



## Addressing the Need to Strengthen Leadership at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

**Anthony Hernandez**, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Throughout the country, states continue to implement higher education policies that ensure the pathway to a degree is inclusive and accessible, with states such as New Mexico recently adopting legislation for tuition-free higher education and becoming one of many states following this trend. As more focus is placed on ways academic institutions can better support their students, there must also be reflection on how leaders play a critical role in guiding the complex organizations that serve large numbers of minority college students – such as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are postsecondary institutions that receive federal designation recognizing their enrollment of 25% or more full-time Hispanic undergraduate students. Over the last two decades, they continue to be the fastest-growing post-secondary institutions in the nation. According to Excelencia in Education, as of 2020-2021, there were 559 institutions in 29 states that met the criteria. My research suggests that fortifying leadership at HSIs would improve important outcomes which include well-being, retention, sense of belongingness, and completion rates for Hispanic students, a traditionally underrepresented and underserved group.

### “Critical Transformational Leaders” in Higher Education

The value proposition of increasing college completion rates for Hispanics is often viewed in economic terms. Greater potential for employment opportunities and increased earnings for successful graduates usually accompanies the discourse about college degree completion. An accompanying narrative is how educated citizens might benefit the workforce and competitiveness of the economy. However, there are other important benefits that arrive from a college education that matter. The ability to use critical thinking skills can enrich how one views their life and place in larger society. Critical thinking skills allow students to engage in reflection, creativity, empathy, and sensemaking. College graduates tend to experience important social outcomes like better wellness, increased civic participation, less criminal activity, and lower use of welfare benefits and programs.

My research conducted a study including 73 higher education leaders at Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the Southwest United States. The interviews included college presidents, vice presidents, deans, department chairs, and other college leaders. One remarkable group of college leaders modeled what strong leadership at HSIs should be and I identified this group as “Critical Transformational Leaders.”

While this group possessed essential managerial competencies, what set the group of leaders apart was their concern and care for students. They were intentional about addressing students’ needs and avoided obsessing over rankings or accolades. These leaders sought to deeply understand the challenges college

students grappled with while navigating the college pathway. They worked to understand how systemic forces shaped the lived experiences of students and worked on creating policies and procedures that would help students better navigate their challenges. These leaders were attuned to the special mission of HSIs to serve—and lift—Hispanic students. They were acutely aware that students are likely to have better workforce opportunities and social outcomes when armed with a college degree.

The example of distributed leadership modeled by this group empowered leaders at all parts of the institution—from the front lines of the student services office and classrooms to the C-suites to make decisions that focused on serving students. At meetings, they interrogated themselves to ask who was not included at the leadership table and then actively worked to broaden the leadership ranks so that leaders from all levels of the institution were represented and given voice. Importantly, these Critical Transformational Leaders did such a good job in supporting students that they were acknowledged by the federal government for their excellent completion rates for Hispanic students.

## Training Leaders to Serve in Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Given that equity is one of the societal goals, there must be recognition that HSIs are key entry points where many Hispanic students begin their academic journeys. These postsecondary institutions are doing the heavy lifting in higher education by providing access to a broad population of traditionally underserved students. For example, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) [reports](#) that HSIs enroll “more African-Americans than all the HBCUs combined, more American Indians than all the TCUs together, and over 41% of all Asian Americans enrolled in college today.” As such, there is a responsibility to shore up leadership at these institutions. My findings broaden the understanding of what strong HSIs leadership work entails. It points to the need for leaders who are trained well to serve at Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

Now is the time to create programming at our national public colleges and universities to prepare higher education leaders to serve the rapidly growing Hispanic college student population. The unique needs of Hispanic college students require leaders who are not only well-trained managers, but critical leaders who are attuned to the unique needs of Hispanic students. There’s an opportunity to train future higher education leaders in their formative leadership years while they are still in college. This effort will help prepare generations of leaders to be ready to successfully serve the growing population of students enrolling at Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

At schools of education where leaders are currently trained to serve in traditional higher education settings, degree pathways for those interested in serving at postsecondary institutions with large numbers of Hispanic students must be created. The leadership curriculum must include training on matters like Hispanic community history and culture, students’ lived experiences, critical pedagogy, and culturally relevant mental health and well-being services. These future leaders must be trained on leadership responsibilities and basic functions of management. Also, in addition to college classroom training by faculty who can provide expert guidance, aspiring leaders need field-based opportunities that help them connect and apply what they’ve learned to real-world settings where they can get a sense of how to drive positive impacts.

College students arrive on campus carrying more than backpacks full of laptops, writing instruments, and notebooks. They arrive with dreams of a bright future. They are hoping for a transformative (not transactional) educational experience that will lift them and their families to a better place. As a society, we have a duty to honor their hopes and dreams by ensuring there is a strong leadership team in place to help make sure they

transition successfully and seamlessly to the next level.