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Senior-level Leadership in Higher Education: The Latina Experience

Lisa Eiden-Dillow[1]
Maryville University of St. Louis, USA

Neil Best
The University of Alaska Anchorage, USA

ABSTRACT
The Latinx student population has emerged as the fastest-growing population in the United States, yet education attainment lags (American Council on Education, 2019; Flink, 2018; Vela et al., 2016). With many Latinx students in higher education institutions, the administration does not reflect the student demographics. Latinas account for a small population of female leaders, adding to the increase in tokenism. Alternative research supports the positive impact of mentor programs and increased tokenism of Latinas resulting from the low number of Latinas in senior-level positions. A qualitative study focused on gaining knowledge from senior-level Latinas' lived experiences provided an opportunity to actively review, interpret, and connect themes from their journeys. Interestingly, the Latina leaders highlighted similar experiences while uncovering the opportunity for additional research. This study revealed the inequities Latinas face due to the low representation in senior-level leadership, implying that increasing leadership diversity is essential. The study uncovered the notion that universities should consider working to change system and process inequities rather than focusing on changing the individual. An additional opportunity for future work is examining the definition of Hispanic-serving Institution (HSI) and determine whether increasing the diversity of leadership could improve the overall performance and retention of Latinx students.

KEYWORDS: Latina leadership, diversity, system inequities, tokenism, intersectionality.

Senior-level Leadership in Higher Education: The Latina Experience

The Latinx population has grown faster than any other racial demographic, increasing by 6.9% over 20 years (American Council on Education [ACE], 2019; Flink, 2018; Vela et al., 2016). As an ethnic group, the Latinx population is projected to be the majority group in the United States by 2050 (Flores, 2017), and enrollment in higher education institutions reflects this population increase. Latinx student enrollment increased from 10.3% to 19.8% in over twenty years, indicating a consistent, diverse university student enrollment trend (ACE, 2019).

The diversity in higher education faculty and non-academic leadership is not a current reflection of most college campuses' diverse student population, especially the Latinx population

[1] Corresponding author; received her EdD from Maryville University in Higher Education Leadership. She also serves in a part-time faculty role at Colorado State University Global in the Organizational Leadership Program. E-Mail: lisadillow@gmail.com

(Griffin, 2019). An ACE (2018) president's report stated that only 30% of college presidents are women. Of this 30%, 5% are women of color, and of that 5%, less than 1% are Latinas. As the Latinx student population continues to increase, the representation of the Latinx leadership and faculty positions, including women, would benefit a diverse student population, potentially increase retention, aid in student academic success, and fuel the university and nation's economy (Karkouti, 2016).

The Latinx Student

In 2013, the U.S. Latinx population was approximately 51 million people (Flink, 2018) and climbed to 58 million in 2016 (Flores, 2017). By 2050, it is projected that about 30% of the nation's population will be Latinx distinguishing it as the fastest-growing population in the U.S. (Flink, 2018; Krogstad, 2014; Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012). The increase in the Latinx population in the U.S. has translated to the fastest-growing population on college campuses (Flink, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2016). In 2011, 18 to 24-year-old Latinx students compromised 16.5% of college enrollments, which increased by 13.6% since 1972 (Rodriguez et al., 2016). And in 2018, 21% of college enrollments were Latinx students compared to 25% of White, non-Hispanic students (Excelencia in Education, 2020b). With the Latinx population in 2018 at 18% of the U.S. population, the percentage of Latinx students in college was more significant than the national Latinx population (Excelencia in Education, 2020b).

Despite the increased population in higher education, the Latinx population has a lower academic achievement level and faces access challenges (ACE, 2019; Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2016). In 2014, only 15% of Latinx students ages 25 to 29 obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, significantly lower than Asian, White, and Black students (Krogstad, 2016). Moreover, on average, 6% of baccalaureate degrees are awarded each year to Latinx students in the U.S. (Flink, 2018). Furthermore, the Latinx population represented only 7% of graduate student enrollment in 2012 (Excelencia in Education, 2015). According to Gasman et al. (2015), in 2012, only 5.2% of master's degrees and 4.4% of doctoral degrees were awarded to Latinx students. Latinx students earned fewer doctoral degrees than African Americans, Asians, or White doctoral students in 2012. The lag in academic achievement among Latinx students heightens the concern of the Latinx population's ability to economically and socially advance (Capers, 2019).

Research by Capers (2019) indicated a positive correlation between Latinx faculty representation and increased graduation rates. Academic success and retention could also equal the need for faculty and administration of Color (Capers, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2016). In using data from 2002, Zerquera and Gross's research (2017) noted a direct correlation between the proportion of faculty of color on campus to the success of students of color on campus, including the attainment of baccalaureate degrees. Having a higher percentage of faculty of color may create an environment of support and mentorship for students. In return, this may help retain students of color and create a positive, innovative atmosphere (Abdul-Raheem, 2016; Zerquera & Gross, 2017).

According to the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU) (2017) and aligning with the Title V federal definition, a non-profit university receives HSI (Hispanic-serving Institute) status once the institution's population represents 25% full-time equivalent (FTE) or more of Hispanic undergraduate student enrollment. HSI status allows universities to receive federal grant funding to support and strengthen programming and services for Hispanic Americans and other underrepresented populations (U. S. Department of Education, 2020). Many institutions use this funding to provide accessibility to the Latinx population and increase student academic success

rates (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Capers, 2019). Today, HSIs have increased by 93% in the past ten years, reaching 569 institutions serving 67% of all Latinx students. In addition, approximately 352 institutions are emerging HSIs approaching the 25% FTE enrollment (Excelencia in Education, 2020a).

Latinas in Higher Education Leadership

In the last 30 years, women have slowly increased their presence in higher education senior leadership roles; however, Latina representation lags (ACE, 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016). In 2015, women held 32% of full-time faculty positions, of which 4% of these women were Latinas (Johnson, 2017). These numbers are similar for Latina presidents in higher education institutions. *The American college president study: Minority presidents* conducted by the ACE (2018) reported that in 2016, women represented 30% of president positions, with only .88% Latinas, down 1% since 2011. While the Latinx population increased, the Latina representation in senior-level leadership positions in higher education decreased (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014).

As a theoretical framework, intersectionality was first introduced in the late 1980s by feminist and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (Shields, 2008). Intersectionality focuses on the obstacles faced by individuals who identify with multiple social categories and how they also identify with another class (Cho et al., 2013). It posits that individuals have many influences, causing complex challenges (Strayhorn, 2017). Strayhorn (2017) defined intersectionality as a "theory, explanation, framework, or theoretical model"; however, "it is an attempt to explain the underlying causal mechanism of social phenomena – the how and why of things" (p. 59). This idea provides a more in-depth and inclusive framework when approaching research. Research with multiple lenses offers a sophisticated approach for analysis resulting in a more thorough adaptation of the research questions.

Latinas face the challenge of being a woman in higher education and being from an underrepresented group (Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012). Due to their identification as a woman and a woman in an underrepresented population, Latinas are more likely to face racism, sexism, stereotyping, uneven promotion, and inequality in salaries, especially when entering the academic setting (Nuñez & Murkami-Ramlho, 2012). Women of Color, including Latinas, repeatedly report having their credentials and competencies challenged in the professional arena (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010) and often face the stereotype of being overemotional and uneducated (Ely et al., 2011).

The pipeline theory originated with a focus on providing opportunities for women in both private and public leadership positions in higher education (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016). Latinas have increased their presence on campus, yet their representation in senior-level leadership positions is minuscule (Johnson, 2017; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Longman & Anderson, 2016). Although women are moving into the university environment faster than men, women obtain predominantly entry-level, service, or teaching-only positions supporting the university's functionality, but they are not the decision-making leadership roles typically dominated by men (Johnson, 2017; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). With this in mind, the pipeline theory is ineffective and broken (Longman & Anderson, 2016).

Women of color experience criticism and scrutiny, resulting in missed opportunities to advance in leadership positions while their White counterparts progress (Hannum et al., 2015). Because there is often a lower representation of Latinas in higher education, they are expected to work within the ranks of their peers and serve on committees as the ethnic representative, leaving them limited time to engage in mentorship, which could lead to promotions. With less representation in senior-level leadership positions, Latinas lack role models and mentors to follow

and confide in during their professional careers in higher education (Hannum et al., 2015; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Nuñez & Murkami-Ramlho, 2012). With a lower representation of Latinas, they are expected to work within the ranks of their peers and serve on committees as the ethnic representative, leaving them limited time to engage in mentorship, which in time could lead to promotions and an increase in Latinas in administrative and teaching positions (Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012; Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014).

Design and Method

This study aims to create a thorough review of Latina women's lived experiences on their journey to become senior-level administrators in higher education using intersectionality as a theoretical framework and a qualitative methodological approach. The research question driving this study was: What are the shared and lived experiences of senior Latina leaders in higher education in their pursuit of a senior-level leadership position?

To better explore the relationships between the events and the person, van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic structure, comprised of six main steps, influenced this study. The measures include (a) revisiting the nature of a lived experience that interests us, (b) investigating the experience as lived, (c) reflecting on the main themes characterizing the experience, (d) describing the phenomenon in writing, (e) perpetuating a relation to the phenomenon, and (f) balancing research while considering the parts and the whole of the experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the most effective way to understand Latinas' lived experiences. Conversing with experts in their own life will enrich the interviews creating a meaningful dialogue (Privitera & Ahlgrim, 2019). From a phenomenological perspective, we had the opportunity to listen, explore, interpret, and connect the meaning behind these women's lived experiences.

Qualified participants were identified using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics. After locating universities with a positive percentage of Latinas in full-time staff positions, an institutional website search was conducted to find senior leadership profiles. Once potential participants were identified, email communication was sent to determine their interest in completing the research study. All Latinas identified for this study were currently employed in a full-time senior-level administrator role on their campus.

Data collection occurred through 45-to-90-minute, semi-structured interviews using a pre-designed set of seven questions as a guide. The interviews allowed participants to communicate their shared lived experiences in obtaining a senior-level leadership position. Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) noted that interviews are an instrumental dialogue and tool used to gather narratives and descriptions for interpretation after the research. Data analysis identified reoccurring themes presented during data collection. Once the themes were roughly defined, Dedoose qualitative software helped organize and refine themes, input quotes from the participants, cross-reference the data, and analyze prominent themes and intersections of ideas.

Participant Characteristics

The study consisted of eight Latinas currently working in senior-level leadership positions in four-year colleges and universities located in California and Colorado. Of the eight women, two were from private institutions, and six were from public universities. While the study did not seek to find participants from Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), 87.5% of the participants currently work at HSIs. The women represented positions from across the institution, including student affairs, academic affairs, advancement, engagement, and diversity offices (see Table 1).

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Position at Institution	Institution Type	HSI	Cultural Identity
Laura	Vice President	Public	Yes	Mexican
Nora	Vice President	Public	Yes	Hispanic
Sofia	Associate Chancellor	Public	Yes	Puerto Rican
Katrina	Vice President	Public	No	Mexican
Maria	Vice President	Public	Yes	Chicana
Juliana	Academic Dean	Private	Yes	Puerto Rican
Raquel	Vice President	Public	Yes	Mexican
Isabella	Chief Officer	Private	Yes	Mexican

Note. HSI = Hispanic-Serving Institute.

Results

In our interviews of eight senior-level Latina leaders, four prominent themes emerged: (a) tokenism, (b) lack of support circles & the need for mentors, (c) the importance of family, and (d) system inequities in higher education.

Tokenism

Even on diverse campuses, representation at the top is slim, evoking a sense of tokenism for the Latinas in this study. Often within higher education, a single Latinx person can be the lone representative at the top levels of organizational leadership (Nixon, 2017; Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). This available representation can be taxing on an individual and a potential barrier for Latinas advancing into senior-level leadership positions. Since many senior leaders are White men, they may not understand what tokenism or cultural taxation entails.

Seven of the eight women noted that tokenism is a challenge they face in their current situations or have faced during their journey to a senior-level leadership position. In reflection, Laura noted how people see her as a token in her vice president position. She explained, "people get really surprised when I walk into a room, and they're like, Oh, she's the vice president." Although being a token can have its challenges, Laura also sees it as an opportunity to break a leadership stereotype. Being the only Latina representation in a professional circle was emphasized in connection with worth and value. Raquel noted the burden of being the only person in the Latinx population helping others navigate the system. "You don't get credit for it. And it's not valued. And it's exhausting." Isabella supported this sentiment by recognizing,

> *When you walk into a room, and you're in a leadership role, in the back of my mind is, huh, are they looking at me as the token? So that's why you have to keep working twice as hard to demonstrate your worth in your value in your capacity.*

Through lived experiences, Latinas in this study recognize the positive impact and influence they have on breaking the senior-level leader stereotype. Much of the diversity and inclusion work also falls on Latinas, Blacks, and Asian-Americans (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). Juliana, a dean at her institution, noted that the president's cabinet lacks understanding of much of the "really important climate-changing work" on diversity and inclusion that falls to the mid-level managers and faculty at the institution are almost exclusively women of color. Even though the university aligns with the HSI requirement for the student population percentages, they lack diversity representation at the top, causing any minority person in a leadership position to take on the responsibility of changing the diversity climate for the entire institution. This task is taxing and merely exhausting. Although Maria never thought she would be in a senior-level position in higher education, she took the challenge when presented. She noted,

> *One of the most difficult things I ever managed to deal with, and I still deal with it still happens is that, you know, being a Latina, you're told you should go into administration because we need more of you there. But when you step into administration, those people on the faculty are those people in the staff who were your comadres and compadres a day ago no longer are. Yes, you become an administrator. And somehow, it's like, I lost who I was, like, I lost Maria, and I'm no longer that radical or that activist or anything.*

Lack of Support Circles & the Need for Mentors

All of the women emphasized isolation and loneliness at the top and the lack of networks that supported achievement in high leadership positions. Research supports that diversity at the top will provide support and create an atmosphere for hierarchical advancement (Chanland & Murphy, 2017; Hill & Wheat, 2017). Women empowering and supporting women, getting a posse, and female networks, were all phrases the participants used to describe support circles. In referring to the senior-level leadership, Laura noted, "we really don't have any support at that level." Maria emphasized this thought in her reflection on advancing to her vice president position, saying, "you cannot imagine what the move to senior leadership is like; it is not a simple step, but more like a jump." Isabella also noted it is a journey and a lack of support for women of color, especially Latinas, to emerge in the top leadership positions, "we don't have the network, so we have to build them."

Laura noted the lack of professional support and development once you become a senior-level leader. She recognized the role of professional organizations but noted the lack of action and collaboration, specifically with Latinas in senior-level positions. Isabella said the challenges of advancing her career to get to the next position of provost or president. "We have to find our own professional development. We have to lean on each other and our allies."

All eight women overwhelmingly noted that mentors are influential and provide guidance. Most women identified specific mentors along their journey, but a few recognized their lack of mentorship. Raquel said that finding mentors "at a young age can help Latinas see their future potential." Katrina also shared the importance of having mentors, especially in your organization,

to support learning outside of traditional avenues. She noted that mentors support "learning about advocacy, learning about context." Sofia also indicated that you should not only find a mentor but keep a mentor. She also recognizes that not every mentor has to be a woman of color. She shared, "Any person who helps you navigate the field will put your best interest at heart and help you succeed." She shared that she has mentors in her professional career. Yet, she has individuals, mostly men, to educate her on the personal side of her journey, including financial investments and social ventures.

Nora disclosed that she did not have a mentor during her journey but interacted with many influential and supportive people. She noted that mentors are essential; however, it is unnecessary to find a woman of color to guide your efforts, "I think a lot of people who have been champions have been white men." Adding,

> *A very important message to men that they have a responsibility probably more than anyone to consciously take the time to support, cultivate, and open doors for people of color and women in their lives and organizations, because they have that power.*

Katrina also mentioned that the mentors she has had have all been men. She grew up in her system and has been one of the only Latinas in leadership. It was a necessity to find men as mentors. Sofia noted that it is essential "to find and keep mentorships. They do not need to be women of color. Any person who helps you navigate the field will put your best interest at heart and help you succeed."

Although every Latina interviewed did not identify an influential mentor on their journey, they all noted the importance of mentors in navigating their higher education careers. Although Juliana stated she is still seeking mentorship, she is a mentor for others. "I have very purposely sought grant funds. So that biannually, we put on a woman of color and political science workshop, and I serve as a mentor through my professional organizations." All of the women see themselves as current mentors and embrace this identity.

The Importance of Family

Latinas have a strong foundation set in family and community (Diaz & Bui, 2017). Each of the eight women emphasized the family's influence and importance in starting their higher educational journey or professional careers. Five of these women still live in the communities they have developed their careers in, staying close to the family and friends they know. Also, five of the women were first-generation students. Isabella emphasized, "for those of us that are first gens, we don't know how to navigate systems to begin with." She found that being a first generational student and a Latina during her doctoral program was challenging.

Three of the women were not first generational students but still faced challenges. Raquel was one of six girls known as the smart sisters in their community. She grew up in a poor, rural area with a high Latinx population. Her father placed a considerable value on education and would do whatever was needed for the family to get the best education they could.

The family unit can also play into the barriers Latinas face in pursuing professional positions. As Juliana noted, "many Latinas and women of color are location bound" and hesitate to move away from family, especially as parents grow older.

Having a family while navigating the professional ladder in higher ed can be challenging as well. Katrina noted, "I had my son, the same year, I became the Executive Director of Admissions at the university, and he was a preemie." Growing a family while still trying to navigate

in a new position was challenging. Still, she felt that taking a leave from her work would disrupt her influence on institutional policies and her advancement at the university.

Higher Education System Inequities

The interviews highlighted inequities in the higher education system. Seven out of the eight women commented on a system or process inequity within the university structure. Institutions often look at the individual's challenges rather than organizational culture or perception deficits in the system (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Katrina noted a situation when she wanted to elevate another Latina to be an associate director but was discouraged from doing so. She recalled,

> *I was told that the university was not prepared to have two Latinas in leadership positions at the same as in the same office. And I thought, okay. So, I literally needed to have that position filled by a White male.*

While she knew the Latina was the best choice, the university was unwilling to promote or advocate for a Latina to advance. Katrina also noted that she is surprised at the number of faculty in various disciplines, especially those outside of social science, that have never talked about diversity or equity in their classrooms. These faculty members may be brilliant in their professions, but "they do not have inclusive pedagogy or inclusive ideas in the classroom." She shared a story of training focused on inclusion and social justice where a faculty member stated, "I just did not know that lynching was such a big deal in the black community." While this was a current situation, she recalled that this was not the first time she had heard a similar comment. Many faculty members are influential in producing financially lucrative research for the institution, yet they do not understand the need to introduce inclusivity in their curriculum.

Leadership in higher education can also create inequality. Sofia first came to her university job after working in the criminal justice system as a lawyer. In her quest to "disrupt the narrative," she decided to apply for a position in higher education. During this process, she noted clues of "systemically racist structures of higher ed" causing the imposter syndrome to the surface, creating doubt in her credentials, abilities, and talents simply because she does not fit the traditional mold of higher education professional. Once hired, she went back and told a committee member that questioned her abilities to never doubt someone's credentials verbally in an interview again. She noted, "if you want to change outcomes, you need to change the way you hire."

Higher education is rooted in the traditional systems, and in California, state systems magnify inequities. Maria shared a story where the university could not employ a local minority-owned office supply vendor that was a small business because they were not the system's vendor of choice. She shared that,

> *50% of our students are students of color, majority Latino, majority first in their family to earn a degree, and 80% of them stay in the region." She went on to say that "we are not able to support the small businesses that they are starting because we are bound by these large-scale contracts.*

In reflecting on this scenario, Maria recalled,

> *I have noticed a new reckoning of institutionalization of inequity and understanding that policies are not neutral because they're influenced by unions. They're influenced by the very institutions, which are doing exactly*

> *what they're intended to do, which is to create inequities. So, in order to disrupt, we have to really look at those very policies that sustain the system.*

This example is one scenario where unequal systems are not supportive of the university's foundation. Another area of inequity is in leadership for HSIs. Two of the women interviewed explicitly noted the lack of diversity in senior leadership. When Sofia was hired at her current institution, she said that she took the appointment,

> *Because it is an HSI, they had nobody who looked like me in leadership, and there were no people of color. I was like, wait, you're telling me there's an institution that's 71%, Latinx, and the students are not seeing themselves reflected?*

Juliana also noted the lack of diversity in senior leadership and missing degree programming for a traditional HSI, which threw up a red flag when she was considering her current position. She commented,

> *Why don't they have an ethnic studies program if they're an HSI? Or, you know, I'm looking at all the other people I met in leadership positions, and there were no Hispanics and no African Americans and no Asian Americans, but there were lots of women in leadership.*

Juliana found the number of women in leadership encouraging even though the women's diversity in leadership was non-existent.

Discussion

The results from this study supplemented previous literature indicating that the lack of Latinas in senior-level leadership positions leads to tokenism and a lack of support and guidance for other Latinas wanting to develop a career in higher education. The research also reveals the need to improve the diversity of senior-level leadership positions and create unbiased and inclusive support systems for Latinas as they pursue higher education positions. As shared in the results, the participants see the need to influence young Latinas on their journey. As Latinas and senior-level leaders, they value the opportunity to disrupt the current systems to support the Latinx culture. They also recognize the need to influence the Latinx culture to improve student retention.

On Coping Strategies

The emphasis on family is essential to Latinas' work-life balance and provides the Latinx community's foundation to advance education and careers (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). Ortega-Liston and Soto (2014) noted that the frequency women enter and exit the workplace to tend to their families stifle their careers. This action alone can hinder women's advancement, leaving an open door for timely promotion for men.

Research has repeatedly magnified the need for support systems and mentoring for women, especially women of color in higher education and contributes to personal and professional growth (Chanland, & Murphy, 2017; Hill & Wheat, 2017; Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012; Vela et al., 2016). Mentorship is an excellent opportunity to, formally and informally, assist individuals in guiding and navigating career decisions and choices (Catalyst, 2019; Hill & Wheat, 2017). Within

this study, all women noted the importance of mentorship even if they had not previously experienced a relationship with a mentor. The women overwhelmingly emphasized the need to mentor aspiring women in higher education, aligning with research by Vela et al. (2016), concluding that Latinx students with positive mentors could increase their sense of self-belonging, resulting in more significant academic success and retention.

Considering there is a lack of women of color, especially Latinas, in senior-level positions, finding a male mentor might help women accomplish more significant success in navigating the traditional "good 'ole boy" network (Hill & Wheat, 2017). As Katrina specifically noted, successful mentor relationships from men and, more specifically, White men have benefited her career. With a more significant number of men in senior leadership positions, tapping into men's mentorship for women's advancement is crucial (Hill & Wheat, 2017; Nuñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012; Valerio & Sawyer, 2016).

On Challenging the System

The number of Latinx students continues to flood university enrollment, yet Latinas' advancement continues to be minimal. In this research, the Latinas recognized their isolation at the top and how they are tokens in their positions. According to Niemann (2016), "tokens are rare persons of their demographic groups within the context, especially in contrast with majority, numerical dominants" (p. 452). Because several of these women are the single Latina representation at the top, they experience tokenism and are marginalized more than others in their institution (Nixon, 2017). Identity taxation, as clarified by Rideau (2019), builds upon tokenism to include the idea of conducting "any labor—physical, mental, or emotional—due to their membership in a historically marginalized group within their department or university" (p. 1). This extreme tokenism or identity taxation level can lead to feelings of exhaustion and isolation, creating a barrier for their continued work to promote their race and gender (Nixon, 2017; Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014; Rideau, 2019).

Gender and racial inequality have plagued the higher education profession for years, yet changes have not sufficiently created supportive and diverse leadership and faculty teams (Rideau, 2019). In a study focused on hiring, the results indicated that when there are two or more minorities in the hiring pool, the statistics change, which changes the status quo. The minority is now the favorable candidate (Johnson et al., 2016). In reflection, our study identified the challenge of going beyond saturating the pipeline with gender and race-specific candidates or developing mentor programs. However, these efforts can be useful to an extent. Systemic ideas and processes hinder the advancement of Latinas and, therefore, stifle the opportunity for advancement.

The participants shared stories and examples of barriers beyond the individuals, alluding to issues in the higher education systems themselves. Systemic inequities left an impression that traditional higher education processes need to be reviewed, changed, and implemented for equality to exist. Burkinshaw and White (2017) posit the need to re-envision work cultures and move away from traditionally masculine structures in higher education. Reworking a system that allows individual talents to shine rather than suppressing their efforts would positively change the system rather than continually focus on changing the individual. Latinas can have the support of each other and others, but unless the system equally allows Latinas to advance by removing systemic barriers, diversity advancement suppression will continue.

Examining the system inequities with a non-biased yet supportive view would enhance the educational diversity spectrum leaving room for the support and advancement of all people of color, especially Latinas. The Latinx population is the fastest-growing, least retained population, and they are the fastest-growing population enrolled in higher education institutions, with 67%

attending HSIs (Excelencia in Education, 2020a). However, the Latinas still only hold .88% of presidential positions in higher education (ACE, 2018). Faculty representation is also low with both tenured and non-tenured ranks are 2% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, as cited in Rideau, 2019). Seven out of eight Latinas interviewed currently hold a senior-level position at an HSI, yet they recognize the underrepresentation of Latinx staff at their institutions. Flink (2018) indicated that HSIs play a significant role in Latinx students' success. Garcia et al. (2019) noted that while federal designation for an HSI is 25% of undergraduate FTE, HSI's title does not represent an institution that genuinely serves or supports the Latinx student. Each institution is unique in its offerings while equally sitting under the HSI umbrella. Recognizing the low representation of Latinx leadership at the participant's institutions is an indication that federally defined HSI designation does not incorporate a true reflection of what it takes to support the Latinx student on the institutional level.

Implications

As the Latinx population increases and universities diversify, developing inclusive practices, including hiring, system development, and HSI designation, will create a more inclusive and supportive university environment. Direct implications revealed that the number of Latinas in top leadership positions are minimal compared to enrollment, and senior-level leaders are utilized to their fullest. Having a more robust representation of Latinas at the top will directly reflect the student enrollment numbers and allow an increase in mentorship and student retention and decrease tokenism and invite a system that promotes equality. Current leadership on campuses should consider consciously adopting hiring practices inclusive of all gender and races to attract and retain qualified faculty staff and develop a balanced leadership. Human resources departments should be mindful of how hiring practices affect the talent they select. Developing policies and training to educate departments on inclusive practices, including increasing the hiring pool, would be a step toward equality.

Understanding the importance of support and mentorship is essential for Latinas entering the higher education profession, including faculty and research positions. The Latinas in this study noted the need for mentorship even if they had not experienced a mentor during their journey. Developing relationships with others experiencing a similar journey could positively influence Latinas.

Participants in this study noted the misalignment of the HSI designation with the lack of Latinx leaders at the top. A 25% enrollment of Latinx undergraduate students is currently the only characteristic needed for a university to receive HSI designation. While many institutions may see themselves as an HSI, this designation does not indicate that a university is holistically dedicated to supporting Latinx students. Many leaders are currently charged with making impactful decisions for the university, yet they are not representative of its majority population. Revisiting the definition of an HSI and how a university receives federal funding would be an impactful way to support the students' lives they serve and support.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study conveyed the lived experiences of eight Latinas currently working in California and Colorado. Although their experiences may be similar to other Latinx professionals, other senior-level administrators' experiences may not be the same because of position differences or institutional policy and makeup. Although this study confirmed past research that Latinas are isolated at the top and often become a token of diversity for their institution, the study also

uncovered system inequalities. How Hispanic-serving Institutions are defined and future research on the impact of diversity within senior-level leadership could help universities develop strategies and improve retention and completion rates of the fastest-growing population on a college campus today; the Latinx student.

Conclusion

The Latinx student population is the fastest-growing population, yet education attainment has not improved (ACE, 2019). This study confirmed previous research surrounding the positive impact of mentor programs and the tokenism of Latinas resulting from the low number of Latinas in senior-level positions. However, systemic inequalities were highlighted; uncovering universities' need to review current practices with an equivalent lens. This article also announced that HSIs are not an accurate representation of how an institution can holistically support and foster a positive Latinx population. Further examination of HSI designation, including the representation of Latinx in staff, faculty, and leadership roles is needed to develop a supportive and inclusive community.

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Notes on Contributors

Dr. Lisa Eiden-Dillow received her EdD from Maryville University in Higher Education Leadership and serves as an adjunct professor and dissertation chair in the program. She also serves in a part-time faculty role at Colorado State University Global in the Organizational Leadership Program. Her research interests include leadership equity, faculty development and hiring practices, and dissertation chair development.

Dr. Neil Best received his PhD from Azusa Pacific University in Higher Education and his dissertation explored on the campus climate predictors of sexual assault victimization. He has professional experience working in the areas of Equity and Compliance, Residence Life, Student Engagement, Leadership Development, and Student Conduct. He currently serves as Deputy Title IX Coordinator and Civil Rights Investigator at the University of Alaska Anchorage. His research interests focus on student success and sexual violence prevention.

ORCID

Lisa Eiden-Dillow, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1762-4990
Neil Best, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1762-4990

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