal” readings of reality. The framework's emphasis on collective knowledge production particularly resonates with HSI contexts, where Latino/a/e students embody this epistemological plurality, simultaneously navigating individualistic academic achievement and communalistic cultural values.

The TransIndigenous dimension of this framework—emerging from deliberate collaboration between distinct Indigenous traditions—provides models for contemporary institutional partnerships. Rather than synthesizing differences into homogeneous fusion, the Taíno-African alliance maintained distinct epistemological contributions while creating collaborative frameworks

that strengthened both traditions. This theoretical model suggests how HSIs might navigate relationships with diverse Latino/a/e communities without erasing specificities or requiring assimilation into singular institutional cultures.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework Development

This paper employs conceptual analysis as its primary methodological approach, developing theoretical propositions through systematic examination of Bombazo epistemology's applicability to HSI contexts (Jaakkola, 2020). Conceptual papers serve crucial functions in advancing scholarly discourse by synthesizing disparate literatures, identifying theoretical gaps, and proposing novel frameworks that generate empirical research (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Given the nascent state of scholarship connecting Indigenous epistemologies to HSI transformation, conceptual development provides necessary theoretical foundation before empirical testing.

The conceptual development process involved three iterative phases. First, archaeological analysis examined historical documents, ethnographic accounts, and cultural texts documenting the emergence of Bomba traditions from TransIndigenous collaboration. This phase established the historical and epistemological foundations of Bombazo methodology, tracing its development from pre-Columbian Taíno ceremonies through African diasporic contributions to contemporary practice. Second, theoretical synthesis connected Bombazo epistemology to existing scholarly frameworks including decolonial theory, Indigenous methodologies, and HSI scholarship. This phase identified conceptual bridges between ceremonial practices and academic processes, developing theoretical propositions about knowledge production, validation, and transmission. Third, applied theorization translated ceremonial protocols into institutional practices, generating concrete strategies for HSI transformation grounded in epistemological principles.

Illustrative Cases and Examples

To ground theoretical propositions in contemporary reality, this paper incorporates illustrative cases demonstrating Bombazo epistemology's operational dynamics. These cases serve not as empirical evidence but as conceptual demonstrations that illuminate theoretical principles through concrete examples (Siggelkow, 2007). Two primary cases—Puerto Rico's 2019 protests and COVID-19 pandemic adaptations—were selected for their demonstration of epistemological flexibility and contemporary relevance.

The selection criteria for illustrative cases prioritized: (1) documented instances of Bombazo practices adapting to contemporary challenges, (2) clear demonstration of epistemological principles in action, (3) relevance to HSI contexts and challenges, and (4) accessibility through public documentation including social media archives, news coverage, and community testimonials. These cases function as “proof of concept” demonstrations showing how ceremonial epistemologies maintain sophistication while adapting to technological and social change.

Analysis of illustrative cases followed abductive reasoning processes, moving between theoretical propositions and concrete examples to refine conceptual understanding (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Rather than treating cases as data to be coded, this approach examined how specific instances illuminated theoretical principles while revealing additional conceptual dimensions not initially anticipated. This methodological approach aligns with Indigenous research paradigms that resist separating theory from practice, understanding knowledge as emerging through engaged participation rather than detached observation.

Theoretical Validation Processes

Validating conceptual frameworks requires different criteria than empirical research, focusing on theoretical coherence, practical utility, and generative potential rather than statistical significance (Cornelissen, 2017). This paper’s validation process incorporated multiple strategies to ensure theoretical rigor. First, internal coherence was assessed through systematic examination of logical consistency between framework components, ensuring that epistemological principles aligned with proposed practices. Second, external validity emerged through connection to established theoretical traditions, demonstrating how Bombazo epistemology extends and challenges existing scholarship rather than operating in isolation.

Community validation, while not empirical in traditional academic sense, informed theoretical development through ongoing dialogue with Bomba practitioners and HSI educators. These conversations, conducted through conference presentations, informal discussions, and ceremonial participation, provided crucial feedback on theoretical propositions’ cultural authenticity and practical applicability. This validation process itself demonstrates Bombazo epistemology’s emphasis on collective knowledge production, where theoretical development emerges through community dialogue rather than individual scholarship.

Theoretical Propositions and Analysis

Proposition 1: The Batey Model for Inclusive Learning Environments

The Batey's circular structure provides a spatial model for creating inclusive learning environments that disrupt hierarchical knowledge transmission while fostering collective meaning-making. Unlike traditional classroom arrangements that position instructors as singular authorities facing passive recipients, the Batey's circular configuration ensures equal sight lines, shared acoustic space, and democratic participation opportunities. This spatial democracy carries epistemological implications: knowledge emerges from collective dialogue rather than individual expertise, validated through community resonance rather than institutional authority.

Translating Batey principles to HSI classrooms requires more than furniture rearrangement; it demands fundamental reconceptualization of pedagogical relationships. In the ceremonial Batey, the distinction between performers and audience dissolves as all participants contribute to knowledge production through call-and-response, rhythmic accompaniment, or energetic presence. Similarly, HSI classrooms operating through Batey principles would position students as knowledge co-creators rather than consumers, with instructors serving as facilitators of collective discovery rather than sole content deliverers. This shift particularly benefits first-generation Latino/a/e students whose families may possess sophisticated knowledge outside academic credentials.

The 2019 Puerto Rican protests demonstrated Batey principles operating at scale, with protest sites becoming circular gathering spaces where collective knowledge emerged through shared testimony, collaborative strategy development, and communal validation of lived experiences. Protesters explicitly invoked Batey protocols, forming circles for decision-making and ensuring all voices gained hearing regardless of educational credentials or social status. These contemporary applications demonstrate how ceremonial spatial principles translate into democratic practice, suggesting strategies for HSI governance structures that genuinely incorporate student voice in institutional decision-making.

Proposition 2: Rhythmic Epistemology as Alternative Assessment

Bombazo epistemology's use of rhythm as a knowledge carrier challenges text-centric assessment methods that may disadvantage students from oral and kinesthetic traditions (Álvarez, 2023, 2025). In Bomba ceremonies,

drum patterns convey complex information about historical events, emotional states, and social relationships that participants decode through embodied knowledge rather than textual literacy. The primo drum's improvisational dialogue with dancers demonstrates real-time analysis and response, assessing understanding through applied performance rather than abstracted examination (Barton, 2004).

This rhythmic epistemology suggests alternative assessment strategies for HSIs that validate diverse demonstrations of mastery. Rather than relying exclusively on written examinations that privilege particular literacy practices, courses might incorporate verbal presentations following call-and-response patterns, collaborative projects assessed through group synchronization, or applied demonstrations evaluated through community impact. These assessment methods align with Latino/a/e cultural practices that emphasize practical application over theoretical abstraction, recognizing that knowledge gains meaning through community benefit rather than individual achievement.

COVID-19 digital adaptations revealed rhythmic epistemology's technological flexibility. Virtual Bomba sessions maintained assessment functions through online platforms, with participants demonstrating knowledge through synchronized unmuting for collective responses, rhythmic accuracy despite transmission delays, and ability to maintain ceremonial energy across digital distances. These adaptations suggest how online HSI courses might incorporate synchronous activities that assess collective understanding through group coordination rather than individual submission, creating assessment methods that strengthen rather than fragment learning communities.

Proposition 3: TransIndigenous Alliance as Institutional Partnership Model

The historical alliance between Taíno and African Black Indigenous peoples demonstrates how distinct epistemological traditions can collaborate without assimilation, maintaining cultural integrity while building collective power. This TransIndigenous model challenges contemporary multicultural approaches that often flatten difference into superficial diversity, instead demonstrating how strategic alliance preserves specificities while generating novel possibilities. The bomba drums themselves—African percussion techniques applied to Taíno ceremonial structures using Spanish colonial waste—materialize this collaborative epistemology.

For HSIs navigating relationships with diverse Latino/a/e communities, this alliance model suggests alternatives to homogenizing approaches that treat “Hispanic” as a monolithic category. Instead of seeking singular institutional culture that represents all Latino/a/e traditions, HSIs might develop alliance frameworks that maintain distinct community partnerships while creating collaborative spaces for shared action. This might manifest as cultural centers that preserve specific national or regional traditions while participating in collective advocacy, or curriculum that acknowledges distinct Latino/a/e histories while exploring shared experiences of coloniality and resistance.

Contemporary examples of TransIndigenous alliance appear in HSI student organizations that maintain distinct cultural identities while building coalitional power. Puerto Rican, Mexican American, Central American, and other Latino/a/e student groups increasingly collaborate on institutional change initiatives while preserving unique cultural practices and political priorities. These alliances demonstrate that operational servingness need not require cultural homogenization; instead, HSIs can serve diverse communities through frameworks that celebrate multiplicity while building collective strength.

Discussion

The theoretical framework presented here offers significant implications for understanding and advancing HSI transformation from demographic designation toward operational servingness. By positioning Bombazo epistemology as a legitimate knowledge system rather than cultural curiosity, this framework challenges fundamental assumptions about academic excellence while providing concrete strategies for institutional change. The three theoretical propositions—Batey spatial democracy, rhythmic epistemology, and TransIndigenous alliance—collectively demonstrate how ceremonial practices developed over centuries offering sophisticated solutions to contemporary educational challenges.

This framework’s emphasis on collective knowledge production directly addresses tensions many Latino/a/e students experience between individualistic academic achievement and communalistic cultural values. Rather than forcing students to abandon collective orientations for individual success, Bombazo epistemology demonstrates how collaboration enhances rather than diminishes intellectual rigor. This finding resonates with emerging scholarship on collective impact and community-engaged research, suggesting that HSIs might lead broader higher education transformation toward more collaborative knowledge production models.

The framework also illuminates connections between epistemological violence and persistent equity gaps in HSI contexts. When institutions operate exclusively through Eurocentric epistemologies, they systematically exclude knowledge systems that Latino/a/e students embody, creating what Rendón (1994) terms “validation” deficits that undermine academic confidence. By recognizing and incorporating alternative epistemologies, HSIs can create validating environments where students’ cultural knowledge becomes academic asset rather than deficit to overcome. This epistemological inclusion may prove more impactful than surface-level diversity initiatives that maintain underlying knowledge hierarchies.

The TransIndigenous dimension of this framework offers particular insights for understanding Latino/a/e identity complexity within HSI contexts. Rather than treating Latino/a/e as a racial or ethnic category, this framework reveals how Latino identities emerge from historical alliances between Indigenous, African, and European peoples under colonial conditions. This understanding suggests that HSIs must navigate not only linguistic and national diversity but also epistemological multiplicity emerging from distinct Indigenous and diasporic traditions. The alliance model demonstrates how institutions can honor this complexity without requiring reduction to manageable categories.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Institutional Policy Recommendations

This theoretical framework suggests several policy implications for HSIs seeking to advance operational servingness. First, tenure and promotion policies should be revised to recognize community-engaged scholarship and culturally responsive pedagogy as equivalent to traditional research metrics. Faculty developing Bombazo-inspired pedagogies often sacrifice conventional publication opportunities for deep community engagement that may have greater impact on student success. Evaluation criteria that value ceremonial participation, community partnership development, and pedagogical innovation would incentivize the transformative work operational servingness requires.

Second, curriculum policies might mandate inclusion of multiple epistemologies across all programs rather than confining cultural content to ethnic studies departments. This could manifest as general education requirements that expose all students to Indigenous, African diasporic, and other non-Western knowledge systems, or discipline-specific courses that examine

how different epistemologies approach field-specific questions. Such policies would position epistemological diversity as institutional value rather than special interest, benefiting all students by developing capacity to navigate multiple knowledge systems.

Third, institutional governance structures should incorporate ceremonial protocols that ensure genuine collective decision-making rather than consultative facades. This might include circular seating arrangements for committee meetings, call-and-response protocols for gathering community input, or validation processes that require broad resonance rather than simple majority votes. These structural changes would demonstrate institutional commitment to alternative epistemologies while creating more inclusive governance processes.

Pedagogical Practice Strategies

For educators seeking to implement Bombazo epistemology in HSI classrooms, this framework offers concrete pedagogical strategies. Circular classroom arrangements represent simple yet powerful first steps, physically manifesting epistemological shifts from hierarchical to democratic knowledge production. Instructors report that circular configurations increase participation from previously silent students, particularly first-generation Latino/a/e students who may feel marginalized in traditional lecture formats. Beyond physical arrangement, instructors can incorporate call-and-response techniques that transform passive listening into active participation, validating oral traditions while developing critical thinking through verbal dialogue.

Assessment innovations inspired by rhythmic epistemology might include group projects evaluated through collective synchronization, oral examinations following ceremonial protocols, or community-impact assessments that measure knowledge application rather than abstract comprehension. These alternative assessments need not replace traditional methods entirely but can complement written examinations, providing multiple pathways for students to demonstrate mastery. Such diversification particularly benefits students whose strengths lie in collaborative, verbal, or applied learning rather than individual test-taking.

Professional development programs should prepare faculty to facilitate rather than dominate collective knowledge production, requiring fundamental shifts in pedagogical identity. This preparation might involve participation in Bomba ceremonies or similar cultural practices, developing embodied understanding of alternative epistemologies rather than intellectual appreciation

alone. Partnerships with community practitioners who can serve as pedagogical mentors would ensure authentic implementation rather than superficial appropriation.

Limitations and Future Research

This conceptual framework faces several limitations that warrant acknowledgment and suggest directions for future research. First, the theoretical propositions presented here require empirical testing across diverse HSI contexts to assess their practical applicability and impact on student outcomes. While illustrative cases demonstrate theoretical principles, systematic research examining implementation challenges, student experiences, and learning outcomes would strengthen the framework's validity. Future studies might employ mixed methods approaches combining quantitative assessment of student success metrics with qualitative exploration of epistemological transformation.

Second, the framework's grounding in Puerto Rican Bomba traditions raises questions about transferability to HSIs serving predominantly Mexican American, Central American, or other Latino/a/e populations with distinct cultural practices. However, it is important to note that similar TransIndigenous alliances emerged in maroon communities throughout Latin America—from palenques in Colombia (Navarrete, 2008) to quilombos in Brazil (Reis & Gomes, 1996) to cumbes in Venezuela (Acosta Saignes, 1967)—where Indigenous and African peoples created parallel knowledge systems through strategic collaboration (Baralt, 1985; Price, 1973). While each developed unique cultural expressions, these communities share foundational principles of collective resistance and epistemological synthesis that may offer broader applicability across diverse HSI contexts. Empirical research should examine how different Latino/a/e communities' epistemological traditions, including these varied maroon heritage systems, might inform institutional transformation. Comparative studies across HSIs serving different Latino/a/e populations could identify common TransIndigenous principles while respecting cultural specificities.

Third, the framework's emphasis on ceremonial protocols and collective validation may encounter resistance from accreditation bodies, funding agencies, and other stakeholders operating within traditional academic paradigms. Research examining how HSIs navigate external pressures while implementing alternative epistemologies would provide practical guidance for institutional leaders. Additionally, studies documenting how Bombazo-inspired pedagogies affect graduate school preparation and workforce readiness could address concerns about preparing students for success beyond HSI contexts.

Finally, this framework's conceptual nature necessarily simplifies complex historical and contemporary realities. The Taíno-African alliance emerged under specific colonial conditions that cannot be directly replicated in contemporary institutional settings. Future research should examine how power dynamics, resource constraints, and institutional histories shape possibilities for epistemological transformation. Ethnographic studies of HSIs attempting implementation could reveal unexpected challenges and opportunities not anticipated in theoretical development.

Conclusion

This paper has theorized how Bombazo epistemology—emerging from five centuries of TransIndigenous collaboration in Puerto Rico—offers transformative frameworks for advancing culturally responsive pedagogies within Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Through systematic conceptual analysis supported by illustrative cases, I have demonstrated how ceremonial practices developed outside academic institutions provide sophisticated solutions to contemporary challenges of operational servingness. The theoretical propositions advanced here—the Batey model for inclusive learning environments, rhythmic epistemology as alternative assessment, and TransIndigenous alliance as partnership framework—collectively challenge Eurocentric academic paradigms while offering concrete strategies for institutional transformation.

The significance of this theoretical contribution extends beyond individual HSIs to broader questions about knowledge, power, and possibility in American higher education. As demographic shifts position HSIs as increasingly central to national educational outcomes, their success in serving Latino/a/e students will largely determine whether higher education fulfills its democratic promise or perpetuates systemic inequities. This framework suggests that such success requires more than incremental reforms or cultural additions to existing structures; it demands fundamental epistemological transformation that positions Latino/a/e knowledge systems as legitimate alternatives to dominant academic paradigms.

The Batey as laboratory reveals that our communities already possess sophisticated analytical tools developed through centuries of resistance and survival. The drums that emerged from colonial waste, the dances that encode historical memory, the songs that carry collective wisdom—these are not merely cultural expressions but research methodologies that predate and potentially surpass university-based approaches in addressing complex social phenomena. HSIs that recognize and incorporate these epistemologies position

themselves not as remedial institutions serving “underprepared” students but as sites of epistemological innovation leading higher education toward more inclusive futures.

As HSIIs navigate the journey from demographic designation toward operational servingness, Bombazo epistemology offers both navigation tools and destination vision. The path requires courage to challenge entrenched paradigms, wisdom to honor multiple knowledge systems, and commitment to collective transformation over individual advancement. Yet the promise—universities where all students’ epistemologies are valued, where knowledge emerges through collective dialogue, where education serves liberation rather than perpetuating domination—justifies the difficulty of the journey. En el Batey universitario, where academic and ancestral knowledge dance together, we create futures of collective justice and epistemological democracy that honor the full complexity of human knowing.

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Educational Leadership to Foster Student Sense of Belonging among Latinx Students

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Abstract

Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions face a critical leadership imperative to build campus environments that foster Latinx students' academic success through belonging and identity affirmation. This qualitative program evaluation analyzed 114 Latinx freshmen reflections using qualitative content analysis to understand student-reported needs, linguistic assets, and stereotype-based barriers encountered across secondary and postsecondary transitions. Findings indicated that students view Spanish-English bilingualism as community-centered cultural capital, yet simultaneously navigate linguistic insecurity, intra-community identity policing, and racialized caregiver and criminalization stereotypes. The study argues that educational leaders—especially presidents, deans, department chairs, and student-affairs directors—shape organizational servingness through policy decisions that validate multilingualism, invest in identity-affirming programming, and disrupt deficit narratives in academic and non-academic spaces. Implications emphasize leadership accountability and proactive policy design to support culturally sustaining and validating campus ecosystems. Authentic HSI servingness must be operationalized through intentional leadership practice to strengthen Latinx identity development and belonging as institutional assets and drivers of student success.

Keywords: Latinx student belonging, identity affirmation, educational leadership, emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions, qualitative content analysis

Educational Leadership to Foster Student Sense of Belonging among Latinx Students

Educational leaders, particularly presidents at institutions of higher education, have the opportunity to seek federal designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). This federal designation requires educational leaders to ensure that their institutions meet specific criteria. The criteria require being a two-year or four-year accredited institution of higher education that is (a) an eligible institution that has 50% of its students eligible for Title IV, federal need-based aid, and (b) having at least 25% of its undergraduate, full-time enrollment identify as Hispanic/Latino (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2016). If these are not met, there is an opportunity to apply for a waiver, which requires narrative explanations that justify exceptions for possible approval. According to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU, 2024), “HSIs represent 16% of higher education institutions but serve 65% of all Hispanic Students” (para. 1). There are also numerous institutions that are considered emerging Hispanic Serving Institutions (eHSIs), and while there is no specific definition for an eHSI, it tends to apply to an institution that is approaching the 25% threshold (citation). Whether the designation has been attained or the institution is aspiring toward the designation, the educational leader must share the vision of transformation toward the institution’s identity to better support student outcomes.

The focus on student outcomes encompasses an opportunity to apply for existing federal supporting, primarily through Title II and Title V funding, along with numerous grants that require the designation as part of grant submission eligibility; these funding streams can help transform instructional delivery, amplify student services, and enhance literacy or efforts toward financial aid, and more (ED, 2023). Ultimately, servingness has been identified by many scholars (e.g., Benítez & DeAro, 2004; Franco & Muñoz, 2022; Garcia et al., 2019) as part of these institutional efforts. *Servingness* is seen in various forms, even though there is no specific definition of *serving* among HSIs (Garcia et al., 2019). For example, an HSI or eHSI may examine its student services efforts and amplify the opportunities for students to explore their programs and practices, as well as create new offerings (Garcia et al., 2019). Therefore, an important part is to account for efforts that operationalize servingness through academic and non-academic outcomes, experiences, organizational dimensions, and external forces (Garcia et al., 2019). As such, this study stems from institutional support among educational leaders at an eHSI to implement programs designed to provide Latinx students with a space to learn about their cultural identity, language,

and to enhance their sense of belonging at the institution. Using program evaluation feedback, the purpose of this study was to better understand incoming freshmen students' perspectives regarding their cultural identity, language, and sense of belonging and help support educational leaders in future opportunities as they strive toward the federal HSI designation.

Educational Leaders' Support toward Sense of Belonging

It is estimated that the Hispanic population across the United States (U.S.) will reach nearly 27% by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), and these increases are also reflected within the higher education landscape. For example, the Hispanic student population in postsecondary education reached 18.4% of the student population in 2025 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2025). As these trends continue, educational leaders enact underlying values that support sense of belonging, identity affirmation, and academic outcomes among Latinx students (Garcia, 2019; Núñez et al., 2021). Leaders must actively support efforts to increase sense of belonging (i.e., students' perceptions of being valued, respected, and included within the campus community), creating strong connections to existing institutional structures, decisions, and the campus culture and climate (Strayhorn, 2019). For eHSIs, this intentional effort to amplify increased sense of belonging is critical in affirming cultural heritage, language, and practices, given they have often been unrecognized in traditional settings (Bazzar, 2024). Educational leaders model efforts of support and opportunity to ensure that all students, including those who have been historically underrepresented, can successfully complete their aspired degrees. Student sense of belonging remains a critical predictor of academic engagement, even more so for Latinx undergraduate students (Donoghue et al, 2025; Maestas et al., 2007). For nearly 30 years, it has been noted that Latinx students' sense of belonging are tied to peer interactions, as well as their perceptions of institutional commitment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As such, students' sense of belonging is associated with their desire to stay enrolled, and the social support can even serve as a coping strategy (Li & Zizzi, 2018). Even so, it also requires institutional commitment to academic integration, and environments where students can generate robust social networks that, in turn, contribute to persistence rates (Li & Zizzi, 2018; Muñoz & Rendón, 2011).

Educational Leaders' Commitment to Improved Institutional Climate

Among educational leaders' efforts to enhance students' sense of belonging, a foundational element is ensuring that the existing institutional climate can support student outcomes. A postsecondary institution's positive climate has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of sense of belonging (Brown & Papp, 2025). The instructional climate, alongside its organizational cultural, is guided by modeling of effective practices by campus leaders where they can create environments that are characterized by common ground, relevant knowledge, relevant community service, and collectivist orientations (Museus et al., 2021). Educational leaders, whether presidents, provosts, deans, and faculty, can significantly influence how an institution adopts opportunity-centered norms, practices, programs that promote social justice and equity (Kezar & Posselt, 2019). Efforts where such work is taking place ensures that leaders address clear commitments to supportive programming that allow students to be seen and valued across their educational experiences by providing more comprehensive support (Barraza, 2024).

At institutions that have attained the federal designation of HSI and have been awarded federal funding, leaders may be able to assess how certain institutional investments have driven student-centered outcomes. Yet, for eHSIs, leadership is even more crucial, particularly as the federal designation has not been reached, so many funding opportunities are limited due to HSI eligibility requirements. At the same time, Garcia (2019) argues that simply reaching a 25% Latinx enrollment threshold does not automatically create a supportive environment; rather, *servingsness* depends on leaders' willingness to reshape experiences for Latinx students. Ultimately, leaders influence how resources are distributed, how data are accessed and used, and how the institutional mission and identity supports transformational change. Leaders must be intentional in ensuring that students do not see themselves as representing a statistic but that they feel culturally visible across the institutional experience in a very response manner (Contreras, 2019). These efforts can take place without a federal designation, and organizational commitment may help continue to guide transformation change in being an eHSI toward becoming an HSI for the betterment of its student population.

Identity-Affirming Leadership Practices

As educational leaders center priorities for student outcomes, identity affirmation remains a pivotal area for Latinx students' well-being to support retention and completion. Students are better positioned to thrive in higher education when their cultural identities, linguistic assets, and lived experiences can be validated (Rendón et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005). Certainly, this requires educational leaders to help shape identity-affirming environments that are woven across the campus experiences, from recruitment through access, alongside the work of retention and completion, and tied to unique decision-making, curriculum, and programming. These actions are commonly interpreted by students; they notice when educational leaders fund cultural centers, create bilingual spaces, and champion programming designed to celebrate identity across all educational levels (Alier, 2025; Torres & Hernández, 2007). Educational leaders engage in efforts that affirm all student backgrounds, promote asset-based perspectives, and work to enhance students' numerous types of capital forms (Rendón et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005). Particularly at eHSIs, such actions may help expand bilingual support services, generate new partnerships with community-based organizations that also foster the demographic, and establish new institutional traditions that honor the history and contributions of the Latino community.

Culturally Sustaining Organizational Leadership

Educational leaders who intentionally enact change need to also maintain their focus on culturally sustaining organizational leadership. Existing scholarship has revealed that institutional efforts are not one-time experiences for students but must be designed to help preserve and amplify cultural and linguistic practices (Khalifa et al., 2022). To illustrate, it does not suffice to hold an event in Spanish with information about an institution; rather, it is important to ensure that the institutional information can be made available in bilingual formatting across its website, promotional materials, at recruitment events, through onboarding, and other communication avenues to capitalize on community-based knowledge and multigenerational experiences. Additionally, educational leaders also impact identity formation through hiring decisions, and this is not merely to support representation but to ensure that the lived experiences of faculty, staff, and administration can also help with innovation, planning, and continuous improvement through diverse contexts (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). Latinx students can thrive with increased academic confidence when pedagogies are inclusive, their backgrounds are validated, and research and historical content is embedded in their educational experiences

(Bazzar, 2024). Similarly, mentoring relationships are expanded when faculty can share in cultural backgrounds or have engaged in professional learning that supports culturally sustaining pedagogies to reinforce identity development and success (Paris & Alim, 2017). Thus, leaders who prioritize this work may be able to more clearly monitor and measure efforts that are designed to influence identity affirmation while at the same time working to sustain these necessary organizational leadership practices.

Background of the Study

Latinx students enrolling at emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) carry unique insights that have been shaped by their lived experiences, cultural histories, and their transition into college spaces. With this understanding in mind, this study is based on a program evaluation that was embedded within a freshmen intensive training program at an eHSI within the Western United States. While all incoming freshmen are required to participate in the week-long experience at the eHSI within this study, one of the sessions, *Ponte las Pilas* [put on your batteries, a Spanish expression for putting in the work and staying energized], was intentionally designed with support of university senior leadership, mid-level leaders, and institutional directors. The session was implemented for Latinx students to be able to articulate their aspirations, while also exploring existing stereotypes, challenges, and systemic barriers that they had navigated. These early reflections underscore the need for universities to intentionally foster environments where Latinx students experience a strong sense of belonging. As eHSIs work to better understand incoming freshmen cohorts, centering student voices provides a foundation for identifying institutional gaps and creating actionable pathways for culturally responsive support.

The work to support Latinx students' sense of belonging and identity is especially critical as these institutions continue to evolve. Therefore, the aims of the session were not simply to have students explore common barriers; rather, the primary aim was to cultivate an asset-based effort by creating a space for Latinx students to explore how their identities will allow them to thrive in their postsecondary education experience. At *Ponte las Pilas*, activities included resource tabling with numerous Latino-identifying campus leaders, a paper-crumble with identity reflections, and open dialogue to highlight personal achievements and commonalities among incoming freshmen that can help support identity affirmation and visibility.

The session was intentionally designed with the understanding that, when universities collaborate across silos, engage community partners, and

create intentional spaces for dialogue, they move beyond surface-level efforts toward structural practices that uplift student identities. With the programming having launched at an eHSI, regardless of institutional federal designation of an HSI or federal funding, the educational leaders demonstrated a commitment grounded in a desire to strengthen students' outcomes and sustain an organizational culture of success.

Methodology

This study used a program evaluation with a qualitative methodology. Written statements from 114 Latinx incoming freshmen students were examined through qualitative content analysis to better understand the needs of Latinx students participating in the program and inform educational leaders on programming opportunities for continuous improvement. Qualitative content analysis was selected to systematically identify patterns within textual data while remaining grounded in students' lived experiences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Both inductive and deductive coding procedures were used: inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from students' reflections on language, identity, stereotypes, and belonging, and deductive coding helped explore students' statements. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth was used as a conceptual lens by which to examine the findings. Additionally, the institutional framework used to operationalize servingness by Garcia (2019) in HSIs supported the program evaluation elements to contextualize the complexity tied to the role of educational leaders.

The Latinx student data were provided anonymously and collected through a paper-crumble activity in which students were provided prompts, and they shared the content within the papers, then tossed them across the room for others to anonymously read and discuss. These responses were then typed, verbatim, read iteratively to identify recurring concepts, and examine frequency patterns in the content analysis. Analysis occurred through multiple coding cycles to condense initial codes into broader categories. These broader categories were then reviewed to identify the noted themes that reflect Latinx students' collective experiences. The researcher used reflexive memoing and sought insights of multiple reviewers to support trustworthiness and rigor in the development to the themes. The resulting themes provide an evidence-based understanding of student needs, while serving as a foundation for educational leaders' efforts toward program improvement.

Findings

Four central themes were identified in this study. The first was centered on language and community responsibility. The second was linguistic insecurity and identity gatekeeping. The third was focused on stereotypes, specifically focused on race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The fourth theme was resilience in balance with family expectations and pressures.

Language for Community

Language remained a central descriptor among Latinx students' expressions regarding their identity. They described variations of Spanish language abilities, and language was predominantly positioned as being a meaningful asset. The asset-focused perspective on language was not necessarily centered on their benefits to self; rather, the focus was on how Spanish knowledge positioned them to serve their communities and families. Many students referenced experiences in which they were with individuals who could not communicate in English, noting examples with older family members, work situations, or intervening in daily interactions that they came across in their settings. Students shared statements like being able to "help the people who don't speak English," or supporting elders and community members who "only speak Spanish." The student statements were reflections of how bilingualism had expanded their ability to help those navigating English-dominant systems, whether in K-12 schools, health practices, or other life experiences. Students referenced early challenges, such as "learning to write in English" when first knowing Spanish. In these statements, there was a notable tie with language and community responsibility that were attained through resilience and opportunity.

Linguistic Insecurity and Identity Gatekeeping

Although students expressed a shared value in language acquisition, particularly bilingualism for Spanish-English opportunities, findings revealed evidence of anxiety and, perhaps, insecurity with language access. For some, this was revealed by statements describing their hesitation to speak in public or being seen "not speaking enough Spanish," as a clear tension to their linguistic capacity, literacy, and performance through linguistic capital. At the same time, it was found that identity gatekeeping was revealed in the form of students' indications that they were not "not Nicaraguan/Latinx enough" or were seen as "too White to be considered Mexican" when their Spanish came at later stages in life or was deemed to lack fluency. Regardless of origin for these statements, this language expectation appeared to serve as a marking point for their authentic selves and their sense of belonging. Thus, while in one sense language helped

serve as their asset and ability to broaden community impact; it also seemed to impact feelings of inadequacy.

Existing Stereotypes

While students were provided a prompt to highlight challenges, including possible stereotypes that they had experienced en route to their postsecondary education journey, many of the statements were rooted in race, gender, and socioeconomic status. For example, some students' comments were centered on racialized experiences, indicating that it was assumed they might be part of a "cartel" or had been labeled with slurs like, "wetback," "alien-hopper," or "ghetto," while being made to feel less intelligent in predominantly White school settings. Gendered expectations were also present, with Latinx students indicating that they faced assumptions of serving in caretaking roles or having to adhere to traditional cultural expectations, rather than being positioned to pursue academia. Still, students indicated that they held a strong work ethic and were determined to challenge these assumptions.

Resilience and Responsibility

While students indicated challenges across their lived experiences, their drive and statements regarding aspirations and opportunities reflected great deal of resilience and responsibility, particularly in connection to family expectations and first-generation college experiences. Many statements reflected being "scared to let parents down" or wanting to honor the sacrifices of parents who "came to the U.S. and gave their children the support to have a higher education" are reflective of their commitment to persevere. Yet, this also demonstrates the emotional weight tied to educational attainment. Students also expressed pride in their ability to overcome challenges, resist oppression, and persist despite barriers, underscoring their resilience and commitment. These narratives reveal that familial and cultural expectations serve as motivators and significant pressures that shape students' educational journeys.

Discussion

The findings from this study illustrate how Latinx students' experiences with language, identity, stereotypes, and resilience reflect numerous forms of capital, even as they work to balance cognitive dissonance between their lived experiences and desired aspirations. These themes strongly align with recent literature emphasizing the central role of educational leaders in shaping organizational cultures that force or undermine essential identity development tied to desired student outcomes (Garcia, 2019; Kezar, 2023; Núñez et al., 2021).

Students' descriptions of bilingualism as service, leadership, and community responsibility echo scholarship linked to Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), through its numerous forms of capital like linguistic, cultural, and familial. However, given the Latinx students' steady balance between valuing their identities or feeling inferior because of them – the role of educational leaders becomes even more pivotal in taking action to value the students' lived experiences in higher education. For example, when leaders adopt culturally sustaining leadership practices and encourage translanguaging pedagogies, their language becomes part of the institutional need, instead of being placed on the margins of opportunity (Khalifa et al., 2022). The actions among educational leaders at eHSIs are essential for shifting its institutional culture toward servingness to ensure there are clear ties to the academic mission (Garcia, 2019).

It was also revealed by the findings that, while students position their language identity as an asset, mixed-messaging creates incongruences. These seem to generate insecurities that might become magnified on campuses where leaders have yet to establish expectations for culturally affirming structures. The emphasis to simply be resilient students is insufficient; belonging is a leadership responsibility, not a students' task and not one that is to be centered on deficiencies (Jang & Lee, 2024; Strayhorn 2019). When leaders avoid or underinvest in supporting student identities, students may internalize inadequacies. These can have them feel that they are not bilingual enough, not authentic enough, or not academically legitimate enough, and it is the role of educational leaders to help support a shift in this deficit lens. Leaders must enact validating leadership practices that celebrate bilingualism and translanguaging, counter gatekeeping narratives, and help sustain structures that create visible and diverse linguistic histories of Latinx students (Barraza, 2024).

Student experiences with racialized criminalization, gendered expectations, and class-based deficit stereotypes reflect broader systemic issues in campus climate—issues that higher education leaders directly influence through policy, hiring, and resource allocation (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Kezar & Posselt, 2019). For example, when there is a lack of investment in critical change, inefficient practices may go unchallenged and may be reproduced in classrooms and campus interactions. These findings align with studies showing that when educational leaders intentionally use a Latinx responsive approach, Latinx students' sense of belonging increases (Barraza, 2024; Contreras, 2019). The persistence of such stereotypes in students' reflections suggests that leaders must pay closer attention to institutional climate as a key dimension of

servings not just when they have reached the requirements of the federal HSI designation, but this should also be something that eHSIs actively support.

Students hold themselves to high expectations and family responsibilities in unique ways that increase pressure for success. Educational leaders can influence academic policies and advising systems that either alleviate or exacerbate student stress, but it requires professional learning, audits, and active engagement toward continuous improvement (Kezar, 2023; Jones Roberson, 2023). As Núñez et al. (2021) argue, institutional structures must be reimagined to reflect the realities faced by Latinx students, as noted in this study; students should not be required to navigate the system alone, especially as sense of belonging is everyone's job (Strayhorn, 2019).

Conclusion

The program delivery of *Ponte las Pilas* was designed to promote sense of belonging among Latinx incoming freshmen students at an eHSI. The findings of the program evaluation reveal students' lived experiences and the delicate balance they face in higher education. The actions of educational leaders remain a core practice that is foundational to increasing students' sense of belonging. At eHSIs, in particular, leaders must adopt intentional and transformational change through policy and practice that fosters servings. Latinx students are not on campus to simply meet proportional ratios or reflect percentages of a population. They are the organizational heart of the campus experience, and their dreams fuel transformational impact beyond institutional boundaries.

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Sin Borders

Gaby Perez

Sin Fronteras / Without Borders

Yo vengo de trabajadores de campo y construccion
de ama de casa y jefa
de pobreza y esperanza
de mis abuelitos y mis angelitos

Yo vengo de amor y de *dreamers*
from Guadalajara, Jalisco to San Francisco
de lucha en un lugar muy discriminante
from Sonia and Luis; my heart and soul

I come from the Mission and Hunters Point
from institutionalized violence to community trauma
from concrete walls to roses in the cracks
hope

Yo soy Mexicana and American
sitting on fence of the borderlands
por un lado, recuerdo la violencia que escaparon mis padres
on the other, I am consumed by eurocentric ideologies so that I forget my
own history

Whose side am I on?

I am torn and I am whole
yo soy pozole, tamales, y agua de horchata
and I am also, hot dogs, pizza, and american football
soy una mezcla de experiences
sin borders

The Work Beneath Our Feet

Guadalupe Placencia Miranda

Labor has pushed us,
and built this country
from the ground up.

Through our day jobs,
night jobs, and
weekend hustles.

Farmworkers
bent over the earth
with blistered,
calloused,
aching
hands that carve our fields
before dawn and long after dusk

Construction workers
lifting steel, bricks,
slabs of wood,
and paving our roads.
Bruises, cuts, falls,
blood, sweat,
but no tears

Absolutely no tears
because if not for you,
who will feed your children?
If not for you,
who will keep the dream alive?
If not for you,
who will rise on the floors you built?
Because your resilience built
what your hands alone could not.

You left everything you knew,
sacrificed all that could've been
to follow the American Dream
our American Dream
Just to give up now?

Keep going.
Work hard.
Honor every sacrifice with your steps forward.

Through sun-bleached days,
through winter's bite,
with every hammer, every nail,
every roof climbed,
I rise on the work beneath our feet.

Keep going.
Work hard.
Honor every sacrifice with your steps forward.

My parents carried
more than their bodies could bear,
forty-five years of relentless,
backbreaking,
day-in, day-out labor
in a country
that alienated them
and others

Yet,
they found space to
carry me too

*“Ponte a estudiar para que
No trabajes de burro como yo”*

*“Haz que nuestro sacrificio
Tenga sentido”*

“La resiliencia es tu herencia”

They taught me
that sweat comes
long before success.

They were the first to leave
I am the first to rise.

The first to rise as an inspiration for others
The first to rise and make sure
their sacrifices
are never forgotten.

The floors they built beneath our feet
have carried me higher than they could ever imagine.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wonderful parents, Rosa and Juan, and my older brother, Juan, for their unconditional love and support throughout my entire educational journey. Their sacrifices and faith have shaped every step that I take. This poem is dedicated to all immigrants who have rebuilt their lives from the ground up and whose sacrifices continue to lift future generations. Your courage and perseverance inspire us to dream bigger, work harder, and rise higher than you could ever imagine.

Centering Cultural Wealth: Undergraduate Identity Development in a Summer Research Program at an HSI

Anissa Stewart & Fátima Andrade Martínez

Abstract:

This mixed-methods study examines the academic and personal outcomes of undergraduate students who participated in a 10-week summer research program at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Designed to address the underrepresentation of marginalized communities in undergraduate research, the program offered accessible, structured, and culturally responsive learning experiences. By recognizing students' lived experiences and inherent knowledge, the program positioned them as producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients. Grounded in Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, the study analyzed data from pre- and post-program surveys, weekly reflections, final research proposals, and presentations. Findings highlight how students developed their research identities by drawing upon various forms of capital, including: aspirational, navigational, resistance, and social capital, as well as their sense of ethical responsibility and community relevance. Ultimately, the program fostered identity development and research engagement by affirming students' cultural wealth and lived experiences as foundational to the research process.

Introduction

Undergraduate research is a high-impact practice (HIP) that significantly enhances a student's education, retention, and career development (Hernandez et al., 2018). It is also well-established that participating in undergraduate research helps develop critical thinking skills and intercultural efficacy (Kuh, 2008; Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, & Pacarella, 2015). Recent studies demonstrate that undergraduates engaging in research acquire crucial hard and soft skills, feelings of community in learning, and motivation to pursue graduate education (see Daniels et al., 2016, and Ruth et al., 2023, for example). Despite these benefits, research opportunities remain limited for many undergraduates, especially within their academic fields. In addition, access to undergraduate research opportunities remains uneven for specific demographic groups, particularly for students from historically marginalized backgrounds, including Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students (Hurtado et al., 2009). Barriers such as course and work demands, lack of preparation, or insufficient knowledge about research opportunities impact marginalized groups at higher rates.

Study context

In this article, we share findings from a study that took place at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and public Research 1 institution on the West Coast. HSIs are characterized by over 25% of the undergraduate student body identifying as Latinx and a high concentration of low-income students, often measured by Pell Grant eligibility. While their focus is to serve and support Latinx identifying students, HSIs, many scholars assert, should serve all underrepresented students through HSI programming (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Thus, the imperative is not just to provide access, but also to reimagine research as a culturally sustaining and community-rooted practice (Garcia, 2019).

Despite the HSI assignment of this institution and its institutional commitment to serve students, undergraduates reported not having access to research opportunities. Table 1 illustrates recent Latino/a/x student enrollment in research courses at this institution, highlighting a disparity. At our university, data from 2022 reports only 14% of Latinx students assisted faculty in conducting research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Further, only 11% conducted their own research with faculty guidance and 11% without faculty guidance

([University] Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) Data Tables, 2022). As indicated in Table 1, even those who were able to secure research opportunities, often did not conduct such research in their disciplinary major. Students in the humanities frequently conducted social science research and 25% of those in STEM majors conducted research in another discipline.

Table 1: Latinx Student Participation in Research Based on Academic Departments

| <i>Student Major</i> | <i>Research Area</i> | | |
|----------------------|--|-----------------|------|
| | Humanities | Social Sciences | STEM |
| Humanities | 0.58 | 0.42 | 0.00 |
| Social Sciences | 0.07 | 0.90 | 0.03 |
| STEM | 0.04 | 0.22 | 0.75 |
| | <i>Note: Percentages are calculated as a proportion of each row total.</i> | | |

To address these gaps and imperatives, we implemented the Academy for Community-, Action-, and Use-Inspired Scholarship & Education (A-CAUSE), a 10-week summer undergraduate research program. A-CAUSE is an HSI Title V grant-funded program designed to enhance and increase undergraduate experience in social science and humanities research for Latinx and low-income students. A-CAUSE focuses on mentoring undergraduate students through independent projects and research-based workshops. The program was intentionally structured to support students in learning foundational research skills, critically engaging with faculty-authored scholarship, and developing community-based research proposals that embodied their identities, interests, and commitments. Grounded in a culturally congruent pedagogical approach, the program emphasized serving students by validating their lived experiences and centering research topics of their choice relevant to Latinx or other minoritized communities. The program was completed by eight students from diverse backgrounds (six Latinx/Chicanx, one African American, one Asian American) and from different grade levels studying different majors.

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic and personal outcomes for students who completed the program, particularly in terms of their development as emerging scholars and community-engaged researchers. This study addresses the following research questions:

- How did students co-construct their knowledge of the research process through interactions with each other and the curriculum?
- What patterns and differences, if any, were seen in how students discussed their understanding of the research process and perceived their skills development?
- What insights can be gained about culturally congruent undergraduate research models at HSIs?

By focusing on the intersection of undergraduate research, minoritized student development, and community engagement, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on equity-driven research curriculum and instruction in higher education. It also responds to calls for transforming HSIs into sites of intentional *servingsness*, where Latinx students are not only retained, but also intellectually affirmed and empowered to become knowledge producers (Garcia, Núñez, & Sansone, 2019).

The program tackles underrepresentation in research by offering accessible, structured, and adaptable learning experiences. It guides students through each step of the traditional research process, while challenging conventional notions of research access. A-CAUSE acknowledges students' inherent wisdom and life experience, breaking dichotomous notions of research (Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020). Participants gain tangible skills and abilities that enhance their CVs by demonstrating intellectual growth, initiative, and project management skills valued by academic institutions and the professional workforce.

Literature Review

Undergraduate Research as a High Impact Practice

Undergraduate research is widely recognized as a vital educational practice that promotes intellectual growth, persistence, and identity development (Kuh, 2008). Research experiences allow students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems, collaborate with faculty mentors, and develop critical thinking and analytical skills (Haeger et al., 2020; Unruh et al., 2025). For students in social sciences, engaging in research further enhances their understanding of complex social issues and encourages a commitment to

public service and social justice (Hunter, Laursen & Seymour, 2007). Across many institutions of higher education, access to research opportunities is often limited to students in STEM fields or those with high academic standing, which can inadvertently exclude first-generation and underrepresented minority students (Finley & McNair, 2013). Studies show that research opportunities can be a space for first-generation and underrepresented students to network and make connections; however, many are left wondering where to go to find information on such opportunities.

Culturally Congruent Pedagogies

For Latinx and other historically marginalized students, the traditional model of education research may not engage with their lived experiences or cultural knowledge systems. Research shows that Latinx students thrive when their educational experiences align with their cultural identities and provide them with opportunities to engage in personally and socially meaningful research (Núñez, Murakami-Ramalho, & Cuero, 2010). Yet, many HSIs continue to operate within a deficit-based framework that views Latinx students as lacking academic preparedness, rather than as holders of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and its evolution into culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) provides important frameworks for designing educational experiences that affirm students' identities, language practices, and community knowledge. Culturally congruent pedagogy advances the idea that learning is best accomplished in classrooms compatible with the cultural context of the communities they ideally serve. More specifically, culturally congruent pedagogy refers to teaching strategies and learning environments that are intentionally aligned with students' cultural norms, values, and experiences to further engagement, academic success, and identity development (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Irvine, 2010). Culturally Congruent Pedagogies seeks to bridge the gap between students' home, community, and school culture, allowing for a more inclusive and affirming educational experience. Such an approach activates pedagogy that not only is inclusive, but also transformative, empowering students to critique systemic inequalities and engage in knowledge production that explores their cultural contexts. Students are not simply assimilated into academic norms, but are recognized as co-creators of knowledge with the potential to reshape disciplinary boundaries. By affirming students' cultural assets and aligning research activities with community needs, such programs foster both academic excellence and social consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). This framework offers a lens to envision how undergraduate research can empower Latinx students as knowledge producers and community-engaged scholars within the context of a public R1 university.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework challenges deficit-based narratives about communities of color by identifying the diverse forms of capital that students from minoritized backgrounds bring to academic spaces. These include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Rather than viewing Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students as underprepared, CCW recognizes lived experiences, cultural assets, and community knowledge as vital to the learning process and scholarly inquiry. CCW highlights and centers the experiences of socially marginalized groups as research opportunities, thereby giving power and agency to students' value and utilize the knowledge they bring into academia, knowledge often ignored if not dismissed by academics.

CCW guided the design and facilitation of learning experiences in the undergraduate research program that explicitly and intentionally valued students' backgrounds and encouraged them to draw from their community knowledge when formulating research topics and questions. Student reflections often highlighted identity development, community relevance, ethical research awareness, and aspirational, navigational, and resistance capital as sources of insight and inspiration. These narratives became integral to the development of their final research proposals that were situated within real-life community contexts and driven by a desire for social change. The Community Cultural Wealth framework informs both the pedagogical intentions and the analytical lens of the study. It underscores a vision of undergraduate research that positions Latinx and other minoritized students not as passive learners, but as active agents of inquiry, advocacy, and transformation.

Methodology

The A-CAUSE 10-week research program took place in the summer of 2024. The cohort of eight students met in weekly cohort meetings, with Zoom options for flexibility. Students engaged in a comprehensive research journey, from brainstorming research questions to crafting research proposals. The program structure enabled students to develop essential skills in research methodology, critical analysis, and academic writing, equipping students for future academic and professional opportunities.

At the beginning of the program, students signed a consent form that allowed us to collect any written work they produced. This program was not connected to a class; therefore, no grade was assigned to their projects. Through a qualitative and mixed-methods analysis of pre- and post-surveys, weekly reflections, final research proposals and presentations, plus follow-up interviews, we began inductive coding (Chandra & Shang, 2019). The first author took the lead in coding, using the written reflections of students to analyze the different capitals stated through the community cultural wealth framework. Together, the authors triangulated data by showing how themes emerged across the reflections, survey responses, and projects.

More specifically, participants were asked to complete a pre-survey prior to the start of the program, which asked about their prior knowledge of research subjects such as conducting a literature review, designing surveys, using software for data analysis, etc. and asked about their skill levels for research activities such as formulating research questions, collecting data, preparing a research poster, etc. The questions were asked on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 was “Very limited” to 5 “Very strong” or 1 was “Novice (little knowledge) to 5 “Expert.” The post-survey was completed at the close of the program and asked the same or similar questions as a way to gauge how the program impacted perceptions of their skill development and understanding of the research process.

The course curriculum was housed in a Canvas site and required weekly reflections posts to the discussion forum after the participants met in person. The main question was: “What did you learn about research today? What are you still wondering about?” On the final day each participant submitted a typed

research proposal and presented for 5-10 minutes highlighting aspects of that proposal, including research question(s), data collection/analysis, theoretical framework, and findings (if they were able to get that far in the research process.) As part of the observation protocol, participants were required to provide appreciation for the work being conducted and any questions they had about the research study. Interviews took place after the program ended, were semi-structured, and lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. Mostly these interviews provided a final reflection on what students learned from participating in the program and what their next steps were in continuing the project with a faculty mentor.

Researcher Positionality

One researcher is a higher education administrator with over 30 years of experience working across secondary, postsecondary, and continuing education contexts. As an administrator rather than a classroom instructor, this researcher occupies a partial insider role, with familiarity with institutional and instructional structures but limited direct authority over student participants, providing some distance from students' evaluative academic experiences. The second researcher is Graduate Student Researcher (GSR) and lead instructor for the program. She provides insider knowledge into the curriculum and instruction of the program. Both engage in professional work focused on undergraduate research, equity-minded practice, and institutional efforts to support first-generation and historically underserved students. The GSR also works on research focused on undocumented student experiences.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study was established using strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor. Credibility was supported through triangulation of data sources, iterative coding, and peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research. Dependability was enhanced through use of a consistent interview protocol and an audit trail documenting analytic decisions throughout the research process. Confirmability was addressed through the inclusion of verbatim participant quotations to ensure findings were grounded in participants' perspectives. Transferability was supported through thick description of the participant characteristics and research setting, which should allow readers to determine applicability of findings to similar contexts.

Table 2: Student Participant Information

| <i>Pseudonym</i> | <i>Grade Level*</i> | <i>Major</i> | <i>Research Topic</i> |
|--|---------------------|---|---|
| Barbara | 2nd year | Bio/Chemistry | Access/Acceptance to Summer Programs |
| Cynthia | 3rd year | Econ/Accounting; Spanish | Imposter Syndrome & Latinx Community |
| Gabriela | 4th year | Communications | Women's Shelter and Mental Health |
| Gene | 2nd year | Biology; Japanese | California & Sweden Recidivism |
| Jasmine | 2nd year | Black Studies; History of Public Policy | Black Maternal Health |
| Philip | 4th year | Environmental Studies | California Wildfires & Community Resilience |
| Rosa | 4th year | Criminology; Psychological Studies | Homelessness/ Unhoused |
| Todd | 4th year | Psychology & Brain Sciences | Alcohol Use Disorder |
| <i>*Note: The grade level represents the year they will be entering in Fall of 2024.</i> | | | |

**Note: The grade level represents the year they will be entering in Fall of 2024.*

Findings

Using the Community Cultural Wealth framework, we looked at the various capitals that students referenced and drew from through their experience in the A-CAUSE program. While we chose to code for one theme present in CWW per student's statement. Some of the student's statements clearly overlap with multiple themes

Identity Development

At many universities, HSI status only reflects that of the undergraduate student population. As a result, it is often the case that staff and faculty are not representative of the student population. The percentages of Latinx or other marginalized group faculty representation are small, and as a result, students do not see much reflected in the faculty their ethnic and racial background as researchers. Aware of this reality, A-CAUSE was centered on developing and strengthening student researcher identity. Identity development refers to showing

growth in confidence, academic identity, or self-perception as a scholar. By the end of the program seven of the 8 students affirmed their research identity in their reflections, either by indicating that they could produce valid, publishable research or that they were beginning to take ownership of the research process. For example, Todd shared in his reflection that “It was helpful to learn that people with a similar background as me have completed important research.” Philip wrote in his reflection that “I learned that research doesn’t have to be for people with PhDs.” Thus, in addition to affirming their research identities and the responsibilities that come with that role, students also acknowledged insecurities, confronted any imposter feelings and realized that they had the ability and legitimacy to contribute to knowledge production. Further, seeing themselves as developing researchers, they acknowledged that they could actively learn from the readings, guest speakers, and other research tools.

As indicated in their pre- and post-program surveys, the program produced positive outcomes with respect to improving students’ academic self-efficacy. They increased their confidence in their research abilities, most significantly coming to see themselves as researchers, understanding that being a researcher is an important part of their academic study. Between 50-63% of students felt “neutral” or “disagreed” in these abilities prior to the program. Students showed evidence of identity development in their final projects when they shared their lived experiences and how they related to the research topics they wanted to explore and in the kinds of research questions they wanted to answer. As was the case with Cynthia who wanted to explore how relationships and environmental factors contribute to the development of imposter syndrome among first-generation Latinx students, something she had felt early in her academic studies.

Community Relevance

By centering students as knowledge holders and producers, A-CAUSE enabled students to choose what research topics mattered to them. Continuously, students reflected on the importance of representing their community accurately in research. Seven of the eight students express a commitment to participate in community-engaged research. Jasmine expressed her desire to conduct research that “show[s] people...how BLACK WOMEN, MOTHERS, AND CHILDREN matter.” Jasmine’s reflection and intentional use of capitalization urgently centers Black women and their well-being. Further, Barbara discussed the importance of deriving research questions from lived community realities and showed a commitment to co-construction of research questions grounded

in local concerns. She announced a desire to “go into the community and survey [them] about systems/communities they are a part of.” Through these surveys, Barbara imagined research that was informed by matters that mattered to community members. Student reflections showed the development of the students’ emerging research identities as community-engaged and ethnically grounded researchers.

In their final projects, students showed interest in interviewing people and applying findings to real-world contexts, signally a commitment to community-engaged research. Todd shared how he grew up in a community where alcohol use disorder was prevalent and wanted to study the topic to help out people from his community. Further, Rosa interviewed 5 people as part of her final project and indicated that these participants were “friends, family, and co-workers.” Jasmine explained that the goal of her research was to actively speak to community members in order to make positive change to the community and to the medical field more generally.

In terms of the survey responses, the only evidence regarding community relevance was in students’ open responses for what they enjoyed most about the program. Multiple students appreciated the guest speakers—faculty of color who taught in different departments within our university. We purposely asked students to read articles written by the faculty before their guest talk. Students enjoyed how faculty guest speakers shared about their journeys to becoming researchers and the importance of engaging ethically with the community they are studying, whether the researcher is part of that community or not.

Ethical Research Awareness

Students indicated ethical research awareness by recognizing ethics in the research processes, including consent, reciprocity, and trust. Seven of the eight students showed a commitment to research ethics by describing the need to build community-centered relationships and avoid exploiting communities, which has been problematic throughout history. Students were concerned with not reciprocating historically extractive and exploitative research methods on marginalized communities (Tuck, 2009). Todd explained how “research can take advantage of people and be harmful if researchers aren’t careful...[instead] research should benefit people.” Following this same sentiment Philip reflected on non-extractive research practices, emphasizing the reciprocity and accountability to the community involved in research by stating that research is “not just an extraction of information so that I can write my paper and progress my own career.” Further, Barbara emphasized the importance of acknowledging

and crediting community knowledge and respecting the ethics of engagement, especially when working with historically marginalized populations. She stated that “being knowledgeable about research ethics is important in order to ensure that one credits ideas to the person whom it is borrowed from.” These reflections highlight the ownership that students began to take of their research process. Students saw themselves as having the agency and power to carry out research that considered the needs of their community more holistically.

Survey responses indicated that the program produced positive outcomes with respect to students’ understanding of research ethics. Prior to the program 63% of students identified as having a “neutral” or “limited understanding of research ethics. As a result of the program 100% indicated they had a “strong” or “very strong” understanding of ethics in research. Philip was the one student that elaborated on his ethical awareness in his final project slides. He listed as part of his literature review that he would research the “history of USFS’s role in complete suppression” as context for study. In other words, he wanted to know more about the U.S. Forest Services’ history and whether fires spread because of their poor management and lack of preparedness, which is ultimately an ethical issue.

Aspirational Capital

As students began to take ownership of the research process, they began to develop stronger aspirational capital. Aspirational capital refers to expressions of hope, future vision, or career/academic goals, despite obstacles (Yosso, 2005). All eight students showed evidence of aspirational community wealth by either expressing a desire to make a difference in the community or by a desire to create a meaningful research project, despite initial assumptions that academic publishing was out of reach or amid any limitations or challenges. Philip shared his journey from not imagining himself in college to pursuing meaningful research. “When I was younger I never really dreamed of going to college... now that I am here” [I have that opportunity.] Two other students shared their future-oriented goals to make meaningful contributions. Jasmine said “I would love to spread awareness and make policies,” while Gabriela simply wrote, “I want to contribute something valuable with my research.” These statements begin to shed light on the importance of centering students as knowledge holders and producers.

Six out of eight of the students expressed future-oriented goals and a desire to make meaningful contributions and impact through their research. Rosa shared that her topic is important to discuss because it allows us to empathize,

explore, and understand how homelessness affects individuals, families, and communities. Todd shared his aspirations for more resources to combat alcohol use disorder for adolescents, low-income individuals, and ethnic minorities. Cynthia explained her understanding that “personal narratives . . . drive research and allow us to provide a voice to those who share their experiences,” a voice that may not otherwise be heard. In an open-ended survey response, students expressed their aspirational capital by indicating that the program helped them be more comfortable with writing literature reviews, hosting interviews, presenting research findings, and broadening their understanding of what research is and is not, more generally.

Navigational Capital

Students showed development of navigational capital by mentioning strategies or skills necessary for maneuvering institutions and dominant systems (Yosso, 2005). Seven of the eight students demonstrated their acquisition of research language and process knowledge by sharing information about methods, literature reviews, and interaction with mentors. Students learned about “different kinds of research,” about a “helpful literature mapping tool called Research Rabbit,” about “using Google Sheets and reading for my research,” and about how to “formulate precise research questions that guide the rest of the study,” for example.

In their final projects, students demonstrated awareness of what it takes to do academic research and/or showed evidence of using skills to complete the research process. Cynthia conducted *pláticas* or conversational approaches she deemed the most appropriate way of connecting with the Latinx students on campus. Rosa conducted face-to-face interviews of people who currently are homeless or were homeless at one point in their lives, which she deemed as “more effective and personal than a survey.”

According to the survey results, the program produced positive outcomes with respect to students’ developing professional knowledge of various research methods and processes, most significantly with conducting a literature review, analyzing primary source documents, using AI for article analysis, and using Excel for data analysis. The program also produced positive results with respect to students’ skill level in all areas, most significantly with understanding theory/concepts guiding research, using primary literature to guide research, and preparing a research poster.

Resistance Capital

Overall, students ruminated on their experiences and what research could mean for them. Many saw research as an opportunity to make sense of the world around them. Resistance capital provides critiques of inequality or injustice and/or desire to advocate or change systems (Yosso, 2005). Seven out of eight students affirmed accessibility and inclusion in research by either challenging the perceptions that research and publishing are only for elite academics and/or by valuing lived experiences and identity as valid drivers of inquiry. Philip explained that there is “more to research than what’s deemed ‘acceptable’ by many scholars,” while Gabriela described how “it [research] does not solely include following a strict protocol in a lab, it can also be informal and explanatory.” Two students demonstrated awareness of societal injustice and a desire to use research as a tool for resistance and change. Jasmine shared that “as a Black woman, I have experienced medical negligence” and that “the medical system, like other US systems, was not meant to help people like me.” Cynthia shared the need to “focus on societal drivers of health inequality including racism and educational opportunities.”

In their final projects, students showed how lived experience and identity were valid drivers of inquiry. Rosa explained that “being homeless or unhoused is not just a label that defines an individual, it’s an experience that comes with many difficulties and setbacks” and that homelessness stems from many factors like mental health issues, immigration, and drug abuse” For her research she interviewed friends, family, and co-workers. Philip shared how he grew up in Lake Elsinore, CA and “witnessed this particular issue [wildfires] worsen over my lifetime, in frequency, severity, and size. He’s an environmental studies major and is researching west coast wildfires and community resilience. Resistance capital was not evident in survey responses. Future iterations of the surveys could include ways students could demonstrate capital development. In conclusion, the topics that students chose were deeply personal and important to them. Each topic critically questioned and pushed established systems to be and do better for marginalized communities. In pushing systematic systems to be reflective, students continued to be reflective and engage in resistance of valuing the knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities.

Discussion

Overall, the students' reflections, survey responses, and final projects were powerful articulations of resistant knowledge, personal commitment, and ethical awareness. Students tied their lived experiences to their scholarly motivations and critiqued systems that have failed them and their community. Students demonstrated a commitment to transformative research, developing various research knowledge and skills, while also recognizing their limitations. Students' reflections demonstrated alignment with the goals of a serving institution, a desire to uplift marginalized voices, and engage ethically in the research process. Students showed evidence of development confidence as researchers, weaving together personal identity, ethical consciousness, and academic learning, suggesting a solid alignment with Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Students demonstrated the importance of centering their lived experience as important within academic settings and theorized how much that could transform the way students see themselves. This program highlighted the impact that centering the cultural knowledge of students had on their understanding of themselves as members of a research community. Through A-CAUSE's curriculum, students learned about the research process and the way through culturally relevant examples and representation. The involvement of faculty of color in the program, promoted representation for students from marginalized and underrepresented communities. The program showcased different approaches how a program could support and harbor a space for students to express themselves holistically.

Conclusion

The A-CAUSE program highlighted the importance of centering cultural wealth in students from marginalized communities. By centering students as knowledge producers, A-CAUSE helped students develop a strong belief in their abilities and identity as researchers. They responded by engaging in research projects that exhibited criticality, reflexivity, and holistic research methodologies. The projects ranged in topics, but all were central to the lives of students. How then can programs like A-CAUSE be replicated to a larger scale? Is it possible to replicate these efforts within classrooms? The A-CAUSE program equipped students with the soft skills to be a part of research labs throughout our university, but it was only the beginning. It is a first step on a longer journey to create a sustained effort of engagement of underrepresented marginalized students in research.

The A-CAUSE program is currently offering workshops to humanities and social science faculty focused on developing CUREs: Course-based Undergraduate Research Experiences. These courses can center on research projects faculty already are engaging in or can provide opportunities for students to engage in their own research projects, which may be necessary for graduate school applications. Some recommendations we have for faculty as gleaned from analysis of this program:

1. **Frame the course around “becoming a researcher,” not just *doing* research.** Students consistently described the shift from seeing research as “something only professors or Ph.D. students do” to “something I can do and contribute to.”
2. **Scaffold research identity development across the quarter/semester.** Identity development occurred gradually through cycles of learning, reflection, application, and revision.
3. **Integrate structured reflective writing throughout the course.** Weekly reflections were the strongest source of research identity evidence with growth in confidence, ethical awareness, and articulation of purpose.
4. **Allow students to anchor research in lived experience and community.** Students developed the strongest research identities when the research connected to personal history, culture, or community and when they felt research could “help people like me,” which was especially salient for first-generation and racially-minoritized students.
5. **Provide recognition opportunities that legitimize students as researchers.** Moments of recognition significantly strengthened identity development, including faculty public presentations, peer validation, guest scholars engaging student ideas.
6. **Embed research skill-building tools transparently.** Students gained confidence when introduced to tools such as literature mapping platforms, citation managers, and structured research templates and when they engaged directly in qualitative coding exercises, for example.

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Redesigning First-Year Experiences for Latinx Students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution: A Case Study from Southeast New Mexico College

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Abstract

This article explores the intentional redesign of the First-Year Experience course (FYEX 1111) at Southeast New Mexico College, a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) serving a majority Latinx and first-generation student population. The course was restructured to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy, peer mentoring, leadership development, and financial wellness, all within a student-centered framework. The redesign aimed to improve college readiness, foster a sense of belonging, and affirm students' lived experiences. Through collaborative partnerships and inclusive teaching strategies, the course has become a model for how HSIs can operationalize "servingness" beyond enrollment metrics. This case study offers practical insights for institutions seeking to elevate Latinx student success and redesign curriculum with cultural relevance and community impact in mind.

Keywords: Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Latinx students, First-Year Experience, culturally responsive pedagogy, student success

Introduction

As Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) continue to expand across the United States, there is increasing attention on the responsibility these institutions hold to not only enroll Latinx students but to intentionally serve them. Under the Higher Education Act, a Hispanic-Serving Institution is defined as an eligible institution of higher education with an undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment that is at least 25 percent Hispanic or Latino (Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). While this designation reflects demographic representation, it does not inherently ensure culturally responsive practices or equitable student outcomes.

The concept of *servingness* emphasizes the need to move beyond access and toward intentional, culturally affirming structures that support Latinx students' persistence, identity development, and academic success (Garcia, 2017). At a small, rural Hispanic-Serving Institution located in the southwestern United States, this call to operationalize servingness served as the catalyst for redesigning the First-Year Experience course (FYEX 1111).

This chapter presents a case study of how a federally funded Title V initiative supported the redesign of FYEX 1111 to better meet the needs of a predominantly Latinx and first-generation student population. The author was directly involved in the design and implementation of this course, bringing a practitioner perspective grounded in day-to-day work with students navigating their first semester of college.

Context and Institutional Background

The institution featured in this case study is a small, rural community college in southeastern New Mexico that recently transitioned from a branch campus to an independent institution. Serving approximately 1,431 students, more than 56.6 percent of the student body identifies as Hispanic or Latino/a/x (Southeast New Mexico College, *At a Glance* [IPEDS-based institutional data], 2023). A significant proportion of students are first-generation college attendees and come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

With support from a U.S. Department of Education Title V Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions grant awarded to strengthen Latinx student success initiatives (U.S. Department of Education, 2022), the college launched several targeted interventions, including a redesign of its First-Year Experience course (FYEX 1111). Prior to the redesign, FYEX functioned largely as a traditional orientation-style course with limited cultural relevance and few structured supports aligned with students' lived experiences.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Servingness

The redesign of FYEX 1111 was guided by culturally responsive pedagogy and the concept of servingness in Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes the intentional integration of students' cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and ways of knowing into teaching and learning practices (Gay, 2000). In FYEX 1111, this approach informed identity-based reflection activities, bilingual resources, and assignments connected to students' family, work, and community contexts.

Servingness extends beyond classroom practice to examine how institutional structures support Latinx students holistically. Garcia (2017) emphasizes that HSIs must align curriculum, policy, and relational practices to ensure Latinx students experience meaningful support. Together, these frameworks shaped FYEX 1111 as a culturally sustaining, academically grounded first-year experience that centers students' identities while building practical college-navigation skills.

Redesigning FYEX 1111: Components and Practices

The redesigned FYEX 1111 course was structured around six intentional components addressing the academic, social, and cultural needs of Latinx and first-generation students: cultural identity and college navigation, academic skills and learning strategies, financial wellness, peer mentoring, leadership development, and a capstone reflection or community-based project. Each component was implemented through scaffolded assignments, guided reflections, discussions, and experiential activities that connected students' lived experiences to college success strategies.

Implementation and Faculty Collaboration

The redesign and implementation of FYEX 1111 were led by the institution's Title V Activity Manager, Raymond Dominguez, with support from institutional leadership and grant administrators. The course was offered in multiple modalities, including in-person and online sections, all utilizing a standardized learning management system shell to ensure consistency across sections.

Instructor Expertise and Inclusive Teaching Practices

Since Fall 2024, the redesigned FYEX 1111 course has been taught by Rocio Esparza and Raymond Dominguez, both of whom bring professional experience and educational backgrounds that directly support the needs of a growing population of English as a Second Language (ESL) students at Southeast New Mexico College. Ms. Esparza holds a master's degree in education and has prior experience working with ESL students at the middle school level. Dominguez holds a Master of Business Administration and has experience teaching ESL at both the middle school and high school levels.

Both instructors are bilingual and intentionally incorporate inclusive teaching practices that support multilingual learners. As the number of ESL students at SENMC has increased, this shared linguistic and cultural competency has contributed to a more welcoming classroom environment. Students are encouraged to engage using their full linguistic repertoire, and course activities are designed to reduce language-related barriers while affirming students' identities. This instructional approach has played a key role in helping students feel more included, supported, and confident during their first semester of college.

Peer Mentor Selection and Role

Peer mentors were selected and assigned by two Academic Coaches at Southeast New Mexico College. These Academic Coaches placed a peer mentor into each FYEX 1111 section for the duration of a semester, allowing mentors to build sustained relationships with students.

Within the classroom, peer mentors assisted with lessons by participating in guided reflections, sharing personal experiences related to navigating college, and helping facilitate discussions. Mentors also shared flyers and information about campus events, academic resources, and student support services available at SENMC, reinforcing help-seeking behaviors and strengthening students' sense of connection to the institution.

Course Requirement and Student Enrollment

FYEX 1111 was offered to all students and became an institutional graduation requirement at Southeast New Mexico College beginning in Fall 2024. Academic advisors enrolled students in the course as part of this requirement. Students who had earned more than 30 credit hours were exempt from taking the course prior to graduation.

Outcomes and Reflections

During the pilot implementation, more than 100 students enrolled in FYEX 1111 across five sections. In addition, 264 students were supported through the peer mentoring component, reflecting students enrolled in FYEX as well as those engaged through mentoring support connected to the institutional requirement.

Evidence of Sense of Belonging

Evidence of students' sense of belonging was gathered through one-on-one conversations between students, peer mentors, and instructors throughout the semester, as well as through recorded student testimonials collected at the end of the Fall 2025 semester. These testimonials provided qualitative data reflecting students' perceptions of connection, confidence, and comfort within the college environment.

One student shared, "*Esta clase me ha ayudado a conocer los recursos del colegio y sentirme más confiada en mi primer semestre aquí en SENMC*" (M. Quinonez, personal communication, 2025). Another student noted, "*This class has been helping me to learn strategies that I can apply in my daily life and my academic life*" (Anonymous student, personal communication, 2025).

Faculty observations and mentor reflections further supported these findings, noting increased classroom engagement, more frequent help-seeking behaviors, and stronger connections between students and institutional resources.

Implications for Hispanic-Serving Institutions

While this case reflects a single institutional context, the strategies described offer transferable lessons for other Hispanic-Serving Institutions navigating similar demographic and structural realities. This case study demonstrates how first-year curriculum can serve as a critical site for operationalizing servingness at Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Embedding culturally responsive pedagogy and peer mentoring into a required first-year course supports students' academic confidence and sense of belonging. Institutional commitment, cross-departmental collaboration, and intentional instructional design are essential for sustaining these efforts beyond grant-funded initiatives.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how a practitioner-led, equity-focused redesign of a first-year experience course can meaningfully support Latinx students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. By integrating culturally responsive pedagogy, peer mentoring, bilingual instruction, and institutional collaboration, FYEX 1111 created a more inclusive and supportive environment for students navigating their first year of college. As Latinx enrollment continues to grow, HSIs are well positioned to lead in the development of culturally sustaining and student-centered educational practices

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Biographies

Dr. Armen Álvarez, PhD

Dr. Armen Álvarez is an Afro-Taíno scholar from Puerto Rico who specializes in Educational Administration and Foundations, with a core focus on decolonizing Eurocentric educational epistemologies through a critical social justice lens. Holding a Ph.D. from Illinois State University, her work, particularly her dissertation “Bombazo Epistemology a Syllabus of Survival,” employs Critical Discourse Analysis and guerrilla pedagogy to critique and dismantle the historical imposition of settler colonialism within the U.S. and Puerto Rican education systems. She is currently active as an instructor and postdoctoral researcher, contributing to the discourse on transforming schools by advocating for culturally responsive instructional supervision and Afro-Taíno knowledge frameworks.

Jafeth E. Sanchez, PhD

Dr. Jafeth Sanchez is a three-time graduate of the University of Nevada, Reno (Education '04, Educational Leadership, '07, Higher Education Administration '10). She is an associate professor who has dedicated her career to developing high-quality educational leaders across P-20 educational pathways. In January 2022, she also accepted the role of Director of the Latino Research Center under the University's Office of the Provost. Her research agenda encompasses educational leadership practices, organizational change efforts, gender and ethnic equity, and student outcomes related to access, retention, and completion.

She has actively managed and attained grant funding as a principal investigator or coinvestigator for approximately \$9 million over the last decade. Dr. Sanchez previously taught mathematics and was awarded Northern Nevada Math Teacher of the Year in 2012 by the Northern Nevada Math Council. She was also a Bill and Melinda Gates Millennium Scholar and served as a mentor for its previous scholars across the country. Her passion for educational improvement and access to higher education are embedded in all aspects of her work in teaching, research, and service.

Anissa Stewart

Anissa Stewart, Ph.D. is an educator and professional development specialist with over 25 years of experience working across all levels of public education. She has worked as a high school social studies teacher, a K-12 teacher educator, and a continuing education professor. Currently she serves as activity director of the Academy for Community, Action, and Use-Inspired Scholarship & Education (A-CAUSE), an HSI Title V grant program at UC Santa Barbara dedicated to supporting minoritized and low-income students in learning research skills, especially those related to humanities and social sciences, and professional development skills to prepare them for life after college. The grant also provides professional development opportunities for faculty to better support students in conducting research and utilizing inclusive pedagogy.

Fátima Andrade Martínez

Fátima Andrade Martínez is a doctoral student at Gevirtz Graduate School of Education. Her work focuses on the experiences of undocumented students and those who support them in higher education. She is interested in how students, with the help of supportive institutional agents, navigate higher education institutions. Fátima is a graduate student researcher for the A-CAUSE program.

Gaby Perez

Gaby Perez is a 4th year Ph.D student at the University of California, Davis. Their research focuses on urban Latinx/e students, with particular attention to Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Drawing from both scholarly and community perspectives, Gaby is committed to advancing research that highlights the experiences of underserved populations and informs more inclusive educational practices. In addition to their academic work, they are also an artist whose creative practice explores themes of culture, identity, and community.

Guadalupe Placencia Miranda

Guadalupe Placencia Miranda is a first-generation undergraduate student at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). She is currently pursuing degrees in Microbiology & Immunology, Biotechnology, and Psychology. Guadalupe enjoys volunteering at local organizations across Northern Nevada, including Catholic Charities of Northern Nevada and CARE Chest of Sierra Nevada. She is currently a Community Health Worker (CHW) and proudly serves rural Nevadans through the UNR School of Medicine's Rural Outreach Clinic.

In addition, she is a Spanish Medical Interpreter, where she provides clear interpretation and culturally-aware support to patients across Northern Nevada. Her work centers on improving equitable access to healthcare, particularly for underserved and immigrant communities. Guadalupe also enjoys expressing herself through music and the arts. She has been a violinist for 10 years, and currently plays in the Mariachi Lobos de Plata group at UNR. She finds joy in performing and preserving cultural traditions. In her free time, she loves scrapbooking, journaling, and crafting. Lastly, she enjoys going on walks with her dogs, Taco and Oso.

Raymond Dominguez

Raymond Dominguez, MBA is the Title V Activity Director for the First-Year Experience Grant at Southeast New Mexico College (SENM), where he leads initiatives focused on student success, cultural inclusion, and academic support for Latinx and first-generation students. With a background in admissions, student services, and program development, Raymond has played a key role in redesigning SENM's First-Year Experience course to align with culturally responsive and student-centered practices. He also oversees peer mentoring, community partnerships, and outreach events that enhance the transition to college. As a first-generation Hispanic college graduate originally from Mexico, Raymond is passionate about creating inclusive spaces that validate students' identities and support their long-term academic goals.



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