INVISIBLE NO MORE: THE JOURNEY OF *LAS EJECUTIVAS*

A CASE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EXECUTIVE LATINAS IN A FOUR-YEAR HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION

by

Martha Sesteaga

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES AND PRACTICE

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2025

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by *Martha Sesteaga*, titled *Invisible No More: The Journey of Las Ejecutivas A Case Study of the Lived Experiences of Executive Latinas in a Four-Year Hispanic-Serving Institution* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Gary Rhoades (Apr 16, 2025 17:23 PDT)

Dr. Gary Rhoades Date: April 11, 2025

Marla Franco
Marla Franco (Apr 16, 2025 21:27 PDT)

Dr. Marla Franco Date: April 11, 2025

Dr. Judy Marquez-Kiyama Date: April 11, 2025

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Gary Rhoades (Apr 16, 2025 17:23 PDT)

Dr. Gary Rhoades Date: April 11, 2025
Dissertation Committee Chair
Department of Educational Policy Studies and Practice

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to God for his abundant blessings. His love and compassion have been my constant companions, guiding me through the challenges of my doctoral journey. When self-doubt crept in, his divine intervention reassured me of my abilities by placing the right people in my life, some of whom I would like to acknowledge next.

Mi Vida, my husband, Hammurabi Romero. You have been my rock, keeping me on track and never doubting my potential. You graciously allowed me to practice my interview skills with you, listened to my frustrations, and provided the encouragement I needed when I was on the verge of giving up. Your enduring positivity, patience, and love have been my source of strength throughout this journey. Thank you for your unwavering support.

A mi familia y amigos, gracias por su amor y paciencia. Por entender y perdonar mi ausencia en muchas de las reuniones de los últimos seis años. A las mujeres guerreras y extraordinarias de mi familia; Nana, Mamá, Gina, Linda, Rosa Isela, Belinda, y muchas más, son ustedes mi inspiración y mi fortaleza. En el espejo de sus logros me vi, y quise ser parte de esa imagen. Gracias por ser parte de mi vida. A ti mamá, por enseñarme perserverancia, y humildad, pero sobre todo gracias por tu amor, tu apoyo incondicional, y tu gran corazón. A mis amigas, mis hermanas y compañeras; Paulina, Mónica, Nina, Berenice, y Jessica. Sus muchas horas de apoyo emocional hicieron una gran diferencia. Gracias por hacer esta experiencia más llevadera al brindarme un espacio seguro para recordar quien soy, y saber que las tenía ahí para sostenerme cuando el camino se ponía bastante duro. A mis sobrinos/as y ahijados/as ustedes siempre son mi motivo para ser una mejor persona.

Additionally, I want to thank the Department of Educational Policy Studies & Practice faculty for their inclusive pedagogy, insightful class discussions, and deep knowledge. Most importantly, I am deeply grateful to my dissertation committee, which

includes Dr. Gary Rhoades, Dr. Marla Franco, and Dr. Judy Marquez-Kiyama (dream team). Your invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and relentless support have shaped my research and academic journey. Your wisdom has been a tremendous blessing. Dr. Rhoades, thank you for being my committee chair and for your patience and time, especially when I felt overwhelmed. You listened to my concerns and provided valuable guidance and knowledge.

I also want to acknowledge my fantastic writing buddies, Dr. Terrace Ewinghill, Alice Lee, and Talia Raya. Our weekly meetings gave me the space, accountability, and encouragement to write, edit, and complete this. Every time I sit and write something, I remember our "happy writing" saying before each session. I will cherish you all forever.

Lastly, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the incredible ladies, *las ejecutivas*, Veronica, Gigi, Paloma, Isabella, and Cristina, who graciously participated in my study and bravely shared their stories. Your life experiences have enriched this research and academia in numerous ways. This study was possible thanks to your selfless contribution. You are all influential and inspiring leaders whose integrity and work ethic are to be admired and emulated. I hope I have done justice to your experiences, accomplishments, and incredible journeys. Thank you for inspiring me and others in countless ways!

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We respectfully acknowledge that the University of Arizona is on the land and territories of Indigenous peoples. Today, Arizona is home to 22 federally recognized tribes, with Tucson being home to the O'odham and the Yaqui. Committed to diversity and inclusion, the University strives to build sustainable relationships with sovereign Native Nations and Indigenous communities through education offerings, partnerships, and community service.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my fellow Latinas, who are often overlooked, overworked, and misunderstood. You are truly phenomenal!

"Now you understand just why my head's not bowed. I don't shout or jump about or have to talk real loud. When you see me passing, it ought to make you proud. I say it's in the click of my heels, the bend of my hair, the palm of my hand, the need for my care. 'Cause I'm a woman phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, that's me."

-Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou

Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES **8**

LIST OF TABLES **8**

KEY CONCEPTS DEFINITIONS **9**

ABSTRACT **10**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION **11**

Problem Statement 11

Purpose of the Study 12

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE **33**

The Evolution of the Latinx Population in the United States and Their Experience in Higher Education Institutions 34

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN **58**

Overview 58

Research Questions 60

Theoretical Framework 62

Methodology 70

Units of Analysis 71

Positionality 82

CHAPTER FOUR: *LAS EJECUTIVAS* & FINDINGS **86**

Las Ejecutivas 86

Veronica *Testimonios* 87

Gigi *Testimonios* 92

Paloma *Testimonios* 96

Isabella *Testimonios* 101

Cristina *Testimonios* 107

Findings 112

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS **128**

Discussion 128

Recommendations 148

FINAL REFLECTION **169**

Current State of Affairs 171

APPENDICES **173**

REFERENCES **187**

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Typology of HSI Organizational Identities 28
Figure 2: Positions With the Largest Increase in Representation of Women From 2002 to 2022 38
Figure 3: FOK Key Contributions Timeline 67
Figure 4: Coding Map of Themes and Subcodes 119
Figure 5: Word Cloud of Codes 120
Figure 6: Word Cloud of the Testimonios Analysis 126
Figure 7: Equity and Justice-Centered Practices 154

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Institution Demographics 32
Table 2: Participants Demographics 86

KEY CONCEPTS DEFINITIONS

Sense of belonging – the basic human need to feel a sense of security, safety, and acceptance, to be our authentic selves without fear of punishment or being treated differently. When belonging does not exist, employees feel they must cover or downplay a part of who they are.

Funds of Knowledge – the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills that staff and their families hold.

Institutional Diversity Typology – posits that Hispanic-Serving Institutions can be identified as six types of Hispanic-Serving Institutions: (1) Urban Enclave Community Colleges, (2) Rural Dispersed Community Colleges, (3) Big Systems 4-Year Institutions, (4) Small Communities 4-Year Institutions, (5) Puerto Rican Institutions, and (6) Health Science Schools.

Mentoring – is a long-lasting and shared relationship in which a more experienced person (the mentor) guides and supports a less experienced person (the mentee) in their professional development.

Organizational Identity – how the organization's people (or members) understand who we are and what we value. Through a cultural lens, we can foster a culture that enriches the educational, racial, and ethnic experiences of students and staff.

Social capital – consists of networks of people and community resources; these peer connections and other social contacts can offer instrumental and emotional support for navigating society's institutions.

Servingness – the ability of Hispanic-Serving Institutions to enroll and educate Latinx students through a culturally enhancing approach that centers Latinx ways of knowing and being to provide transformative experiences that lead to academic and non-academic outcomes.

***Testimonio*s** – a first-person oral or written account drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something one bears witness.

The Academic Emotional Cabinet – is a metaphorical idea in which a person stores away emotional experiences from academia in a mental space.

The Institutional Dance of Serving – refers to the complex and often challenging role Latina women play in balancing the institution's needs with the community and student population they represent.

Transitional Identity – identity in which members make sense of an interim identity about who they are becoming.

ABSTRACT

"Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It should not be that women are the exception."- Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.
– Carmon & Lnizhnik, 2015, p.45

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Based on prior research and this study, it is evident that Latinas are significantly underrepresented in executive positions within Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Overcoming the challenges to progress beyond midlevel positions remains an issue, with very few Latinas able to attain senior leadership roles. This qualitative study uses *testimonios* (personal stories) as its primary methodology. It incorporates oral, written, and expressive *testimonios* with five carefully selected participants holding executive positions at an HSI in the southwest. The participants are referred to hereafter as *las ejecutivas*. For this study, executive positions encompass titles such as Assistant or Associate Vice Provost, Assistant or Associate Vice President, Vice Provost, and Vice President. The analytical framework was guided by Funds of Knowledge (FOK) and Social Capital (SOC) elements, highlighting how different aspects of marginalized identities intersect within the context of higher education. The main themes that emerged were: (1) Latinas greatly benefit from **mentorship** and sponsorship, which help break down barriers to advancement, advocacy, and empowerment; (2) Latinas derive invaluable support from their **families** and **cultural identity**, significantly impacting their **integrity** and **self-focus**; (3) Latinas face a unique set of **professional challenges** that stem from the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity; (4) Latinas struggle to reconcile the demands of their **professional roles** with their **familial responsibilities (work-life balance)**. The study examines the practical implications of its findings and provides recommendations for institutions to foster a more supportive environment for Latina professionals in higher education. It also provides strategies to help Latinas advance in their careers and offers advice for navigating the higher education landscape using their FOK and strengthening their SOC.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"I am a becoming-woman. I am earth, fire, water, and wind, and my spirit sings me to wholeness as I dance my spirit into joy. I am guided by my heart's intuition, and my heart is wise, generous, loving, and brave, even after withstanding assault upon assault."
– Latina Feminist Testimonios, 2001, p.132.

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Problem Statement

The Latinx population in the United States has experienced remarkable growth compared to other racial demographics. However, this growth must be reflected in the employee demographic at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), particularly for Latina women in executive roles. Latinas often encounter a career ceiling at mid-level positions, commonly referred to as "mid-career stagnation" (Engerman et al., 2022, p. 75), with very few advancing to executive levels (León & Nevarez, 2007; Menchaca et al., 2016; Montas-Hunter, 2012). Studies show that identity-related barriers and negative work experiences have hindered their advancement (e.g., A. Gonzalez, 2018; R. López, 2021; Matthews, 2022). Even those who have achieved executive administrative positions have had to navigate numerous obstacles and recognize that there will always be more challenges (Matthews, 2022; McGee, 2020). While there has been some progress in representation at the highest levels of traditionally white-male institutions, women of color in leadership positions remain a rarity (American Council on Education, 2020; Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022; Longman & Anderson, 2016; J. Miller, 2019). The few who have broken through the glass ceiling have often forged their unique path with the help of supportive mentors and family members (Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022; G.A. Garcia, 2023a; C. González, 2007; Onorato & Musoba, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999).

Minoritized administrators are often called upon to contribute to numerous committees, social justice initiatives, and other diversity-focused projects, often with limited resources (Montas-Hunter, 2012; Valverde, 2003). Despite the increased service burden and

emotional labor involved in fulfilling these responsibilities, these administrators often do not receive adequate recognition or rewards for their efforts (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). Additionally, they must navigate micro-aggressions and the effects of institutionalized oppression on their own identities (Shayne, 2017). The lack of resources available to these administrators limits their agency and forces them to resist systemic oppression by advocating for their racial and gender identities despite the personal toll. This segregation not only harms students by limiting access to necessary services, but it also harms staff by failing to provide the resources needed to combat burnout and inequality.

Purpose of the Study

This research study builds upon existing literature by exploring the impact of social capital (SOC) and funds of knowledge (FOK) on the personal and professional journeys of executive Latinas, referred to in this study as las ejecutivas (female executives). For this study, the executive positions that make up an *ejecutiva* include Administrative - Vice Presidents, Vice Provosts, Associate Vice Presidents, Associate Vice Provosts, Assistant Vice Presidents, and Assistant Vice Provosts. The purpose is to understand how their cultural background, knowledge, and community contributed to their success. Through this exploration, the study examines their career paths, sources of inspiration, support systems, and perspectives on how HSIs can be transformed to be more inclusive for Latinas. The study also considers the role of networks, culture, and values in their advancement. Ultimately, by gaining insight into these experiences, we can better understand institutions' role in shaping their career trajectories.

Most studies regarding HSIs have concentrated on students and the institution’s initiatives to promote a sense of belonging (e.g., Cuellar, 2014; G.A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; G.A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; I. Garcia, 2020). While HSIs ought to acknowledge their students’ culture and values, they should also prioritize those of their staff. According to

Gina Garcia (2020), this means enrolling and educating Latinx students with a culturally enhancing approach that centers on Latinx ways of knowing and being. This approach should also be extended to retaining, training, and supporting HSIs' staff. Some institutions have successfully implemented mentorship programs, fellowships, and professional development initiatives to address this issue. These efforts have led to improved retention of Latinx staff and the proactive transformation of institutions in serving their minority students and staff (G.A. Garcia & Natividad, 2018). This research does not explore the successful initiatives of North Star University; however, it highlights the importance of recognizing their staff's funds of knowledge and social capital, at least concerning *las ejecutivas* involved in this study.

Various works of literature (including those by Crespo, 2013; Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Menchaca et al., 2016; Montas-Hunter, 2012; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, among others) have explored the experiences of female executives in higher education institutions (HEIs). Nonetheless, there is still a need for advancement in theoretical frameworks and empirical studies regarding their experiences in HSIs. Being a woman in academia is already a challenge, and having multiple marginalized identities only adds to the difficulties of progressing and succeeding professionally, "a minority woman must walk between two worlds, the one framed by stereotypical traditions of the white-dominant culture and the one in which her ethnicity is rooted as part of an all-encompassing ethos" (Suarez-McCrink, 2002, p.240). This study sheds light on their journey and amplifies the voices of those silenced by oppression, hoping to pave the way for other Latinas with similar goals and aspirations. Additionally, it can help develop more effective ways to balance the obligations of serving the community, personal life, and fostering community ties, all while meeting institutional requirements.

This study highlights the urgent need for increased Latinx representation at all institutional levels, particularly in executive roles, to drive a transformation in HSIs, aligning

them with their intended purpose. As Gina Garcia (2023a) advocates, HSIs should be governed and led by people of color who identify with multiple marginalized identities (i.e., race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, language, and others), focusing on their knowledge from community-based initiatives to transform the organization. There are committed people of color in administrative positions who are eager to disrupt the systemic racism of their institutions but are often disempowered or burned out. The urgency and importance of this issue cannot be overstated. The lived experiences of these administrators should not be ignored, as they bear real consequences. Therefore, this research aims to unveil some of the experiences of Latinas who are making significant efforts to challenge the existing norms. The questions leading this research are:

1. What are the experiences of *las ejecutivas* in a Hispanic-Serving Institution regarding practices that encourage or deter their advancement, agency, and servingness?

2. To what extent do *las ejecutivas* leverage their social capital and use their funds of knowledge to advance professionally, exercise their agency, and enhance their service contributions (servingness)?

Gina Garcia's (2020) concept of 'servingness' is a crucial aspect of HSIs. Servingness refers to the ability of institutions not only to recruit and retain their Latinx students but also to serve them holistically in achieving their academic and personal success (G.A. Garcia, 2023a; G.A. Garcia, 2020; G.A. Garcia et al., 2019; G.A. Garcia & Cuellar, 2023; Núñez et al., 2015; Núñez et al., 2016). It highlights the significance of the 's' in HSI, emphasizing the institution's pivotal role in translating this concept into practice by addressing inequities for marginalized populations through culturally relevant practices and services (G.A. Garcia, 2023a; G.A. Garcia et al., 2019). Additionally, this study uses the theoretical frameworks of Funds of Knowledge (FOK) and Social Capital (SOC) to explore their roles in the journey of

las ejecutivas. The results are obtained through three distinct *testimonios* methods for data collection: oral, written, and expressive. *Testimonios* represent a crucial, diverse approach to educational research, offering both a framework and a theory centered on hope and liberation; they are "a first-person oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something to which one bears witness," (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p.525). *Testimonios* are deliberate and have political significance, intended to be shared rather than hidden; they aim to inform a particular issue, present a perspective, or serve as a vital call to action (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). These *testimonios* offer typical and authentic data based on personal and professional experiences, which can be analyzed alongside previous research and theories to provide significant recommendations for HSIs, other aspiring Latinas, and future research.

Throughout the research, some choices are based on personal preferences, and more favorable ones are found among higher education institutions. For instance, "Latinas," a Spanish term for Hispanic or Latina women, is used to maintain consistency. It is important to note that the terms "Hispanic" and "Latin" refer to a shared culture, ethnicity, and identity rather than physical characteristics such as skin color or race (Cuncic, 2021; I. G.A. Garcia, 2020). Therefore, this research study focuses on women from Latin America (Latinas) and not women from Spanish-speaking countries (Hispanas). However, many of these arguments can also be applied to other women and people of color. Moreover, the term "Latinx" is used as a gender-neutral term for individuals who identify with racial and ethnic backgrounds from Latin America, South America, Mexico, and certain areas of the Caribbean (Rodríguez, 2014; Salinas, 2015; Salinas Jr, 2020). It is also a professional preference, as it is widely recognized in most recent studies within the Latinx higher education community (e.g., G.A. Garcia, 2023a; Salinas & Lozano, 2019; Salinas Jr, 2020). Furthermore, the term "women" is used to discuss biases and stereotypes that are commonly applied within a male/female binary.

However, many of these challenges and arguments may also apply to nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals. This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the rationale for investigating HSIs, women, executives, and their interconnectedness. It reveals the significance of my interest in this research and its relevance to my experiences.

Why Me

My Identities

Staying impartial and avoiding biases is crucial, so I want to express my viewpoint clearly. My research topic stems from my challenge in comprehending how my multiple marginalized identities (i.e., being a woman, Latina, a person of color, a first-generation student, and having Spanish as my first language) have impeded my professional development and may persist in doing so. In light of this, it seems impossible not to include my personal experiences and feelings in my study. My interest in the intersectionality of marginalized identities was sparked during a course on 'Organization and Administration in Higher Education' taught by Dr. Gary Rhoades, who also serves as my academic advisor and chair of my dissertation committee. During the first week of the course, we discussed the concept of Cosmopolitan Vs. Locals, which highlighted how limiting it can be to stay within one's local community. This realization hit me hard, as all my degrees were earned locally, and I have worked at the same institution for almost fifteen years. I suddenly became aware of how this might increase the difficulties faced by marginalized individuals. I distinctly remember feeling defeated and thinking that achieving equality would be an uphill battle for women, particularly women of color like myself. Even as I pursued a doctoral degree, I was learning that my locality could still work against me.

While I recognize that many factors contribute to being an ideal candidate, studies and hiring trends clearly show that locality can significantly affect the decision-making process, as research universities rarely employ their own graduates for entry-level tenure-track

positions (Rhoades et al., 2008). The administration of HEIs also echoes this view for advancement, as Rhoades pointed out that students' choice to remain in their community "will reduce your opportunities for moving up…because in student affairs, too, the fastest path to moving up is moving away" (Rhoades et al., 2008, p.210). As a person who identifies with multiple marginalized identities (i.e., being a woman, Latina, a person of color, a first-generation individual, and having Spanish as my first language), I am already starting at a disadvantage. The cosmopolitan versus local argument made me realize that multiple marginalized identities can contribute significantly to the struggle. Women, in particular, face gendered inequities, and adding race to the equation forces many to obtain a greater terminal degree. I understood this early enough and have focused on setting myself apart by advancing my educational career, determined to overcome these unforeseen additional challenges.

I remember what my *abuela* said one day, "No se llega lejos deseándolo o esperándolo, si no trabajando duro" which means, "You do not get far in life by wishing or waiting, but by working hard." Therefore, I sought to delve deeper into the impact of multiple marginalized identities, including locality, on individual progress, rather than focusing solely on the local versus cosmopolitan debate. How do individuals facing these challenges overcome them? Who is providing them with the support and tools to succeed? These questions led me to focus my study on executive positions, specifically for Latinx women. Executive positions offer a platform for change, whereas managerial roles like mine carry significant responsibility but lack decision-making authority. While holding an executive position does not guarantee change or ensure their voices will be heard at the decision-making table, it does provide an opportunity for them to try.

My Experiences

My experiences have shaped my decision to pursue a Ph.D. and focus my research on Latina women in executive positions. From my middle school years of transitioning to the

U.S. educational system to entering the higher education professional field as a young adult and experiencing microaggressions, I have faced numerous challenges. As a middle school student, I was isolated due to my lack of language proficiency. In high school, I witnessed senior administrators expelling students who crossed the border from Mexico to the U.S. daily. As a young professional, I faced rejection for having an accent and being an outspoken employee, which did not meet their systemic oppressive standards. As a managerial professional, I have been overlooked due to racially coded hiring criteria that favor white normative measures for excellence. Early in my professional career, I faced discrimination due to my last name and accent. The hiring committee presumed that I was not a suitable candidate since the role emphasized customer service significantly; therefore, they preferred someone for whom English was the primary language. However, this preference was not specified in the minimum or preferred qualifications listed in the job posting. As a result, they minimized my language skills since my English was not considered "perfect."

Aside from my professional experiences, I credit my personal experiences for shaping me into a resilient woman. My family, particularly the inspiring women in it, has been my guiding example. Despite facing financial and societal hardships, I have persevered. I was born in Nogales, Sonora, but from an early age, I also established a life in Nogales, Arizona. Many of my family members lived in the United States, and others in Mexico, so it was normal for us to cross the border regularly. I first attended school in the U.S. during middle school, a decision made by my mother, who wanted me to have better opportunities after high school. Although it was difficult to be apart from her, I am grateful for the doors this decision opened and the development that later was instrumental in my growth.

My transition to middle school in Arizona was quite a cultural shock, with language barriers as the primary obstacle. Along with the school system, commute, and people, I faced the added challenge of relocating to live with my grandmother to have an Arizona address

and make the lengthy commute to school feasible. Unfortunately, my mother's multiple jobs prevented her from being able to transport me across the border. This separation from my mother was difficult to cope with at the age of 11, despite her constant presence in my upbringing. So, living during the week in another household only added to the hardship. Attending a school where I knew no one and was unfamiliar with the language and curriculum left me feeling like an outsider. Fortunately, I was able to form a few friendships with classmates who had similar experiences, having also moved from schools in Mexico and shared a common language, Spanish. Our shared English as a Second Language (ESL) classes fostered these friendships, where we could relate to each other's struggles and find a place where we felt comfortable.

As an ESL student, I experienced numerous microaggressions and direct aggressions from other students due to my limited language proficiency. I was unfairly stereotyped and labeled with derogatory terms that suggested I was unintelligent or illiterate simply because I had not yet mastered the language. Unfortunately, some teachers seemed to struggle with meeting the needs of English language learners and would become frustrated with our attempts to seek clarification. They did not want to "deal" with us. I recall one instance when I approached a Latinx male science teacher after class to ask a question, but I asked in Spanish. Despite being fluent in Spanish, he responded with a dismissive comment about the importance of speaking English in the U.S. At the time, I remained quiet and left the classroom, but looking back, I wish I had spoken up. It is not easy to revisit these memories and the emotions they evoke. Unconsciously, I had placed these memories deep within my mind so as not to recall the feelings of sadness, despair, and rejection.

In high school, I was fortunate enough to have my mother's permission to commute independently, which allowed me to move back to Sonora. Thankfully, the school had a bus stop near the border, making my journey easier. While the commute was a challenge, I was

grateful for the opportunity to live with my mother again. My home in Nogales, Sonora, was not exactly close to the border - my neighborhood, San Carlos, is about a 30-minute car ride away. Since I relied on public transportation, my commute often took over an hour. Occasionally, my mother would take me to the border early in the morning, and from there, I would walk three blocks to catch the school bus. School was still a harrowing experience due to bullying, loneliness, and aggression, but I was able to form strong friendships that lasted then and continue to this day.

Throughout my life, the theme of invisibility has been a recurring one. As a new student in middle school, I struggled with the language barrier, which led to an inadequate K-12 education, leaving me unprepared for college. I consistently felt out of place in the American education system. Likewise, taking an eight-year break between my Master's and PhD studies, I felt invisible compared to my classmates, who transitioned seamlessly. I often found myself unable to participate in discussions on theories and topics. In my professional life, I experienced invisibility due to race and gender segregation imposed by white cisgender male and female supervisors and the prevailing institutional norms. I often wonder if I will ever break free from this feeling of invisibility. Would I ever stop being invisible?

Despite these challenges, my experiences have contributed significantly to my knowledge and social connections, shaping me into the resilient individual I am today. These experiences have fostered a deep appreciation for the opportunities I pursue and those that come my way. As I embarked on this study, I was confident that my participants would also have unique stories to share about their personal and professional journeys. My inquisitive nature, individuality, and enduring commitment to equity and justice have compelled me to advocate for racial equality in all HSIs through this research. Hence, my work is informed not only by my own experiences but also by those of others, as well as through critical reflection.

The Women in My Life

As the youngest female in a predominantly male family, I was fortunate to have strong, independent women as role models. I was raised by an incredible LGBTQIA+ single mother who navigated societal norms and expectations to provide us with a loving upbringing. She is my primary example of resilience, perseverance, determination, and authenticity. My mother does not speak in detail about the struggles she faced as a young Lesbian woman in México in the 1980s. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been to come out to her very conservative and religious parents at the age of 18, fully aware that from that point forward, everyone would scrutinize her life and decisions. However, she did it because it was more important to live an authentic and happy life than an oppressed and ashamed one. This was an excellent example of me being true to myself, to what I want, and never worrying about the opinions of others. Unfortunately, she did not receive the immediate support of her parents, but eventually, they came around and accepted her. Of course, there were some microaggressions and inappropriate comments throughout her life from my grandparents. However, most of the family was very loving and open.

Another driving force of strength and identity was my grandma, my *nana.* She challenged traditional patriarchal norms by maintaining her independence through her work. My grandpa embodied the traditional Mexican machismo (i.e., a man who is aggressively proud of his masculinity) (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024), and Mexican culture valued machismo and strict gender roles (Anzaldúa, 1987). However, my nana refused to be a housewife, not that there is anything wrong with that, if it is your choice and not something forced upon you. I commend her for that, as it was not easy to go against societal norms in Mexico in the 60's. My nana's independence and strength came from my great-grandmother, Margarita Sesteaga Preciado. I wish I had known her at her young age. I only knew her for the first nine years of my childhood, so my memories are limited to her white hair and

beautiful, soft skin. However, the many stories I have heard about her upbringing show her toughness. For instance, she was the first female correctional officer in Mexico, and by all accounts, she excelled in her role, showcasing her courage and unwavering personality. I believe her sovereignty was passed down through generations to my nana, mom, and me, as we have all displayed confidence, resilience, and autonomy.

The culture and values I inherited from them have not only led me to explore the lived experiences of other women who share similar stories and goals, but they have also ignited a personal passion to advocate for gender equality. Sharing my *testimonio* on the support I received from the women in my life is not just a personal narrative but an essential part of understanding my research interest in women. I hope to shed light on the experiences of other Latinas so that those who follow in their footsteps can navigate the challenges they will encounter with knowledge and purpose.

My personal and professional experiences have shaped my research and equipped me to identify gaps in the literature, thereby advancing this study. As a professional in an HSI, I have witnessed racism and experienced microaggressions, giving me insight into the challenges these women have faced and the many more that were discovered through this narrative inquiry. I hope this study encourages readers to contemplate how Latinas can actively engage in the systems they are part of. Representation in leadership positions alone is not enough; we should focus on creating institutional structures that genuinely serve everyone.

Why Women

This study recognizes and honors the women who have dedicated themselves to serving the educational needs of all students in HSIs. By listening to and analyzing the narratives of Latina women, this study sheds light on their college and career paths in higher education. The findings reveal commonalities, such as how their institution affected or

supported their experience, what kept them resilient and focused, and many other aspects. The study focuses on Latina women who held executive positions during data collection, including Vice Presidents, Vice Provosts, Associate Vice Presidents, Associate Vice Provosts, Assistant Vice Presidents, and Assistant Vice Provosts.

Studying the life experiences of *las ejecutivas* was essential to understanding their unique knowledge as underrepresented women of color in a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Due to their gender, ethnicity, and other marginalized identities, Latinas are more likely than white women to face sexism, racism, wage disparities, uneven opportunities for advancement, and stereotyping (Núñez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012). A qualitative study done by Turner (2002) reveals that individuals with multiple marginalized identities experience the following:

> (1) Feeling isolated and underrespected; (2) salience of race over gender; (3) being underemployed and overused by departments and/or institutions; (4) being torn between family, community, and career; and (5) being challenged (p. 86).

The experiences of Latinas in HEIs are likely distinct from those of their male counterparts and white women (G.A. Garcia, 2019). Some studies (e.g., Acker, 2006; Ballenger, 2010; Johnson, 2017) acknowledge these variations but then group all women together without addressing their race or the challenges women of color encounter compared to their white female colleagues. It is also unfair to group women and men who identify as Latinx together, given the continued gender inequity that exists in the workplace, even if they are from the same race. Other studies (e.g., Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010) have reported that Latinas have experienced subordination by being doubted in their competencies, credentials, and capabilities. Women of color, including Latinas, are often viewed as overemotional, uneducated, and reactive (Anzaldúa, 1987; Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Montas-Hunter, 2012). Thus, Latinas'

representation in executive positions in higher education is minimal; it is more common for them to attain entry-level jobs often led by men (Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022). This lack of Latina representation may significantly impact students, staff, and the institution (Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022; Morales, 2019). The effects are more significant for institutions that aim to increase their diverse student populations and those that promote gender equality, such as HSIs. These are the systemic reasons why this study focused on women's narratives.

Why HSIs

The primary objective of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 and its subsequent reauthorizations is to support students and enhance the educational resources available to colleges and universities, doing so through the modern student aid program, such as the Federal Pell Grant (Shohfi et al., 2023). Additionally, the HEA paved the way for developing several designations that support students of color more significantly (Elfman, 2024b). The Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) designation was established in 1992 (Logan, n.d.). The increasing enrollment of Latinx college students between the 1980s and 1990s correlated with a significant shortfall in Latinx faculty, administrators, and resources (Logan, n.d.). As the disparity between student enrollment and faculty and staff numbers grew, advocates and policymakers recognized the need for targeted federal assistance for institutions with high Latinx student enrollments (Logan, n.d.). The designation enabled these higher education institutions to secure specific funding through Title III and Title V grants, which helped them expand educational opportunities and enhance their capacity to accommodate a larger student body, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (House, 2024). These extra funding options are essential because the per-student Federal funding at HSIs is 25% lower than that of other degree-granting institutions, and numerous reports indicate inadequate physical and digital infrastructures (House, 2024).

Despite the differences in funding, HSIs nationwide are still expanding and increasing their diverse student enrollment internally. HSIs are defined in federal law as accredited and degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education, with 25% or more of the total undergraduate Latinx full-time equivalent students enrolled (Title V Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program - Definition of an HSI -- Printable, n.d.). According to an infographic by Excelencia in Education (2023), there are currently 600 HSIs in 30 states and locations across the US, with a total enrollment of 4.2 million students, 1.45 million of whom are Latinx undergraduates. This significant increase from the 189 HSIs in 1994 underscores the growing importance of the HSI designation, which now represents 20% of all colleges and universities yet enrolls over 60% of Latino undergraduates (Excelencia in Education, 2023). This growth is a testament to the increasing diversity in higher education and the potential for more inclusive learning environments.

Institutions that receive the HSI designation become eligible for federal grants to improve educational opportunities and resources for Latinx students. However, this designation entails more than just grant eligibility. Institutions have both opportunities and obligations to serve the students they represent. The opportunity is to bring about change intentionally, a potential that can inspire hope. However, the obligation can be challenging, particularly for institutions needing help diversifying their practices. Many institutions struggle to implement practices beyond enrolling Latinx students due to the challenge of "transitional identity" (G.A. Garcia, 2017a, p. 128). That is, many HSIs began as predominantly white institutions (PWI) and have faced significant challenges in adapting their institutional practices to be tailored towards servingness. This struggle requires our understanding and support, as administrators often find themselves disempowered or burned out in their efforts to disrupt the systemic racism of their institutions.

The servingness concept encompasses the commitment and effectiveness of these institutions in serving Latinx students, addressing their unique needs, and promoting their academic success. Since its introduction, the term has gained widespread usage among HSIs, research, and academia (G.A. Garcia et al., 2019). This highlights the significance of HSIs' work in offering equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of their background. Nonetheless, attaining servingness can be problematic because no leadership frameworks are designed specifically for the Latinx community, and there is a lack of representation in administrative and faculty roles (G.A. Garcia, 2020). In G.A. Garcia, Núñez, and Sansone (2019), we are provided with a multidimensional, conceptual model for grasping servingness in HSIs based on how researchers have defined servingness in these institutions; their results indicate that servingess has been understood in four different groups:

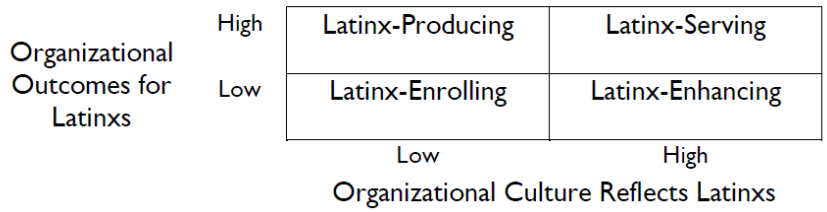
1. Academic and non-academic outcomes – Some examples of academic outcomes include GPA, course completion rates, graduation rates, and transfer rates. Non-academic outcomes are academic self-efficacy, social agency, and racial and leadership identity (p. 759).
2. Experiences – Positive experiences include interactions with peers of the same race or ethnicity, cultural validation, mentoring, and speaking Spanish. Negative experiences include racism, discrimination, harassment, and microaggressions (p. 760).
3. Organizational dimensions – developing mission and values, strategic and diversity plans, changing hiring practices, and advancement activities (p. 762).
4. External forces – decisions made through legislation, government boards, advocacy groups, and community leaders (p. 765).

Additionally, research by Gina Garcia (2016, 2023) and Scott, Muñoz, and Scott (2022) emphasizes that defining HSIs by a single identity can be complex. Gina Garcia

(2023), an expert on the subject, explains that HSIs can be found in every segment and type of higher education institution, ranging from research universities to Catholic institutions, urban to public, and comprehensive to broad-access institutions. Integrating leadership practices decolonized in HSIs requires that institutional leaders acknowledge students' perspectives, "identities, experiences, and socio-historical context, acknowledging their unique, intricate, and intersecting nature" (G.A. Garcia, 2023a, p. 7). These identities span multiple borders across history, time, and space (G.A. Garcia & Natividad, 2018). Prior research studies exploring the diversity of the Latinx community focus on five primary groups: Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and those from Central and South America (e.g., Rivera-Santiago, 1996; I. Garcia, 2020). However, the Latinx community is complex and diverse in many ways, including its history, cultural traditions, socioeconomic conditions, and language (Jaksic, 2015; Martinez & Núñez, 2023; Oboler, 1995). Scholars such as Suzanne Oboler (1995) have appropriately argued that acknowledging the unique histories and experiences of the group known as Latinos in the U.S. can enhance our understanding of their multiculturalism rather than "striping people of their historical identity and reducing them to imputed common traits," (Giménez, 1988 as cited in Oboler, 1995, p. 2). HSIs include diverse students beyond their race and ethnicity; they come from various backgrounds, different religions, low-income families, and are first-generation college students, among other characteristics, making their identities multifaceted. Moreover, some may fall under the non-traditional students classification, meaning they enroll one or more years after high school graduation or attend college part-time (Bowl, 2001). As a result, both Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and the Latinx community are intricate and diverse. Serving these students becomes even more challenging when considering the population disparity between them and the staff (G.A. Garcia, 2023a). Given the complexity of organizational identity, G.A. Garcia (2017a) proposes a practical typology relevant to policy

for classifying the organizational identities of HSIs and emerging HSIs. The Typology of the HSI scale includes (1) Latinx-enrolling (enrolling 25% minimum of Latinx students), (2) Latinx-producing (ensuring equitable college outcomes), and (3) Latinx-enhancing (creating an educationally enriching and welcoming culture), (4) Latinx-serving institution fulfills all three criteria (Franco & Hernández, 2018; G.A. Garcia, 2017a). Below is a figure from Garcia's research illustrating the dual scale of institutional proximity in achieving equitable outcomes and fostering a culture that enriches the educational and racial-ethnic journey of Latinx students.

Figure 1: Typology of Hispanic-Serving Institution organizational identities.



Note. The image was created to depict the typology, highlighting the multifaceted nature of organizational identities at HSIs. From "Defined by outcomes or culture? Constructing an Organizational Identity for Hispanic-Serving Institutions by Dr. Gina Garcia (p. 122), 2017, American Educational Research Journal. Copyright 2017 by AERA.

Gina Garcia's research examines the influence of campus culture on the development of a Latinx identity, primarily through the integration of culturally relevant modules, curricula, programs, and teaching methods that validate the perspectives and learning styles of Latinx students (Franco & Hernández, 2018). Recognizing this is important due to the disparity between the student and staff demographics and the influence it has on Latinx identity as the campus increasingly becomes Latinx-serving. Excelencia in Education provides excellent data showing the growth of HSIs and the impact this has nationwide. However, they focus solely on providing student enrollment and graduation numbers, the distribution of HSIs nationwide, and details on the racial and ethnic composition of the students. None of the reports provides data revealing the race and ethnicity of their faculty

and staff. It would be incredibly beneficial to have readily available comprehensive data on the 600 HSIs, their Latinx student population, and the corresponding faculty and staff population rates. This information would significantly assist in assessing diversity and inclusivity within these institutions. With this data, we can better understand current affairs, promote racial equity, advance social justice, and cultivate a more inclusive educational environment.

Despite each HSI's unique characteristics and diverse student population, they should all strive to provide exceptional support to Latinx students. However, institutions alone might not possess the necessary knowledge, resources, or personnel to cater to the student population's unique culture, values, and needs, rendering them ill-equipped to function effectively as HSIs. Nonetheless, some dedicated staff members who understand the needs of the Latinx student population often must put in the extra work required to serve their students effectively, despite having few resources and little support. The growing Latinx student population will not stop, but unfortunately, the staff and faculty will continue to fall behind, and with it, the adequate resources to meet the students' demands.

In order to effectively assist Latinx students and staff, HSIs need to adopt practical strategies that cater to their specific needs and assess the growth opportunities available for their Latinx faculty and staff. With a clear understanding of how to execute these strategies, HSIs can meet the needs of this vital community. Therefore, it is not just essential but also motivating and necessary for HSIs to develop and implement effective methods for serving their Latinx community.

Why North Star University

This research is especially significant in the Southwest, a prominent region, for two main reasons. First, it includes six of the top 10 states with the highest and fastest-growing Latinx populations (Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Oklahoma,

and Texas). Second, this region is home to several HSIs and emerging HSIs, which expanded the possibility of eligible participants and enhanced institutional diversity, making it an ideal setting for this research.

It is vital to recognize the significant differences in institutional diversity, mainly when conducting empirical research about the institution. North Star University (NSU), located in the Southwest, is a public, urban, research, and masters-granting institution. Table 1 below compares the student and staff demographics at NSU. The undergraduate enrollment is 42,075, with a compositionally diverse student body: 67.7% identify as white, 27.4% as Latinx or Hispanic, 9.7% as Asian, 7.3% as Black or African American, 3.6% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.9% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (The source is intentionally not disclosed as it would jeopardize the identities of the institution and the participants).

The diversity among faculty and staff is reasonably comparable to that of the undergraduate enrollment figures at NSU. However, it fails to break down the demographics of various employee categories, such as tenure-track and professional staff, compared to custodial and hospitality staff, who tend to be more diverse. With 16,699 employees, 70.9% identify as white, 25.2% as Hispanic or Latinx, 13.3% as Asian, 4.4% as Black or African American, and 3.8% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, which includes Hispanic or Latinx administrators, faculty, graduate assistants, and others (The source is intentionally not disclosed as it would jeopardize the identities of the institution and the participants). This comparison is not specific to job titles, but it is worth noting that the percentages are even lower for women, particularly at the executive level. The current definition of HSIs in the Title V grant competition does not prioritize institutional diversity (Núñez et al., 2016). However, research indicates that faculty and administrators at HSIs can significantly influence the sense of belonging among Latinx students, ultimately impacting their academic

performance (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; G.A. Garcia, 2017b). It can be argued that the political notion of HSI identity is overly simplistic as it does not consider these factors (G.A. Garcia, 2017a). Despite its compositional diversity, NSU has not kept up with the diversity of its faculty and staff. In 2013, approximately 19.1% of the staff were Hispanic or Latinx. This percentage reached its highest at 32.1% in 2019 but has since decreased consistently: 29% in 2020, 26.2% in 2021, 25.7% in 2022, and 23.4% in 2023 (The source is intentionally not disclosed as it would jeopardize the identities of the institution and the participants). It is worth noting that the highest-level Latina administrator was not hired until 2010. Recognizing that structural change takes time, NSU was still a good site for this study as it was actively involved in constructing its Latinx-serving identity when data collection began. The issue of student and staff disproportionate diversity is a significant concern that demands thorough analysis and discussion within this research study. However, further focus is also needed in future research.

Advocating for inclusion is essential, but it alone does not guarantee equality or create a safe space for all. While NSU may not fully reflect its student body's diversity, it is actively taking steps to better serve its students and staff. NSU is recognized for its innovative "grow your own" programs, which aim to educate future faculty and staff members with a focus on the Latinx perspective (G.A. Garcia, 2017a, p.26). These efforts are geared towards increasing diversity among the faculty and training Latinx administrators who are already positively impacting their students. NSU is driving changes aligned with the needs of the student population, including the provision of fellowship programs and projects that prioritize culturally responsive educational experiences, outreach initiatives for low-income high school students, culturally sensitive teaching methods, and programs that acknowledge the cultures and experiences of Latinx, Black, Indigenous, and other underrepresented student

communities. While HSIs cater to all people of color, this research study focuses specifically on the experiences of Latinx individuals.

Table 1: Institution Demographics

North Star University						
Undergraduate Demographics						
Total Headcount	**White %**	**Latinx or Hispanic**	**Asian**	**Black or African American**	**American Indian or Alaska Native**	**Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander**
42,075	67.7	27.4	9.7	7.3	3.6	0.9
Workforce Demographics						
Total Headcount	**White %**	**Latinx or Hispanic**	**Asian**	**Black or African American**	**American Indian or Alaska Native**	**Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander**
16,699	70.9	25.2	13.3	4.4	3.8	0

(The source is intentionally not disclosed as it would jeopardize the identities of the institution and the participants.)

Chapter One Conclusion

In this chapter, the issue of the underrepresentation of Latinas in executive positions was addressed. Gender inequality remains prevalent across various professions, and the advancement of women in HEIs is no exception. Despite some progress, the presence of women at all institutional levels does not necessarily imply equality in terms of wages, resources, representation, and power. To shed more light on women's experiences, particularly those with multiple marginalized identities at HSIs, further studies are not just necessary but imperative. Women deserve not only a seat at the table but also to be visible and heard. It is time for us to be ***Invisible No More.***

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience."
– Rudine Simms Bishop, 1990, p.5.

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This research examines the experiences of executive Latinas, also known as *las ejecutivas*, in their professional development, focusing on the significance of their funds of knowledge and social capital. This section examines the current literature to understand better the underrepresentation of Latinas in executive roles in higher education and the efforts that have led to change or lack thereof.

First, the literature review focuses on the evolution of the Latinx population in the U.S. and their experiences within higher education institutions (HEIs), emphasizing both progress and ongoing challenges. Second, it examines the internal dynamics of these institutions, particularly the continuing racial and gender biases that persist in higher education. Finally, the review highlights key findings from other studies regarding factors critical to advancing Latinas in higher education. The sources referenced in this comprehensive review are from 1957 to 2023, are diverse, and include influential works by prominent scholars such as Acker, Gouldner, Sewell, and Valverde. Despite their age, these texts provide valuable insights into higher education. The sources' methodologies, designs, and subjects vary widely, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Throughout the research study and this literature review, some choices are personal inclinations and preferences among higher education scholars. For instance, this review will use "Latinas," a Spanish term for Hispanic or Latina women, to maintain consistency. It is important to note that the terms "Hispanic" and "Latin" refer to shared culture, ethnicity, and identity rather than physical features such as skin color or race (Cuncic, 2021). Therefore, this review focuses on women from Latin America (Latinas) or Spanish-speaking countries

(Hispanas), but many arguments can be applied to other women and people of color (POC). The term “Latinx” is used in this research study as a gender-neutral term for individuals who identify with racial and ethnic backgrounds from Latin America, South America, Mexico, and certain areas of the Caribbean (Salinas Jr, 2020; Salinas, 2015; & Rodríguez, 2014). It is also a professional preference, as it is widely recognized in most recent studies within the Latinx higher education community (G.A. Garcia, 2023a; Salinas & Lozano, 2019; Salinas Jr, 2020). Furthermore, throughout this review, the term “women” is used to discuss biases and stereotypes that are commonly applied within a male/female binary. However, many of these challenges and arguments may also apply to nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals.

The Evolution of the Latinx Population in the United States and Their Experience in Higher Education Institutions

The Latinx population in the United States (U.S.) has experienced considerable demographic, cultural, and social change over the last century. With a history in the U.S. that predates the nation’s founding, the Latinx community has shown remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Significant waves of migration occurred in the 20th century, particularly following the Mexican Revolution (1910) and during the Bracero Program (1942-1964), which facilitated labor migration (Massey, 2012). According to the Pew Research Center (2019), the Latinx population reached 60 million in 2019, accounting for 18% of the U.S. population, with projections indicating continued growth. By 2060, this population is projected to reach 111.2 million, accounting for 28% of the total projected population, similar to the current population in Mexico (*U.S. Census Profile America Facts for Features,* 2018).

The southern territories, once governed by Mexico and Spain and inhabited by Native American tribes, became the ancestral home for many Latinx families. However, acquiring these territories after the Mexican-American War and the Gadsden Purchase in 1854 marked

a significant turning point (*The Gadsden Purchase and a Failed Attempt at a Southern Railroad*, 2022). Families living in these areas were suddenly surrounded by borders, exposing them to bigotry for generations. For many Latinx people, the border crossed them instead of the other way around. Today, this community represents the most significant minority and the fastest-growing population in the country, with some members born in the U.S. and others immigrating from various parts of Latin America.

Scholars like Gutiérrez (2008) emphasize the importance of recognizing the diversity within the Latinx community, including individuals from diverse countries of origin and cultural backgrounds. The Latinx community is an incredibly diverse group, representing 15 different countries. However, the American racial system integrates them into a single ethnic identity, assuming a level of uniformity and supporting a classification system; "Racialization is how society and the state assign individuals to racial groups and determine the relative positions of these groups... Racism depends on racial categories and the methods used to classify people within them" (Gómez, 2022, p.5). It was not until 1980 that the federal government began counting Latinx individuals, a practice that was not immediately embraced at the state and county levels (Gómez, 2022). This form of categorization perpetuates the subordination of Latinx individuals and reinforces the notion that they are perpetual foreigners rather than legitimate Americans. Martínez and Gonzalez (2021) describe this categorization as "panethnicity," typically formed through strategic partnerships between different ethnic groups, motivated by collaborative efforts and the aim to increase political power (p. 4). These practices can significantly impact the Latinx community and the broader American society.

It is worth noting that after 27 years, the U.S. Census plans to significantly change how it categorizes people by race and ethnicity (*U.S. Census Changes How It Identifies People by Race And Ethnicity, Creates Middle Eastern Category For First Time*,

2024). This update aims to more accurately represent the Hispanic population and those of Middle Eastern and North African descent. While this initiative is a positive step toward inclusivity, the racial and ethnic categories are still social and political constructs.

Latinx Experiences in Higher Education

Early studies have shown that Latinx professionals face systemic barriers, such as discriminatory hiring practices and limited access to higher education (A. Gonzalez, 2018). They also deal with cultural isolation, struggle for visibility, microaggressions, and systemic biases (Blithe & Elliott, 2020; R. López, 2021). As a result, this population continues to be underrepresented at all levels of higher education institutions (HEIs). Previous research highlighted that some of this population's challenges include the need for more mentorship and professional growth opportunities (Sanchez, 2019). Thus, the argument is for institutional policies that foster equity and assist Latinx faculty and staff.

Cristina González (2007) addresses the challenges faced explicitly by marginalized staff. She introduces the concept of "sustainable power" to emphasize the importance of Latinx scholars creating and maintaining a lasting influence in academia (p. 62). González contends that by tackling systemic barriers, promoting changes within institutions, and establishing robust support networks, marginalized scholars can foster a more just and inclusive campus climate. However, she also states that sustainable power requires a long-term commitment to structural change, especially because many institutions resist change, as change may be interpreted as relinquishing power. Additionally, many institutions lack mechanisms that empower marginalized staff to influence decision-making processes. Another contributor to a campus climate and practice that results in a marginalized workplace where minority staff feel their voices and contributions are not valued.

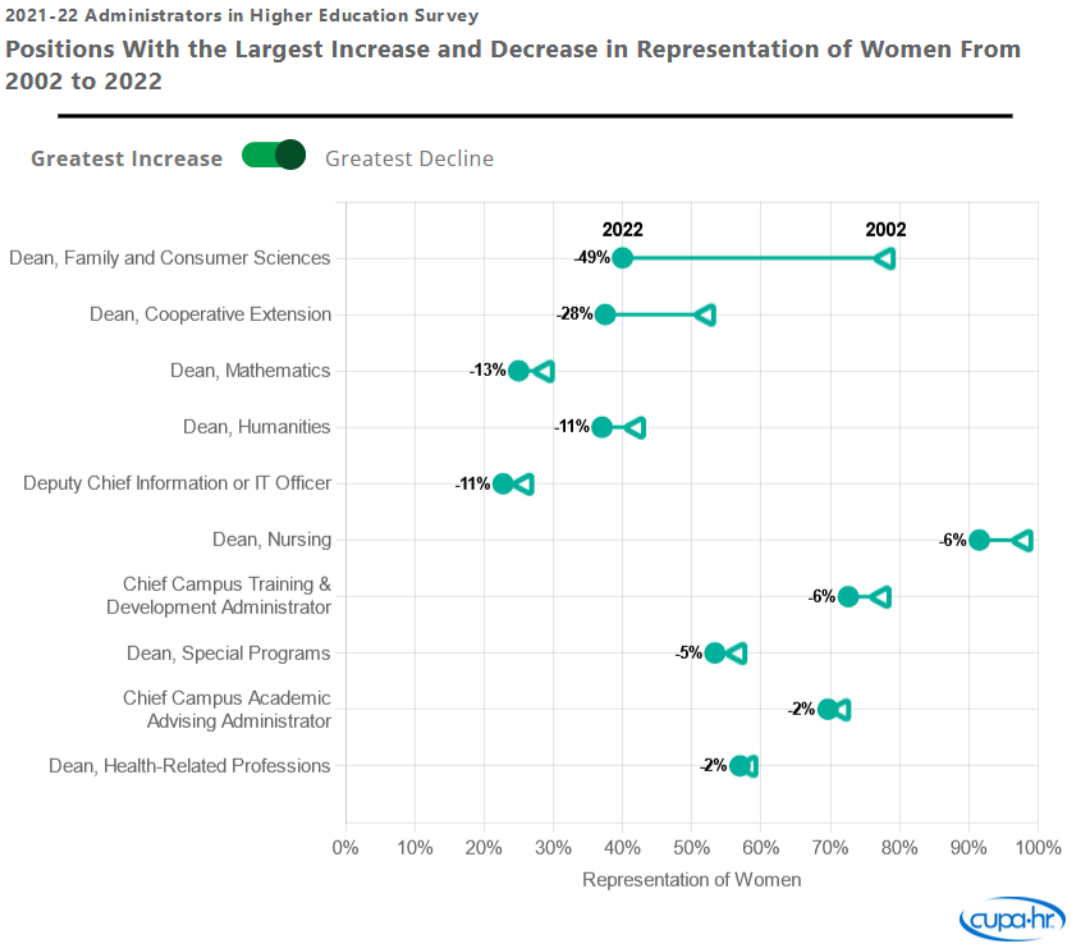
Despite these obstacles and constant challenges, Latinx faculty and staff significantly contribute to higher education. They often play an essential part in improving the campus

climate for Latinx students, serving as mentors and advocates (Cruz, 2022). They enrich the educational setting and curriculum with their cultural views and personal experiences, fostering a more inclusive atmosphere and learning environment (Hurtado & Wong, 2015). Furthermore, they are instrumental in creating programs that intentionally address the needs of underrepresented student populations and promote diverse initiatives (Rojas, 2020).

The rise of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) in the 1980s marked a pivotal moment. These institutions aimed to serve and support Latinx students. As mentioned in Chapter 1, HSIs are colleges and universities where at least 25% of the student body identifies as Latinx, a designation established in 1992. Nevertheless, HSIs are not historically committed to serving Latinx students (G.A. Garcia et al., 2019). However, what does it mean to serve Latinx students? Gina Garcia, who has conducted significant research on "servingness," defines this concept as "the ability of HSIs to enroll and educate Latinx students through a culturally enhancing approach that centers Latinx ways of knowing and being, to provide transformative experiences that lead to both academic and non-academic outcomes." (G.A. Garcia, 2020, p.15). However, to achieve these academic and non-academic outcomes, the representation of Latinx staff needs to reflect the demographics of the student population better (Miller, 2019). While the lack of representation of Latinx staff has improved, from 2012 to 2022, it increased from 13% to 18%, and women of color from 7% to 10% (CUPA, 2022). Titles that saw the most significant growth in women's representation often started with a notably low number of women in 2002, and many of these roles are deanships (CUPA, 2022) (See figure 2). The CUPA report also notes that while there has been an increase in representation for specific roles, there is no link between the changes in representation and adjustments in pay equity. The challenges presented before remain part of current systemic practices affecting the campus climate, access, and retention (ACE, 2020; Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022; Longman & Anderson, 2016; Miller, 2019).

Acknowledging the low representation of Latinx administrators proposes that the federal criteria for HSI designation fail to accurately represent the necessary components for supporting Latinx students at the institutional level (Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022). It is critical to match the diversity of the student population to ensure that HEIs remain inclusive and intellectually stimulating, especially at HSIs, as they play a significant role in their success (Flink, 2018).

Figure 2.



This figure was obtained from CUPA (2022). All figures in the CUPA report are animated and informed on composition and trends for administrators, including representation, pay, and position variation. This figure shows the most notable position increases in the representation of women.

Higher Education Institutions

The intersection of race and gender significantly influences the experiences of Latinx staff within Higher education institutions (HEIs). This literature review presents the

racialization and gendering practices that affect marginalized groups' institutional environment, decision-making, and professional advancement.

Racialized Organizations

The term racialization pertains to the societal processes that assign racial identities and stereotypes to individuals and groups, shaping how they are treated and what opportunities are available to them within institutions (Ray, 2019), as discussed below. HEIs play a crucial role in facilitating social mobility, producing knowledge, and transmitting culture, thus promoting various learning approaches and exposing students to different viewpoints (Valverde, 2003). Nevertheless, studies show that HEIs can also function as places where institutional racism occurs, with policies and practices upholding racial inequalities (Cabrera, 2014; Garcia, 2018; Scott et al., 2024). The organization of HEIs often gives priority to the interests of dominant groups (G.A. Garcia, 2019), leading to the presence of organizations that are influenced by race (Ray, 2019) and gender (Onorato & Musoba, 2015; Sewell, 1992). These consequences are visible in the student and staff populations, where race and gender act as dividing factors that impact work, salaries, conduct, and environments (Acker, 1990). The racialization of HEIs has strong historical ties to colonialism and systemic racism. Scholars such as García (2019) argue that the historical exclusion of marginalized groups from higher education has created a lasting legacy of inequity. This particularly impacts African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and other racialized communities, including Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and those of mixed race. These groups face numerous barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education, such as racism, discrimination, microaggressions, sexism, stereotyping, and harassment (Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022).

Racialization manifests in various institutional practices, including admissions processes, curriculum design, and faculty hiring. Research by Orbe (2004) shows that

standardized testing and admissions criteria can disadvantage students from marginalized backgrounds, while a lack of diversity in curricula often reflects a Eurocentric viewpoint, marginalizing the contributions of racially diverse communities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Victor Ray (2019) further highlights how segregation and racial hierarchies within these organizations affect decision-making, leading to the underrepresentation of marginalized groups, particularly in leadership roles. His Racialized Organizations Theory (ROT) draws on the work of Sewell and Bonilla-Silva (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Sewell, 1992; Wooten, 2006) to illustrate how organizations reproduce and challenge processes of racialization through four key tenets: (1) Racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups; this tenet suggests that how HEIs operate can either limit or empower the agency of racial groups (Ray, 2019). For example, people of color (POC) may encounter implicit biases that hinder their career advancement, such as being overlooked for promotions. Consequently, this diminishes their agency as they find themselves restricted in decision-making; (2) Racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources; this tenet proposes that they often justify the unequal access to resources through practices or policies (Ray, 2019). These issues arise from failing to correct disparities in hiring practices, promotions, or compensation, for example, primarily appointing white executives while relegating or retaining POC in lower-level roles. (3) Whiteness is treated as a credential; this tenet indicates that being white or conforming to white norms is recognized as a qualification for gaining power, status, and resources (Ray, 2019). For instance, an institution hiring or promoting white individuals because of their implicit bias that views whiteness as competent, professional, and the preferred choice. Lastly, (4) the decoupling of formal rules from organizational practices is often racialized; this tenet suggests that on the surface, rules at racialized organizations may appear race-neutral or inclusive, but their practice differs from these rules in ways that disadvantage racial minorities (Ray, 2019). For example, many

institutions have diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) offices and/or policies stating that all employees should have equal opportunities. However, in reality, racial minorities may be left out of informal networks, "i.e., old boys club," receive unfair performance evaluations, or face microaggressions that hinder their chances of success.

Moreover, the underrepresentation of faculty and staff of color, particularly in administrative positions, supports this significant systemic problem (Matthews, 2022). Gina Garcia (2023) points out that while many Latinx individuals hold lower-level positions, they encounter significant barriers in ascending to executive roles, reflecting a pattern of marginalization within institutional structures. These patterns frequently arise from systemic obstacles that generate unequal chances for racial minorities. These barriers include stereotypical assumptions impacting their professional advancement, particularly their work ethic and leadership abilities. Another common one is questioning their abilities or being passed over for a promotion, even with better qualifications, due to leadership being linked to traits typically ascribed to white men. (e.g., assertiveness, confidence).

Valverde (2003) stresses the need for institutional change to align more closely with the student body's demographics and local community. Agents of change, often POC, are at the forefront of this effort, striving to enhance the lives of minority individuals and to promote their autonomy. However, as Dr. Gary Rhoades states, "agency is a collective enterprise and a marathon," as they face substantial responsibilities and challenges, especially in predominantly white institutions resistant to change (Ray, 2019). As a result, these agents are frequently perceived as "oppositional individuals" (Blitz & Kohl, 2012, p. 494; Bazner, 2021, p. 10). For example, when a white director challenges tradition and authority to implement new approaches, they are often labeled as innovative; conversely, if a director of color attempts the same, they are more likely to be perceived as oppositional or conflict-driven (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). Consequently, white individuals tend to be more at ease, making

independent choices and disregarding rules for the collective benefit. However, this can also lead to issues; their actions are often viewed as "taking the initiative" (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). Despite this oppressive climate, POC remains dedicated to underrepresented communities and the pursuit of racial justice and equality.

However, those advocating for equity and justice often compromise with long-standing institutional norms, making their work highly emotional and isolating (Arminio et al., 2024; Bazner, 2021; Valverde, 2003). One common way in which they compromise is through resource allocation. POC, including Latinx administrators, often push for increased funding and resources that benefit minority students, but they frequently encounter limitations due to existing institutional priorities. Thus, they settle for what they can get (Ray, 2019; Vega et al., 2022). Another way they compromise is through policy implementation. Latinx administrators who aim to promote equity and justice might suggest policy modifications that tackle problems such as resource accessibility, diversity, curriculum representation, and recruitment methods. For instance, they could advocate for a policy that promotes increased involvement from underrepresented groups in committees (Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019; Vega et al., 2022). Nevertheless, they might encounter resistance from individuals claiming the policy is unjust or will result in unnecessary quotas. This represents a typical institutional behavior for fear of losing existing power dynamics. Many institutions oppose meaningful change, prioritizing the maintenance of power and control, which hinders the promotion of equal opportunities (Ray, 2019; Vega et al., 2022). This resistance manifests as artificial barriers to advancement for POC, commonly called the 'glass ceiling,' a phenomenon where "their advancement is artificially halted before they can reach the top positions" (Valverde, 2003, p. 12). The journey toward a multicultural campus requires exposing and addressing persistent segregated practices (Valverde & Castenell, 1998).

Achieving a multicultural campus involves exposing and addressing ongoing segregated practices (Valverde & Castenell, 1998).

Despite seeming to support a reasonable number of Latinx staff, some institutions do so from a Latinx-neutral perspective, disregarding the unique experiences of Latinx staff and failing to nurture an inclusive culture, thus hindering servingness initiatives (G.A. Garcia, 2017a; G.A. Garcia, 2023b). As explained in Chapter 1, servingness is achieved in various forms when institutional practices reduce inequities for marginalized populations (G.A. Garcia, 2019). Improving campus climate through increased representation is crucial, as research shows that students' perceptions of campus climate significantly influence their persistence (G.A. Garcia, 2017a). By examining institutional identity from a cultural standpoint, we can create an environment that enriches the educational, racial, and ethnic experiences of both students and staff. While enhancing staff compositional diversity may not entirely solve gender and race disparities, it can potentially develop individuals who actively challenge the existing status quo.

Cristina González (2007) calls on the Latinx community to actively participate in university practices and demand the proper "development of Latinx academic leaders" (p. 1). According to her research, Latinx individuals are often denied advancement opportunities because their white counterparts perceive them as newcomers, unprepared, and lacking power. The core issue, however, is that institutions frequently do not provide the resources necessary for fostering Latinx professional development. Instead, Latinx individuals are often hired to fulfill minority quotas, leading to tokenism (Valverde, 2003; Montas-Hunter, 2012). González argues that institutions should identify areas where Latinx representation is lacking as a mechanism to fill gaps; however, this approach risks reinforcing tokenism. Increasing Latinx representation should prioritize competence, qualifications, and contributions rather than simply meeting quotas. Additionally, Latinx professionals often face greater

expectations, such as obtaining advanced degrees and engaging in various community activities to be considered significant and gain visibility. González contends that white individuals tend to associate power with competence, creating an unfair standard that complicates advancement for Latinx individuals.

Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of mobility, suggesting that Latinx individuals should be willing to leave their local communities to enhance their advancement prospects. Other scholars, such as Gouldner (1957), have argued that remaining local can limit an individual's chances for career progression, as broader, cosmopolitan experiences may offer more opportunities. However, Rhoades, Kiyama, McCormick, and Quiroz (2008) contend that staying local can symbolize loyalty to the organization and the local community. Many individuals remain local for various personal reasons, particularly among minority groups. For many Latinx individuals, staying close to home is not always about loyalty but more about the support systems provided by family and friends with similar values and cultures. Remaining local can provide the resilience needed to tackle the challenges associated with marginalized identities while exploring new career possibilities. Although progress has been made in recent years, racialized groups, particularly those facing gender-based discrimination, continue to encounter significant barriers to achieving full integration within their communities and workplaces.

Gendered Organizations

Joan Acker (1990 & 2006) noted that organizational structures are not gender-neutral, making workplace diversity an ongoing research focus. In her 2006 work, Acker introduces the idea of inequality regimes, which she describes as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (p.443). She contends that organizations are not neutral entities; they are shaped by power dynamics that dictate how individuals are treated

and regarded. Acker emphasizes the need to recognize systemic inequalities (i.e., class, race, and gender) to address them effectively. She describes class inequalities as "enduring and systematic differences in access to and control over resources for provisioning and survival" (p. 444); these inequalities arise as work activities are performed and defined. Race inequalities are "differences based on physical characteristics, culture, and historical domination and oppression" (p. 444). Finally, gender inequalities represent socially established distinctions between men and women; women are often required to conform to masculine standards of teamwork and work commitment, alongside facing pay discrepancies and variations in job roles (Acker, 2006). The classifications of race and gender among jobholders help determine who qualifies for specific positions. Typically, roles held by women are situated at the lower end of the hierarchy with lesser compensation, as workplace structures are modeled after a white male figure dedicated solely to work without additional responsibilities. Nevertheless, Acker points out that many of these disparities may be intentional or unintentional; they stem from unexamined beliefs and deeply rooted norms. Consequently, Acker advocates for initiatives to bring inequality to the forefront and address it by modifying organizational policies, structures, and cultures.

Similarly, my study aims to accomplish intersectional research in line with Ackers' and other studies (e.g., Crenshaw, 2013; Franco & Hernández, 2018), incorporating race, ethnicity, and culture. Intersectional analysis is fundamental in higher education, where the gendering of institutions complicates the landscape for staff members. Gender biases overlap with racial ones, resulting in compounded challenges for women of color. Research has examined several contributing factors, including campus racial climate (G.A. Garcia, 2016; Franco & Hernández, 2018), leadership identity development (Onorato & Musoba, 2015), and the absence of sustainable power (C. González, 2007). McGee (2020) emphasizes that institutional practices often overlook the implications of both gender and race, leading to a

lack of representation and support for marginalized groups. This oversight fosters a campus climate that can be unwelcoming and hostile, particularly for women of color who face various forms of discrimination.

The racial climate on campus significantly influences the staff's experiences. Studies have shown that a hostile campus climate can significantly affect job satisfaction and retention rates among staff members from minority groups (G.A. Garcia, 2016; Franco & Hernández, 2018). Gina Garcia's (2016) research highlights the necessity for HSIs to enhance inclusivity in their diversity efforts, acknowledging that the racial environment affects students and staff across all racial and ethnic groups. Moreover, it emphasizes that the institution's mission must be inclusive rather than exclusive. Additionally, she argues that staff experiences indicate that, even in organizations where racial or ethnic identity is a key part of their mission, there is frequently insufficient training, support, or resources to effectively address issues related to racial climate (G.A. Garcia, 2016). Franco and Hernández (2018) similarly highlight that there is a gap between the HSI identity and the actual resources, policies, and practices that significantly affect the academic achievement and well-being of Latinx students. One of the main arguments presented in the article is the difference between "compositional diversity" (pp. 62-63) (having a high number of Latinx students) and institutional capacity (p. 69) (the genuine ability to serve and support these students effectively). The article points out various challenges that HSIs encounter in becoming genuinely supportive environments for Latinx students; one primary concern is the insufficient diversity among faculty and the lack of culturally relevant resources (Franco & Hernández, 2018). Latinx students frequently express that the lack of faculty members who share or comprehend their experiences can lead to feelings of isolation, marginalization, and a hostile campus climate (Franco & Hernández, 2018). Institutions with a hostile campus climate can worsen feelings of isolation and marginalization among minority staff, too,

creating a cycle where these groups feel unsupported and undervalued, ultimately leading to higher turnover rates and lower morale. Understanding the effects of racialization and gendering in this context requires an intersectional approach. Crenshaw (2013) introduced the concept of intersectionality to explain how overlapping social identities shape individual experiences of discrimination and privilege.

For instance, Onorato and Musoba (2015) determined that women of color often encounter exclusion from mentorship and leadership networks, which are crucial for professional advancement. This demonstrates that women of color face distinct challenges stemming from their racial and gender identities. This dual marginalization (same as the participants of this study) often plays a crucial role in exclusion, and it goes beyond mentorship; they face institutional barriers that are present in bias, microaggressions, and lack of cultural competence within leadership structures (Onorato & Musoba, 2015). This may lead these women to approach leadership roles in unique ways, frequently putting in more effort to demonstrate their value, conforming to a leadership model that might not resonate with their cultural principles, or continually shaping their identity in ways their colleagues do not need to. They also highlight that this exclusion, while not intentional, is exacerbated by the insufficient representation of women of color in influential roles, making it harder to cultivate their leadership identity.

Several other studies on the advancement of women (Hart, 2016; León & Nevarez, 2007; Menchaca et al., 2016) highlight the significance of mentoring, engagement, and geographical mobility for achieving success. Nevertheless, women often find themselves overcommitted in efforts to remain visible and relevant for advancement opportunities. Despite their efforts, some literature indicates that women are often overlooked for advancement due to sexist stereotypes associating them with sensitivity and passive behavior (Montas-Hunter, 2012). Sonja Montas-Hunter focuses on the intersectionality of self-efficacy

(which she defines as the belief in one's capacity to achieve goals), leadership, and the experiences of Latina leaders in academic settings. She acknowledges that gender-based biases impact the professional trajectories of Latina leaders in higher education, biases such as Latina being viewed as too emotional, passive, or submissive to hold authoritative positions. However, they are still expected to fulfill the leadership role by constantly proving their competence, a phenomenon referred to as a "double bind" (Montas-Hunter, 2012, p. 320). The double bind is the "requirement that women be communal and avoid directive and assertive behavior, but at the same time requires that effective leadership include agentic behaviors" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 104). As a result, women in leadership roles frequently juggle their time and responsibilities while also managing their behaviors, occasionally making sacrifices in their leadership styles (Montas-Hunter, 2012). Women, specifically Latinas, have faced intimidation and oppression throughout their lives, starting with machismo, which is the dominance of men over women's voices and growth (Anzaldúa, 1987; Montas-Hunter, 2012). This dominant mindset can lead to feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and discomfort with self-efficacy, making it difficult for Latinas to acknowledge their academic achievements. This struggle with self-efficacy is critical for assessing one's capabilities. By applying Bandura, Freeman, and Lightsey's (1999) self-efficacy theory, Montas-Hunter highlights the significance of a strong sense of self in establishing effective leadership. For Latinas seeking executive positions, connecting their cultural values with those of the majority is essential, but it requires a strong sense of identity and authenticity. This study noted that *las ejecutivas* indicated that mentoring and family support were crucial for their advancement and leadership development (Montas-Hunter, 2012). Representation and recognition, seeing someone who shares their values and background, was a powerful motivator for these women to pursue leadership roles. Support from family and friends was invaluable to their confidence and determination, instilling hopes of becoming advocates and

role models for other Latinas. However, Montas-Hunter acknowledges that self-efficacy alone cannot diversify leadership; institutions must commit to providing tailored professional development opportunities, diversity training workshops, and programs that strengthen support networks for Latinas, allowing them to express and address their unique challenges. This institutional support is crucial for the advancement of Latinas in leadership roles.

Similarly, Bazner's (2021) study addresses the stereotypes attributed to women. It introduces the concept of the "weaponization of tears" (p. 577). This term denotes a particular form of emotional labor and reaction to experiences shaped by race, frequently impacting marginalized individuals within institutional environments. The difference is that Bazner's study explores the lived experiences of mid-level student affairs administrators. He delves into the challenges faced by this specific population, and not surprisingly, they are pretty similar to what has been discussed before. These mid-level professionals navigate the uncertainty of not being at the highest or entry-level, dealing with unique tensions, and remaining in the mid-level for many years. (Bazner, 2021). Bazner contends that their racial and gendered experiences involve institutional expectations, microaggressions, isolation, a lack of mentorship, and emotional distress. This further illustrates the emotional toll of being a racialized and gendered administrator in higher education and stresses how institutions exploit these emotional responses to maintain the current order.

This gendered issue of viewing women as deficient or doubting their skills is an old practice, and it was even worse in the 80s. Suarez-McCrink (2002) illustrated how the patriarchal practices of the '80s viewed women as inherently deficient in powerful intellectual pursuits. She addresses Hispanic women's challenges, including socio-economic status and cultural expectations, but emphasizes the importance of building confidence and fostering self-efficacy. The Suarez-McCrink research is significant as it indicates that patriarchal customs significantly influenced societal perceptions of women, strengthening

conventional gender roles. Over many years, erasing these beliefs has required significant effort and advocacy. The article accurately criticizes the historical patriarchal practices that have sustained the idea that women, especially Hispanic women, require “fixing” and promotes a shift towards fostering self-efficacy and confidence (Suarez-McCrink, 2002).

In addition to the importance of self-efficacy, the studies by Helgesen (1990) and Robinson and Lipman-Blumen (2003) suggest that qualities traditionally associated with women, such as nurturance and empathy, can promote cooperation and trust in managerial roles, enabling them to provide a more holistic and mindful approach to program and policy development. Sally Helgesen (1990) examines the distinct attributes that women contribute to the workplace, including emotional intelligence, which is advantageous for leadership positions. She indicates that women frequently adopt leadership styles that allow for better interpersonal relationships within teams (Helgesen, 1990). This invites open communication, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging. Empathetic leadership focuses on understanding the needs of your employees and showing that you genuinely care, increasing the morale and trust of your employees (Helgesen, 1990). Helgesen emphasizes that these qualities are advantageous when women occupy leadership positions, and they are not just practical but also critical for the long-term success of organizations.

Likewise, Robinson and Lipman-Blumen (2003) explore how gender affects leadership styles and behaviors in managerial positions. In this article, they compare and discuss the leadership styles of both men and women, along with common stereotypes associated with each. They emphasize that men tend to adopt a more hierarchical and direct leadership style, whereas women generally prefer a participative approach (Robinson & Lipman-Blumen, 2003). Like Helgesen, they argue that women’s empathy, emotional intelligence, and relational skills are beneficial traits as they foster trust, collaboration, and effective team communication. Because of this, women can connect on a personal level with

their employees because they are better equipped to understand their concerns (Robinson & Lipman-Blumen, 2003). They also argue that women's leadership style fosters an environment of cooperation rather than competition and control, leading to a more supportive atmosphere. These traits can assist in alleviating power struggles, minimizing conflicts, and fostering a healthier, more efficient workplace. Although both of these studies are older, they are still relevant to the continued attributes that women bring to any organization.

It is safe to conclude that HEIs are complex organizations that have been historically shaped with a specific race and gender in mind. While progress has been made in addressing these inequities, challenges remain. Ongoing research and advocacy are instrumental in progressing inclusive environments that support the development and success of all individuals, regardless of their racial or gender identity. As HEIs grapple with these issues, thoroughly examining their structures, policies, and practices will be crucial in advancing equity and justice in education.

Representation of Latinas in Higher Education Leadership

The representation and advancement of Latinas in higher education is a problematic issue influenced by multiple connected factors, including agency, networking, and systemic barriers. This literature review synthesizes understandings from various studies that address the lack of representation of Latinas in executive positions, the role of agency and networking in their career advancement, and the significance of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) in fostering an inclusive educational environment. By integrating these perspectives, we can better understand Latinas' challenges and the strategies that may enhance their success in higher education.

Despite the growing number of Latinas in higher education, their representation in executive roles is still lacking. Data indicates that Latinas fill a minimal percentage of senior administrative roles, reflecting longstanding patterns of racial and gender discrimination

(American Council on Education, 2020; Arredondo, 2011; Morales, 2019). Drawing data from the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2022, those holding full-time faculty status in the United States colleges and universities, including two-year institutions, were 72% white, 13% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 7% African American, and 6% Latinx, specifically 3 percent each female and male. The distribution of racial/ethnic backgrounds and gender among full-time faculty differed depending on the academic rank at degree-conferring postsecondary institutions in the fall of 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Looking at senior-level leadership, based on data from the CUPA-HR *Administrators in Higher Education Survey* from 2001-02 through 2021-22, women hold just 33% of U.S. college and university presidencies. The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA) *Higher Ed Administrators: Trends in Diversity and Pay Equity From 2002 to 2022* report indicates that the composition by race/ethnicity and gender across 27,935 administrators and at least 909 institutions reported that the representation of POC in higher education [from combined groups] comprised 18% of administrators. In the same report, it is indicated that women of color comprised 10% of administrators. Looking into women of color senior leadership positions, the composition was among presidents, 5%, provosts, 9%, and chief human resources officers (CHROs), 17%. In examining these three executive roles, the percentage of Latinx women in CHRO positions is more significant, at 6%, compared to the 3% representation found among provosts and presidents (*Higher Ed Administrators: Trends in Diversity and Pay Equity From 2002 to 2022*, November 2023). These data show that representation of women among administrators has steadily increased, but minorities are still underrepresented in executive positions like the ones *las ejecutivas* represent. The CUPA (2022) data also indicates that little progress was made in pay equality for women in the 20-year comparison. Although this is alarming, it is a fact for future research on the continued gender pay gap.

Historically, Latinas have faced many challenges due to their intersecting identities, further marginalizing them in academic leadership (Arredondo, 2011; M. López, 2017). A few of those challenges are structural barriers, a lack of mentorship, and cultural expectations. For instance, institutional practices that favor established networks often disadvantage Latina candidates (Bensimon, 2007). Additionally, the shortage of mentors who can provide proper guidance and advocacy further limits advancement opportunities for Latinas (Crisp & Nunez, 2014). Lastly, cultural norms related to familial obligations and gender roles may deter Latinas from pursuing leadership positions (Valenzuela, 1999).

Research suggests that the inclusion of Latinx staff and faculty at all levels of an institution positively impacts the academic success of Latinx students, significantly influencing their sense of belonging (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Milem, 2015). Students have expressed that the absence of representation on campus detracts from their experience, while having relatable faculty and administrators fosters security, motivation, and inspiration (Franco & Hernández, 2018). The need for connection and support from individuals with similar experiences underscores the importance of diverse personnel.

A recent study by Shon, Perry, Elmore, and Mendelsohn (2023) identified a “positive matching effect” when students and faculty share similar racial and ethnic backgrounds (p.1). However, many HSIs are inadequately equipped to support Latinx students, as these institutions were not originally designed with their needs in mind (Scott et al., 2022; G.A. Garcia & Natividad, 2018). Some HSIs received their designation from the benefits of their geographical location rather than through deliberate planning, resulting in a lack of effective strategies to fulfill their designation (Scott et al., 2022). Consequently, many engage in performative whiteness, for instance, issuing statements or strategies that suggest a commitment to racial justice and equity without enacting substantial changes (Scott et al., 2022). These practices are ultimately unsuccessful in serving Latinx students and instead

result in superficial attempts at inclusivity. HSIs must fundamentally reevaluate their policies and practices to genuinely serve Latinx students, from mission statements to curricular offerings (G.A. Garcia, 2017a). Gina Garcia (2017a) suggests that institutions can achieve this by (1) embracing cultural identity and acknowledging and celebrating their students' cultural backgrounds, (2) holistically supporting students; instead of concentrating on academic results, the emphasis should be on addressing the student's needs, including family obligations, work-life balance, and involvement in the community, (3) reassess metrics for success, not just by traditional metrics, but by broader outcomes that reflect the students' lived experiences, and (4) fostering inclusive leadership and policy development can help guarantee that institutional practices genuinely address the needs of students. Involving administrators, faculty, and staff who understand the students' backgrounds more actively in the decision-making process can lead to the creation of effective policies.

Furthermore, diverse leadership enriches decision-making processes and encourages more inclusive policies within institutions (Page, 2007; Hernandez, 2018). A qualitative study by Scott, Muñoz, and Scott (2022) emphasizes the critical role of representation in challenging the status quo within predominantly white institutions. Creating a sense of belonging and connection among students is essential; however, when faculty and staff of color are scarce, it places an undue burden on those present (Scott et al., 2022). HSIs must prioritize the needs of Latinx students and actively challenge rooted institutional practices, ensuring that POC occupy decision-making roles. If executive positions remain predominantly held by white, cisgender men, progress toward meaningful change will be stunted. However, with collaborative efforts, there is potential for a more inclusive and equitable future.

The importance of representation extends beyond students to Latina professionals across various roles. As noted by Eiden-Dillow (2022), "Latinas lack role models and

mentors to look up to and confide in during their careers in higher education" (p.2). While women's representation in executive roles has improved over the past three decades, Latinas have not seen comparable progress (ACE, 2020; Eiden-Dillow, 2022; Longman & Anderson, 2016). This often forces Latina professionals to seek role models outside their institutions or rely heavily on a few mentors.

Having Latinas in executive roles is critical not only for role modeling but also for fostering student success. When Latina students see leaders with similar backgrounds, it cultivates a sense of belonging and inspires aspirations for leadership roles (A. Gonzalez, 2020). This representation is particularly vital as student populations become increasingly diverse. However, institutions often struggle to recruit faculty members from diverse backgrounds (Aguirre, 2000; Turner et al., 2008; Shon et al., 2023). This shortfall is concerning, as students benefit significantly from having faculty who reflect on their own experiences, enhancing overall institutional performance (Joshi et al., 2018). Institutions should recognize the importance of diverse faculty in creating an inclusive and successful learning environment.

Representation's significance for students and staff cannot be overstated, as it profoundly influences critical organizational outcomes (Shon et al., 2023). Increasing Latina representation in leadership is essential for addressing systemic inequities in higher education. Diverse leaders can advocate for policies supporting equity, challenging discriminatory practices, and implementing beneficial programs for underrepresented students (M. López, 2017). A commitment to diversity is vital for creating institutions that mirror the demographics of their student bodies.

While increasing staff diversity is crucial in transforming HSIs, it is part of a broader effort. This endeavor must also address campus climate, eliminate barriers through fair practices, develop inclusive recruitment and retention strategies, and provide training that

ensures all staff understand the HSI designation as Latinx-serving rather than merely Latinx-enrolling (G.A. Garcia, 2017a). We can work toward a more equitable and inclusive higher education landscape for all through these comprehensive strategies.

Chapter Two Conclusion

The research presented underscores a significant issue: Despite being the fastest-growing demographic group in the U.S., the Latinx population remains noticeably underrepresented in executive roles within higher education, particularly when considering gender disparities. This underrepresentation happens from a confluence of factors, including racialized and gendered organizational structures, campus climate, and oppressive practices. Much of the existing literature focuses on individual experiences rather than examining the broader institutional influences involved. Additionally, the potential of combining funds of knowledge and social capital as catalysts for the career advancement of executive Latinas has yet to be systematically explored.

Recognizing the numerous obstacles that Latinas encounter in higher education, including cultural and language hurdles, gender role expectations, and prejudice, is critical for promoting empathy and comprehension. Latinas are disproportionately affected by systemic injustices at the intersection of race and gender, demonstrating the need for substantial institutional changes to achieve genuine equity and representation. Despite advancements in diversity, persistent challenges such as underrepresentation, institutional biases, and cultural barriers hinder the creation of truly inclusive environments, emphasizing the pressing need for transformative action within institutions.

Achieving equity and justice in higher education requires continual research, advocacy, and a commitment to eliminating the obstacles hindering marginalized communities' advancement. By embracing diversity and implementing inclusive practices,

higher education institutions can evolve into spaces where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, thereby contributing to a more just and equitable society.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

"Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues on fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself."
– Cherríe Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa, 2021, p.173.

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This section presents the research design applied in this study, which includes an overview of the study, research questions, theoretical frameworks, methodology, units of analysis, and positionality.

Overview

Senior-level, Senior leadership, and Executives are some of the many names given to individuals with positions that epitomize top-level management. In this study, they are called *las ejecutivas*. These positions sometimes involve individuals with a tenured faculty role, a doctoral degree, and a robust scholarly background (Haro,1990). Therefore, attaining these positions is highly exclusive and poses a significant challenge for the Latinx population. Previous studies have attempted to analyze and modify the selection and appointment process of these positions, examine the experiences and progression of faculty, and explore the role of gender and race in these positions (e.g., C. González, 2007; Haro, 1990). However, recent research indicates that higher education institutions (HEIs) should focus on changing their system and processes rather than just focusing on the individuals (Eiden-Dillow & Best, 2022).

This research study seeks to provide a balanced perspective on the issue, recognizing that change is not solely dependent on the individual or the institution but on the actions of both parties. While measures taken by individuals and institutions do not necessarily guarantee equitable practices, they are essential in raising awareness and initiating change. The study's design focused on Latinx women who hold executive positions in a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). The reasoning behind these choices was thoroughly explained in

Chapter 1; however, I will summarize here to highlight the importance and rationale of my choices. I researched a four-year public HSI for three simple but important reasons. The choice of HSI is one made because of the demographic representation. HSIs, as explained before, serve a significant portion of Latinx students, making them an essential focus for grasping the challenges and opportunities encountered by Latinx students and staff. By choosing to study an HSI, I am more likely to focus on the higher education experiences of a large segment of the Latinx community. HSIs can offer a distinct environment where Latinx cultural values are more visible and appreciated, potentially impacting student outcomes, staff support, and institutional practices. Choosing between a public and a private institution was not an intentional decision but rather one that I accepted since the public nature of this institution indicates that it frequently encounters more significant budgetary limitations and policy difficulties. I found this appealing because it may explain how Latina executives in these organizations manage these obstacles while advocating for service and fostering student achievement. Next, I decided on a four-year HSI because of its more "traditional" college education. I recognize that "traditional" is open to interpretation; however, I believe four-year universities can offer a more transparent view of the long-term results regarding resources, support services, staff experiences, and how these factors influence their progress. Additionally, analyzing executive leadership focusing on Latinas is important due to the historical lack of representation of Latinx individuals and women in higher education administration. Latinas holding executive positions at HSIs can significantly impact institutional priorities, student achievements, and the overall campus environment, particularly regarding advancing equity, inclusion, and the success of Latinx students. Simply put, my choice to concentrate on a four-year public HSI is fundamentally based on the vital role these schools play in fostering the academic and professional achievements of Latinx

students, as well as the influence of executive Latinas in promoting and enacting policies that benefit these students.

Latinas have mostly been overlooked in studies concerning executive positions in HSIs. By examining the stories of these women and their paths to success, we can gain a deeper understanding of the support, empowerment, and social connections that have influenced their professional and personal development. The study also emphasizes the impact of family support and social networks on their progress and advancement. This research focuses on an HSI in the southwestern region, illustrating the crucial significance of representation for students and staff and the decolonization of institutional practices.

Data was collected through various *testimonios* methods*:* oral interviews with *las ejecutivas* and facilitating a written and expressive activity. The information obtained was subsequently analyzed and contrasted with previous research and theoretical frameworks. Additionally, the analysis includes personal insights that acknowledge limitations and suggest potential directions for future research while comprehensively assessing and categorizing each phenomenon. This process included recognizing shared trends by comparing similarities in participants' educational backgrounds, upbringing, and mentorship experiences.

Research Questions

Incorporating the concept of servingness and principles from Social Capital (SOC) and Funds of Knowledge (FOK), the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of *las ejecutivas* in a Hispanic-Serving Institution regarding practices that encourage and/or deter their advancement, agency, and service contributions (servingness)?

2. To what extent do *las ejecutivas* leverage their social capital and use their funds of knowledge to advance professionally, exercise their agency, and enhance their service contributions (servingness)?

These questions were used to explore *las ejecutivas* shared experiences through multiple *testimonio* methods: written, oral, and expressive (detailed in the methods section below). These experiences encompass their academic background, knowledge, and practices. Through the research methods, the study highlights the skills, abilities, and funds of knowledge that helped these women navigate social contexts, as well as the impact of their capital on their career paths and social networks. The study also examines the challenges faced by women who identify with multiple marginalized identities and how systemic oppression may have affected their career experiences. Accordingly, this analyzes the accuracy of institutional experiences regarding advancement and explores potential strategies for addressing any issues identified.

Moreover, the questions examine the significance of diversity in leadership and emphasize the inclusion of Latinas in executive roles at HSIs. Latinas have the potential to be powerful agents of change as they possess a deep understanding of the student population they serve and have a unique lens that brings a different perspective to serving Latinx students. While Latino men are also capable of fulfilling this role, the ongoing gender disparity in the workplace prompted this research to concentrate on women. As a result, the objective was to highlight the experiences of women who have shattered the glass ceiling and reached executive positions. Executive positions for this study are women who hold an administrative executive position (non-instructional) of Vice-President/Vice-Provost (VP), Associate Vice President/ Associate Vice Provost (AVP), or Assistant Vice President, Assistant Vice Provost (AsVP) (detailed in the participant section below). This study offers a platform to amplify their voices and narratives. The hope is that the findings will encourage others to conduct similar research and prompt HSIs to actively assess their current practices, reconsider their hiring methods, and intentionally work toward a more equitable and just institution.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical principles of FOK and SOC offer valuable insights into how individuals and groups navigate their environments, particularly in education and professional advancement. While they focus on different aspects of social interaction and resource access, using them together can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying forces, especially for marginalized groups like Latina administrators in higher education. It can also show the benefits of collective knowledge that the community and family give, which is not often valued or used in higher education.

Social Capital

Tara Yosso (2005) builds upon Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital by recognizing various forms of community cultural wealth that marginalized groups hold, and she describes six categories of capital:

1. **Aspirational Capital**—The capacity to hold onto dreams and hope for the future even when faced with inequality and a lack of resources to make them a reality (p. 77).
2. **Linguistic Capital**— The skills and talents people acquire through communication practices, such as bilingualism and the capacity to engage in various contexts (p. 78).
3. **Familial Capital**—The understanding, practices, and values developed within families highlight the importance of family well-being and kinship (p. 79).
4. **Social Capital**— The importance of the networks and relationships individuals cultivate to access fundamental resources, information, and opportunities (p. 79).
5. **Navigational Capital**— The ability to navigate social systems, such as educational institutions, workplaces, or power structures, which were not designed with the communities of color in mind (p. 80).

6. **Resistant Capital**— The skills and knowledge acquired by resisting marginalization and oppression, enabling individuals to confront social inequalities (p. 80).

In the context of higher education, social capital is especially crucial for marginalized groups, as it fosters trust, cultivates supportive networks, and provides both instrumental and emotional support that helps them overcome adversity (Ayala & Contreras, 2019; Yosso, 2005). For executive Latinas at HSIs, their ability to find allies and navigate institutional structures can significantly impact their effectiveness in leadership roles. Moreover, these leaders often play a significant role in building connections with students, faculty, and external partners, emphasizing the importance of social capital in their leadership approaches (Delgado-Bernal et al., 2012).

Coleman (1988) asserts that social capital is essential for enabling certain activities while constraining others. In this regard, social capital can provide the necessary support to encourage institutional leaders to challenge the status quo, ultimately paving the way for structures and policies that promote equity and inclusion (G.A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Yosso, 2005). By centering on relationships and social networks, social capital facilitates access to jobs, mentorship, and other career-enhancing resources, allowing individuals to gain advocates and sponsors to support their advancement within the organization (G.A. Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, it has the potential for collaborative efforts among individuals with shared interests to influence institutional practices.

This research study delves into how *las ejecutivas* leverage their social capital to pursue their career aspirations and transform HSIs into more inclusive spaces. By applying the social capital framework, the study examines their ways of building networks and how these connections enable access to information, knowledge, and resources to promote inclusivity and benefit their personal and professional growth. Moreover, this research

underscores the critical role of social connections in higher education. It stresses the need for strong leaders who can leverage their positions and networks to promote inclusivity. By highlighting their experiences, this study significantly enriches our understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with advancing social justice in HSIs.

Funds of Knowledge

The Funds of Knowledge (FOK) concept is based on the idea that people and communities have valuable cultural and experiential resources influenced by their histories, traditions, and daily routines (Funds of Knowledge Alliance, 2021). This idea highlights the significance of cultural heritages, family experiences, and community customs in shaping an individual's knowledge and abilities (González et al., 2006; Mariscal et al., 2019; Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2017; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). By acknowledging and appreciating these resources, we can empower individuals and reinforce that their unique backgrounds can be valuable in professional environments.

Initially introduced by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg in 1992, FOK highlighted the development of skills, knowledge, and cultural practices within U.S.-Mexican households in Tucson, Arizona. Their work highlighted the complex and interconnected knowledge systems that existed within these families, including knowledge about business, community organizing, and navigating cultural boundaries (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Another important influence on the development of FOK was the work of Norma González, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti (2006). Like Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, they focused their research on Mexican-American families. They argue that students from marginalized or immigrant communities are not “lacking” knowledge; instead, they possess valuable knowledge that can be utilized in educational settings (González, et al., 2006). Their work revealed how families used various approaches and methods to teach their children valuable knowledge and skills, including negotiation, problem-solving, and community building

(González, et al., 2006). Both research studies laid the foundation for many others to explore the value of the experiences and knowledge learned from culture, community, and family, and how they can enrich learning in the classroom. For example, Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2017) expand on this groundwork by examining how FOK can improve learning and assist students' diverse cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and the assets they can contribute to the institution. The primary distinction between Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar's study and earlier research is that it shifts away from a K-12 focus; instead, it investigates how FOK can be utilized to comprehend and assist college students, particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds (whether they are first-generation college students, students of color, or working-class students). This book is an excellent resource for any higher education institution employees seeking to advance the FOK framework. It provides strategies for educators, promotes inclusive institutional practices, advocates for student agency and voice, and offers many other approaches to enhance the learning environment.

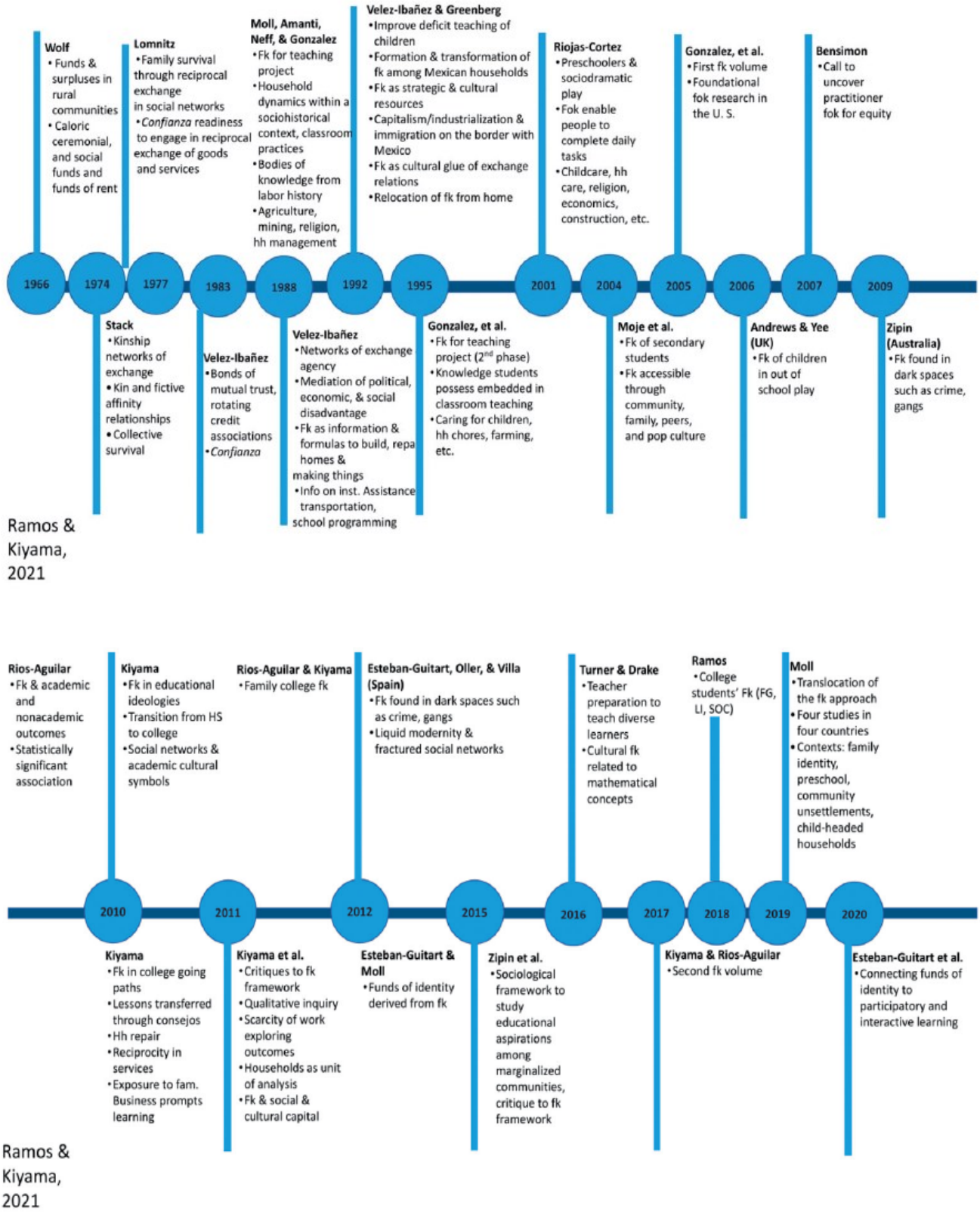
In addition, Ramos and Kiyama (2021), in their work *Tying it All Together: Defining the Core Tenets of Funds of Knowledge*, present six fundamental tenets of FOK to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its essential concepts and how it can be utilized in educational contexts to connect students' real-life experiences with academic learning.

1. FOK are strategic resources (p. 439). An example is relying on kinship networks of exchange to access and effectively manage resources (awareness of opportunities, public services, and expectations).
2. FOK transcends the familial environment to empower FOK holders to navigate society (p. 440). An example is obtaining employment through kinship connections, sharing knowledge learned with other community members, and access to knowledge and motivation in the community.

3. FOK is accessed and developed through the mobilization of social networks (p. 440). An example is the strong foundations of knowledge through friendships, networks, household maintenance, community relationships, and support systems.
4. FOK includes dynamic cultural practices, including faith and spirituality, and is inclusive of labor histories (p. 441). Examples are daily prayer, rituals, medicine prayers, and labor learning (i.e., obtaining a job in a specific sector due to their families working there).
5. The core of FOK is an excellent sense of *confianza* (mutual trust) (p. 442). An example is identifying a key person in college to support you; it can be a mentor, advisor, or institutional agent.
6. Oral tradition as a means of survival is a key principle of FOK (p. 443). Examples are relative names, addresses, family affairs, *consejos* (advice), and storytelling.

These tenets, along with all previously mentioned articles in this section, underscore the valuable insights FOK offers for student development and institutional practices that support their development. One key argument for incorporating FOK in this research is its capacity to benefit staff development and agency. Moreover, FOK was initially used to research communities in the southwest, which aligns with the geographic context of this research. While FOK has primarily been used to examine student experiences, a clear gap exists in exploring staff experiences. This gap is illustrated by the comprehensive timeline presented by Ramos and Kiyama (2021), shown below.

Figure 3: FOK Key Contributions Timeline



This figure was obtained from Ramos and Kiyama (2021) in their work, *Tying it All Together: Defining the Core Tenets of Funds of Knowledge*. This illustration presents a chronological overview of significant contributions to research incorporating the FOK framework (p. 437).

While much of the subsequent research has concentrated on students, the relevance of FOK extends significantly to staff, particularly those from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. FOK serves as a foundational framework for bridging the divide between traditional educational settings and the lived experiences of both students and staff. Individuals embody family knowledge through bonds and commitments that shape their professional practices (Mariscal et al., 2019). This study delves into these resources' commitment, influence, and integration into *las ejecutivas* professional lives while recognizing the diverse expressions of agency each woman brings to her role.

For instance, the FOK framework highlights the impact of mentorship and knowledge exchange on professional growth. *Las ejecutivas* frequently take on mentorship responsibilities, offering guidance to emerging Latinas by sharing their experiences and perspectives on navigating the complexities of higher education (doing the same in their written testimonios). However, their leadership roles are very demanding, and they often cannot commit to as much mentorship support as they would like. Thus, well-organized mentorship initiatives that link Latina leaders with aspiring professionals can strengthen institutional leadership pathways and promote a culture of teamwork and assistance.

Similarly, the FOK framework emphasizes the importance of community relationships in shaping professional journeys. Executive Latinas often use their community connections to gain resources, find mentors, and tap into various support networks that enhance their growth. These leaders expand their professional circles and develop a deep sense of inclusion and meaning by participating in their cultural communities. As a result, they experience a dynamic daily work routine different from that of an office job.

HEIs that actively support community engagement initiatives empower these Latinas to utilize these connections, improving the organizational culture and creating a more

inclusive environment. This holistic approach not only aids in personal career growth but also plays a significant role in developing a more equitable and diverse academic setting.

FOK and SOC

Building upon the foundational arguments in "Funds of Knowledge in Higher Education: Honoring Students' Cultural Experiences and Resources as Strengths" by Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2017), this study intentionally integrates FOK with SOC. The authors emphasize the importance of understanding students' FOK in fostering equitable practices and inclusivity. They argue that gaining insight into the contexts of students' upbringings, social connections, and learning methods is vital for nurturing their cultural identity, character, and educational success. However, Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2017) also contend that family knowledge primarily documents the wealth of resources available to marginalized students and their communities. Thus, FOK should be viewed as a complementary framework to the more widely recognized theories of capital, such as social and cultural capital.

The integration of FOK and SOC offers a chance to delve deeper into the experiences of Latina administrators in executive positions. The current literature has not thoroughly researched this subject, focusing on HSIs. By combining these frameworks, we can gain a richer insight into their unique backgrounds and how these frameworks impact their career paths and interactions within organizations. This approach underscores the significance of their personal experiences as significant contributions to their advancement in leadership roles within higher education.

These two frameworks offer a collaborative perspective as FOK emphasizes inherent cultural assets, while SOC focuses on external relationships and networks. Together, they offer a more thorough understanding of how Latina administrators can utilize their personal and professional resources to advance their careers. This combination acknowledges the cultural strengths of Latina administrators and emphasizes the significance of cultivating

social networks. It empowers them to navigate institutional barriers more effectively, fostering confidence in their ability to bring about positive change in higher education.

Acknowledging marginalized communities' cultural strengths and social connections allows institutions to create more inclusive spaces that value diverse experiences and backgrounds. This transformation can lead to developing policies and practices to empower underrepresented individuals. By recognizing the community-driven aspects of FOK and the collaborative opportunities offered by SOC, organizations can encourage joint efforts for systemic change, giving greater prominence to the voices of marginalized groups.

Methodology

A qualitative research design utilizing the *testimonio* method is suitable for understanding and depicting the distinct lived experiences of *las ejecutivas* at four-year HSIs. Thus, this study delves into their experiences through oral, written, and expressive *testimonios*, aiming to comprehend the factors influencing their career trajectories from their perspectives.

It is also qualitative, as its primary objective is to delve into and reveal the intricacies of human behavior and the organizational experiences of these women. Qualitative research enables an understanding of existing literature, identifying gaps, and advancing research by gathering opinions and perceptions and gaining a deeper understanding of individuals' lives (Creswell, 2013). The data collection methodology involves narrative inquiry, which "examines human lives through the lens of a narrative, valuing lived experiences as a crucial source of knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 1), given the focus is on amplifying and presenting the voices of these women and understanding the "why" and "how," narrative inquiry was the appropriate methodology for data acquisition. It will be utilized to comprehend how participants perceive HSI support, its absence, and how this

impacts their experiences and development. Presenting their stories provides a unique chance to raise awareness about the experiences of Latinas at HSIs.

This study employed multiple data collection methods to ensure fair and thorough communication, including written, oral, and expressive approaches. These diverse methods offered a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the target audience, capturing genuine responses and sincere narratives of their lived experiences. While written and oral communication methods are commonly used in research, expressive methods are less typical. However, these expressive methods can often evoke more profound expressions of thoughts and feelings, leading to a deeper understanding of *las ejecutivas'* experiences. As a result, this study involved three phases of data collection.

Units of Analysis

Data Collection

This study uses *testimonios* (personal stories) as a method and methodology. *Testimonios* were utilized to capture the narratives of *las ejecutivas* in four-year HSIs, focusing on their experiences. Originally, *testimonios* conveyed the struggles of individuals who faced discrimination and government oppression in various Latin American nations and were communicated through different mediums, including poetry, narrative, storytelling, and music, serving as tools for social action and knowledge to assert rights and advocate for social change (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Furthermore, Beverley (2004), in *Testimonio*: *On the Politics of Truth*, states that in Spanish, the term *testimonio* conveys the idea of truth-telling in a religious or legal context; to give *testimonio* means to testify or bear truthful witness. Therefore, t*estimonio* serves as a valuable tool for gathering personal and intimate reflections on the experiences of *las ejecutivas*, as it highlights the importance and "validity of experiential or lived knowledge" (Brabeck, 2003, p.256). This study has similarly

leveraged *testimonios* to shed light on educational inequities, marginalization, oppression, and resistance while providing new perspectives on individual experiences.

Other scholars such as Dolores Delgado-Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga, Judith Flores Carmona, Michelle Espino, and Lindsay Pérez Huber, to name a few, have explored and shared the significance of using *testimonios* as a methodological approach that centers the voices and lived experiences of marginalized groups (Delgado-Bernal et al., 2012; Espino et al., 2012; & Pérez Huber & Aguilar-Tinajero, 2024). All of them use, in a similar way, personal stories to question individual viewpoints and examine the idea of *testimonio* from various perspectives. For instance, Delgado-Bernal et al. (2012) utilize a more political approach, indicating that testimonios are significant for "social change" (p. 364). This article also highlights that *testimonios* can be utilized in education to foster a more inclusive and culturally aware learning environment, "as such, *testimonio* is a pedagogical tool that lends itself to a form of teaching and learning that brings the mind, body, spirit, and political urgency to the fore," (p. 367). In comparison, Espino et al. (2012) focus more on the role of *reflexión* (reflection) in bridging *testimonios* across different lived experiences. They explore the idea of using *testimonios* to connect different individuals' personal stories to create solidarity and foster understanding of the lived experiences of marginalized communities (Espino et al., 2012). Lastly, Pérez Huber and Aguilar-Tinajero (2024) apply *testimonios* as a significant methodology in educational research, primarily through the perspective of Critical Race Feminism (p. 1272). They argue that this approach "allows for an interweaving of Chicana feminist and critical race epistemological and theoretical tools with qualitative research methods to cultivate methodological space for *convivencia* (gathering), critical reflection, collective knowledge production, and healing" (p. 1272). *Testimoniando* (giving testimonials), a concept presented in Pérez Huber's earlier work (2009), argues that it is more than content; it is a process of reflecting on deficit ideologies surrounding marginalized

communities based on their lived experiences. Thus, Pérez Huber and Aguilar-Tinajero's (2014) method not only elevates the voices of marginalized communities but also challenges the standard power dynamics and foundations of knowledge within academia. All three approaches focus on empowering marginalized voices through disruption, reflection, and reclaiming narratives. Like them, this research uses *testimonios* as a method based on personal narratives to generate knowledge and to challenge fundamental narratives in academia that frequently ignore the perspectives of marginalized groups, like those from Latinas.

It is clear then that *testimonios*, as a collaborative inquiry, emphasize a mutual exchange of knowledge and perspectives. *Testimonios*, in many ways, also center on what the Latinx community knows best, “Familia, barrio, and life experiences” (Rendón, 2009, p. 3 as cited in Santa-Ramirez & Vargas, 2024, p.5), which this study uses to provide valuable insights into the experiences of *las ejecutivas*. Most importantly, their *testimonios* have the potential to inspire and empower rising Latinas who are striving to succeed in higher education.

This study used multiple types of *testimonios* as data collection methods: written, oral, and expressive. The objective was to comprehend how these Latinas attained their executive positions in higher education. By collecting their *testimonios*, I could grasp Latinas' obstacles and, more importantly, contribute to addressing the need for more research focused on their perspective. The three phases of data collection evolved from one another. Initially, I solely focused on oral testimonios (interviews), a more standard research approach; however, I wanted to create a more engaging, collaborative, and inviting experience. Therefore, I realized I needed to explore additional methods of data collection. That was when I became certain that I had to develop my initial concept of incorporating unique data types, such as

written testimonios (papelitos) and expressive testimonios (expressive activity). The three phases of data collection are presented next.

The Written Phase.

The written portion was done in the form of written *testimonios* (Spanish word for testimonies) at the beginning of the first interview and then at the end of the second interview. The first part of the interview was used purposefully as a meet and greet to build a connection with the participants so they feel secure sharing their personal lives with me. Continually, they were asked to write down a *Testimonio* to the question, "What would you say to your younger self about the higher education career you are about to start?" They were instructed to write down their answer on a *papelito* (a little piece of paper). However, before it was folded and put away, they placed it on the camera so that a picture could be taken (see Appendix F). This same written *testimonio* activity was done at the end of the second interview. However, this time, they were asked, "What advice would you give emerging Latina scholars as they navigate a higher education career?" Once they were done writing the *testimonio*, they again placed the *papelito* in front of the camera so a picture could be taken. The "*papelito* guardados" were discussed at the end of the second interview. The main intention of this *testimonio* exercise was to see if what they tell themselves is what they will tell strangers with similar career goals. This activity allowed for a unique and honest *testimonio* of how they perceived their experiences and mentoring abilities. It also shows their natural community-building skills, servingness, and social capital. After my dissertation proposal, I discovered that my idea of *papelitos* had a lot more significance than I had initially thought. The following is a personal account of my dissertation proposal defense.

As part of my proposal, specifically the data collection section, I mentioned my intent to use *papelitos* as part of the *testimonio* method. I also explained the *papelitos* activity stated in the last paragraph. Now, my use of *papelitos*, at the time of my proposal, was a mere

concept, just giving a name to an activity. However, one of the suggestions I received from a committee member was to elaborate more on using *testimonios* and the significance of this data collection method. Part of this suggestion was to read the work by the Latina Feminist Group and their book Telling it to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios. When I started reading this book, I was expecting detailed knowledge on the importance of *testimonios*, which I got. However, I did not know someone had already used *papelitos* as a *testimonio* method. The coincidence surprised me, and the significance of their *papelitos* was way more important than what I had provided in my research design. The Latina Feminist Group refers to *papelitos* guardados as a process for examining thoughts and feelings, but often in "isolation and through difficult times" p.1. The word guardados means to put away. These women's *papelitos* hold secrets, protected documents, identities, and roles tucked away to protect them from critical and condemning eyes. When reading this, it clicked —I understood why this book was explicitly suggested to me after my proposal defense. These women exemplify the objective of my research, discovering through *testimonios* the experiences of *las ejecutivas* and providing a platform that demonstrates the purpose of *testimonios*. The Latina Feminist Group arrived at the importance of *testimonios* as a crucial means of "bearing witness and inscribing into history lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure" (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p.2). This form of *testimonio* shows how important it is to witness lived experience in some way. The use of the term *papelitos* is now more intentional for my study, as for me, it is not to hide away our true selves in fear of derogatory eyes, but rather a way to tell it as it is! The Latina Feminist Group (2001) used *testimonios* as a "tool for Latinas to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity" p.19, and it was used similarly in this research study. The participants' lived experiences are based on stories embedded in their memories. Sharing them out loud and capturing them can be healing and empowering for them and inspiring for others. Even with the anonymous nature of this study,

the information gathered is significant because their experiences are relatable to many other Latinas in and out of academia.

The Oral Phase

The narrative inquiry method was pivotal in the oral research phase because it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of various experiences, from the participants' academic expertise to their day-to-day experiences. This method's evident value lies in its capacity to discover genuine and powerful narratives, thereby enhancing the research findings' validity (Clandinin, 2016). This approach is frequently used in research because it is a valuable tool that provides rich data sources and offers a deeper understanding of human experience (Clandinin, 2016; Snow et al., 1982).

The participants completed two interviews through Zoom. The two interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, depending on how much the participants elaborated on their responses. Additionally, the oral data collection used the interviewing by comment method. This method, as indicated by Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg (1982), is for the general purpose of "discovery and eliciting information about certain behaviors, events, and relationships" (p. 1). They present eight different types of comments. Although employing all eight during the interview was impossible, a couple were purposefully used by proposing a statement as an alternative means of eliciting information from interviewees. One is the evaluative comment, intended to elicit information about the interviewee's feelings, meanings, and interpretations on a topic of interest (Snow et al., 1982). The evaluative comment was used by linking my personal life situation with the issue of interest, which in this case was how habitual it is for Latinas to receive from our elders the funds of knowledge that we can use as tools in our agency. This moment created an invaluable bond between the participant and me because we both could associate our resilience with what other women within our families taught and how their strength in a much more hostile situation was an encouragement. This association

elicited an emotional response and created an essential connection between the interviewer and the interviewee.

I actively participated in the interview process, using motivational comments to understand the respondent's motives and attributions (Snow et al., 1982). This approach allowed me to offer a motivational account relevant to the information sought rather than simply asking why certain behaviors or activities occurred (Snow et al., 1982, p. 18). For instance, when discussing the university's lack of mindfulness regarding financial accessibility for meaningful engagement activities, I invited the interviewee to provide further details by saying, 'Because of these limitations, did you feel like you did not belong?' This approach led to a more personal response, and the participant guided the conversation, sharing how she and her friends created their own community and support system that did not rely on institutional spaces.

The first interview comprehensively explored the participants' upbringing and personal experiences, which were found to influence their career paths profoundly. So, the questions were more tailored towards funds of knowledge. The discussion covered their unique backgrounds, family dynamics, and the role of their Latina identity. The second interview was equally thorough and focused on their institutional experiences, thus more tailored towards their social capital, providing a deeper understanding of their work history and professional growth. This comprehensive approach ensured understanding of the complex relationship between personal experiences and professional paths. Both interview protocols can be found in Appendix C.

The Expressive Phase

The idea of an expressive activity began in one of my higher education courses, 'Organization and Administration in Higher Education', taught by Dr. Gary Rhoades. In this course, we read the study by Shaun Harper, *"Success in These Schools? Visual*

Counternarratives of Young Men of Color and Urban High Schools They Attend." In this research, Harper (2015) examines the experiences of young men of color in urban high schools. What stood out to me then was his use of an expressive method, specifically photography and other visual forms, to gather data and reveal counter-narratives to the common stereotypes associated with these students. As an inquisitive reader and a student getting ready to work on their dissertation proposal, I found his method exciting; I thought, "I wonder what other studies have employed a similar approach?" This prompted me to conduct some research, and I discovered that numerous studies have used expressive data collection methods. For example, Ramos (2016) used photovoice to examine how Latinx students develop their identities by encouraging them to take photographs of aspects that reflected their experiences and creative voices. Some other studies use poetry and *testimonios* across time (Sepúlveda III, 2011), cultural artifacts (Pahl, 2004), art to validate, strengthen, and elevate the perspectives of students who are educationally and socially disadvantaged (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2012), and *testimonios* art (Yoon-Ramirez, 2024) to appreciate the emotional and embodied dimensions of learning. In a similar vein, our professors at the College of Education, Dr. Julio Camarota, Dr. Regina Deil-Amen, and Dr. Ashley Domínguez-Lopez, are employing creativity generated by students from the University of Puerto Rico to highlight their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds as essential elements of their identity (*Creative Resistance*, n.d.-b). I attended their presentation in the Fall of 2023 on their Creative Resistance research and found it engaging and collaborative. Thus, at the time, I wondered how I could use something similar in my research. A common element in most of these studies is that participants were encouraged to express their personal narratives and emotional responses through an art form. This aligns with my expressive activity, as the goal was to provide my participants with multiple mediums to express themselves in three different ways (oral, written, and expressive) so that their personal

narratives and emotions are more fully captured. These studies are just a few examples of researchers striving to enhance data collection and offer a unique approach to gathering it. Their approach invited me to use individual artistic expressions to gather data, interpret, analyze, and present as part of the findings. The expressive phase was done via email. The email (see Appendix E) asked them to express themselves through any chosen art form. They could create something or share something they or someone else previously made. It could be a collage, painting, photograph, poem, song, drawing, artifact, or whatever else with which they can interpret the following:

> When you think about your professional journey toward your current executive position, what do you think about? Do you think of a word, a place, a person, a feeling? Put this into an art form. It could be something that represents resilience, strength, community, culture, adversity, resistance, hope, etc. -Please also provide a brief explanation of your selection.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative methods, which involve the analysis of text and image data, utilize a distinctive approach to data analysis and encompass a variety of designs. The process of qualitative data analysis is thorough, progressing from specific to general and involving multiple levels of analysis. Researchers are responsible for meticulously deconstructing and reconstructing the data, following a set of particular steps outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018, p.210):

> Organizing and preparing the data, conducting an initial reading through the information, coding the data, generating a description and thematic analysis from the codes, using computer programs, representing the findings in tables, graphs, and figures, and interpreting the findings.

Various techniques were used to ensure the data's accuracy, transferability, and reliability. The classical thematic analysis with an inductive approach was used, meaning the codes naturally emerge from the data. This method assisted in interpreting and revealing the main themes related to the research purpose. A hybrid approach to coding was also utilized to

examine the transcripts. MAXQDA was chosen as the software to transcribe the interview recordings for its accuracy and efficiency. Consequently, values-based and in vivo coding methods were used in the interview transcripts. Values coding involves developing codes that relate to the participant's worldviews and is useful when exploring cultural values and interpersonal experiences (Jansen, 2024), which is the core objective of the study's framework. In vivo was used in some parts of the interview transcripts, but it was beneficial for the written *testimonios* as the exact quotes were used. This way, inferred meaning was avoided by sticking to the original phrases. Descriptive coding was used to deal with the non-textual data submitted by the participants as part of their expressive activity. Line-by-line coding was then used to refine the initial code set and dig deeper.

The expressive and written *testimonio* activities were collaborative efforts between the participants and me. Following the second interview, we analyzed and interpreted both activities, comparing perspectives. This process facilitated deeper analyses, as "*Testimonio* is often seen as a form of expression that emerges from intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else, who then transcribes, edits, translates, and publishes the text elsewhere" (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 13).

Combining various data collection methods provides a more comprehensive and reliable body of evidence. It also fosters a universal design approach by creating a setting that addresses the needs of all people participating without the need for specialized accommodations (Kroeger & Kraus, 2017). This triangulation approach assists in validating and corroborating data from diverse sources and techniques, offering a more precise understanding of the research subject. Combining multiple techniques helps mitigate the limitations inherent in each method and enhances the confidence level of the research findings. This is particularly significant as a qualitative analysis requires substantial recollection and intuition from the researcher, which can be flawed and misleading.

Participants

In the initial stage of participant selection, purposeful sampling was employed for its dual benefits. First, it facilitated a comprehensive and critical analysis of specific individuals' experiences. Second, it was a practical approach due to the limited number of participants who met the eligibility criteria, as detailed below:

- Holds an administrative executive position (non-instructional) - Vice-President/Vice-Provost (VP), Associate Vice President/ Associate Vice Provost (AVP), and Assistant Vice President/ Assistant Vice Provost (AsVP).
- They identify as Latina women.
- Works at a four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI)—The institution has had this designation for at least a year.
- Has been employed by the HSI for at least a year - Even if their job title was different, the study aims to encompass their career path and progression to the executive role.

This study is restricted to executive positions in central administration, excluding middle management individuals and executives in instructional roles. Deans and Associate Deans are intentionally excluded despite meeting the executive position criteria. Once the participants were selected, they were provided with a detailed statement outlining the nature and purpose of the research study (see Appendix A) and a thorough consent form (see Appendix B) containing information about time commitment, study benefits, and confidentiality practices. The consent form also included a disclaimer stating that pseudonyms would be used to maintain confidentiality and trustworthiness, and participants were allowed to select their pseudonyms. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study and refuse to answer any questions. Additionally, the participants received their written section for accuracy review and to ensure confidentiality (Groenewald, 2004).

The second phase of participant selection involved snowball sampling, a method outlined by Groenewald (2004) as "expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing" (p. 46). However, this approach presented significant challenges directly linked to my research findings. The busy schedules and high expectations placed on the few executive Latinas who agreed to my study made establishing ongoing communication and introducing other Latina participants challenging. My time with them was limited and valuable; thus, I needed a strategic approach to maximize its use. Given that snowball sampling was unsuccessful, LinkedIn and direct email were used to recruit potential participants from two other HSIs. A call for participants flyer (see Appendix G) was shared, which included a link to a comprehensive questionnaire to assess eligibility. The post and flyer were public to allow others to share. I asked some HED program friends to repost and share with their networks. Nevertheless, this was also an unsuccessful approach. Thus, the study is focused on five participants within one HSI in the southwest.

Positionality

As a Latina in a managerial position who knows the participants' academic work, I recognize that my positionality and familiarity may have inadvertently influenced the interview responses. While I consciously tried to minimize bias, I acknowledge that my insider status as a Latina could have impacted the participants' answers. However, I leveraged my unique perspective to gain insight into the true essence of the participant's life experiences, utilizing a blend of objectivity and emotional connection,

> Insiders are often charged with the tendency to present their group in an unrealistically favorable light, and it is often considered to be overshadowed by the enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding (Mannay, 2010, p. 2).

This discussion holds significance, but only if it leads to a meaningful exchange of knowledge while recognizing both the advantages and disadvantages of my position. Being an insider allowed me to establish a strong emotional rapport with *las ejecutivas*, encouraging

them to share their experiences openly. However, it also led to preconceived notions about shared experiences, emphasizing the need to approach them with fresh perspectives (Mannay, 2010). Additionally, each participant's verbal and written *testimonios* offered unique perspectives. As I delved into the data, familiar and surprising themes emerged, bringing their stories to light.

As a Mexican-American woman with multiple marginalized identities, including being a first-generation college student, bilingual, Latina, and female, I find myself in a unique position to understand the experiences of the participants in this study**.** This dissertation not only contributes to the existing literature but also serves as a personal reflection of my aspirations and the challenges I have faced. It encapsulates my desire to learn from the experiences of Latinas who have successfully navigated these barriers and continue to share their narratives through various avenues beyond traditional research. In numerous respects, I resonate with the narratives of *las ejecutivas*, envisioning myself in their roles as advocates for initiatives that benefit marginalized communities across all tiers of the academic institution, including students, faculty, and staff. The personal connection I have established with this study and *las ejecutivas*, which is notably articulated in the "why me" section of the dissertation, underscores that my lived experiences, identities, and journey have equipped me with personal and professional insights into this subject matter. This deep-seated understanding significantly informs my research efforts as a scholar, enhancing the accuracy and relevance of the inquiry.

Assumptions

This study is based on the following assumptions:

1. Navigating multiple marginalized identities can present additional challenges in achieving upward mobility and maintaining self-worth.
2. Systemic oppression can impact the abilities and career trajectories of *las ejecutivas*.

3. *Las ejecutivas* will respond to questions honestly.
4. *Las ejecutivas* will answer questions without concern for negative consequences or criticism.
5. *Las ejecutivas* are in a position to drive decisions for transformation and progress.

Delimitations

This study takes into consideration the following delimitations:

1. The study is delimited to only Hispanic-Serving Institutions.
2. This study is delimited to only what is defined as executives for this study: AVPs or VPs.
3. This study is delimited by the subjective tone in reporting their lived experiences.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that the study's sample size is small and limited, consisting of only the five Latinas who met the executive criteria set out in the study and could commit to the one-year timeframe. Although a sample size of five is small, its significance is noteworthy. Among others who met the criteria requirements, their schedules were full, rendering them unavailable to participate due to prior commitments. This is a common challenge for executive Latinas, as highlighted in the research findings. They are often expected to single-handedly address all racial and ethnic issues within their organizations and actively participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, leading to feelings of overwhelm and overwork. It was no different for the many women invited to participate through the many recruitment venues. Making them not available for this research.

Summary

Narratives are powerful tools for understanding others' experiences and relationships. This study aimed to provide a platform for *las ejecutivas* to communicate through various forms. The interview-by-comment process allowed for storytelling and exploration of the influence of cultural values, traditions, and individual capital on their development. Participating and discussing the *papelitos* and expressive activity further confirmed and conveyed their life stories. This work is constructed selfishly towards a Latina collective and for their communities, providing a wealth of knowledge and understanding. The study's findings are informative for other Latinas in the earlier stages of their professional careers and development in higher education institutions. They shed light on breaking the glass ceiling and its importance, especially at HSIs. It is also beneficial for HSIs who are intentional about change and breaking the status quo.

CHAPTER FOUR: *LAS EJECUTIVAS* & FINDINGS

"You are broken down and tired of living life on a merry-go-round, and you can't find the fighter, but I see it in you, so we gonna walk it out, and move mountains, we gonna walk it out and move mountains,"
– Andra Day, 7clouds, 2019.

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This chapter presents *Las Ejecutivas,* their journeys, and the findings of the data collected through multiple forms of *testimonios*.

Las Ejecutivas

Las ejecutivas (the executives), a term used in this study to refer to the participants, are remarkable women whose stories are truly inspirational. All of them were employed at North Star University (NSU) during the study and have achieved significant personal, local, and national success. However, due to the sensitive nature of this study and the low number of executive Latinas that met the research criteria, it was necessary to honor their privacy. Therefore, their chosen pseudonyms have been used in this study to protect them and the institution. Specific details about their departments, exact years of service, roles, or notable achievements have been omitted to safeguard their anonymity, as their work is distinctive and could potentially reveal their identities. Nevertheless, their invaluable contributions to academia and the Latinx community are deeply appreciated, and their experiences have greatly enriched this research. For general demographic information, see the table below.

Table 2

Participants Demographics

Name	Title	Years in HEIs	Highest Degree Earned
Veronica	Vice President	<15	Professional
Gigi	Assistant Vice Provost	<15	Doctorate
Paloma	Vice President	<20	Doctorate
Isabella	Associate Vice Provost	<30	Doctorate
Cristina	Vice President	<30	Doctorate

Each *ejecutiva* is introduced in this chapter, and their upbringing and lived experiences relevant to this study are shared. These experiences were gathered using various *testimonios* methods: oral, written, and expressive. The oral method involved two 90-minute interviews. The written method consisted of responding to two related questions at different times. The first question aimed to uncover what they would advise their younger selves about pursuing a higher education career, and the second question focused on what they would advise an emerging Latina scholar. This exercise sought to determine whether their advice to their younger selves aligned with what they would advise someone embarking on the same professional journey (see Appendix F). The expressive activity encouraged *las ejecutivas* to convey their experiences and their journey through an artistic form. The expressive activity question and instruction were: When you think about your professional journey towards your current executive position, what do you think about? Do you think of a word, a place, a person, or a feeling? See Appendix E for the email with the instructions. This chapter will delve into each *testimonio* and analyze its significance.

Veronica *Testimonios*

Oral

Veronica's life and career narrative is a compelling story of determination, cultural identity, and leadership. Born and raised in the Southwest of the United States (U.S.), Veronica's upbringing was deeply influenced by her close-knit family and the local community. Her formative years were shaped and influenced by the presence of her aunt and uncle, who resided nearby, and especially her grandmother, who raised her. These family members not only offered emotional support but also exemplified the values of perseverance and commitment that Veronica would carry with her into her adult life.

From an early age, she experienced firsthand the disparities in educational opportunities between schools. When she moved from one middle school to another, into a

more affluent side of town, she noticed a significant increase in resources at this new school, “The opportunities that other students have are just so different, it felt really unfair, so, at that age, I said, I want to do something about this,” she says. This awareness of inequality fueled her passion for creating change.

Encouraged by her parents, both high school graduates who supported her educational aspirations without imposing a specific career path, Veronica left her hometown for college in California, where she earned her undergraduate and terminal degrees. She says:

> I worked really hard in school, but it was more because I wanted to go on and make a difference based on what I experienced. It wasn’t because I felt like I had to because of what my parents expected.

Moreover, in college, she continued to see resource disparities, microaggressions, and racism. She and maybe two other students were the only Latinx students out of 90 students in her dorm. It was apparent that there was racial inequality at her school.

After completing her studies, she married her now ex-husband, whom she met during graduate school. At this time, Veronica also pursued a career in the nonprofit sector and local government, aiming to combat systemic injustices and advocate for marginalized communities. Despite her professional success, she missed her family, felt a strong bond with her hometown, and was drawn by the opportunities at North Star University (NSU), so she decided to return. For more than 15 years, Veronica has played a fundamental role at NSU, experiencing both achievements and challenges. While the university holds excellent potential for making a positive impact, its environment has not always been inclusive. Veronica has faced significant obstacles, including rudeness, interruptions, and a lack of respect from some colleagues, most of whom were cisgender white individuals. These challenges and the complexities of working within a large institution have made her role demanding. Throughout, she has leaned on the support of key mentors, including her former

supervisor and her current boss, both of whom are cisgender white individuals, who have provided her with guidance as she navigated the difficulties of her position.

At the beginning of her higher education career at NSU, she decided to work part-time to have more time for her children while balancing her professional responsibilities. Although this decision benefited her family, it affected her career advancement in some ways. There is a prevailing stigma in higher education that suggests part-time employees do not prioritize their careers. This mistaken belief is unfounded and unfairly impacts individuals like Veronica, who view part-time work as necessary at any stage of their career. These life experiences, her Latina identity, and her background have influenced her empathetic and intuitive leadership style.

Despite initial concerns about her workload due to having young children at home, Veronica wholeheartedly embraced the opportunity when she was recruited for her full-time administrative position. In her current role as Vice President, she has more opportunities to participate in discussions and initiatives that focus on equity and justice, both of which are core values for her. She views NSU as a complex and large organization committed to serving the local community and underrepresented groups. As a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), the university places great importance on this designation and strives to integrate it into every aspect of its mission.

Veronica's tenure has not been without its challenges. Initially, she was not provided with sufficient budget and staffing to accomplish her work, and she faced resistance from some colleagues who resented her appointment. Additionally, budget constraints have hindered her ability to acquire the necessary resources for her office multiple times, making her role even more difficult. She has also encountered dismissive and condescending behavior from certain administrators, she says:

> In a meeting, I was the one who was the expert on the issue we were discussing, and this white male leader from this other department interrupted me like three times, and then he was very much deferring to my white male colleague there, who really knew nothing about the situation.

She attributes this situation partly to being a woman of color who is held to a higher standard than her white male counterparts; before she spoke up, she took the time to analyze the situation and see how it was apparent that this person did not value her contributions or her presence. She emphasizes that condescending behavior is a frequent issue at NSU due to the university's highly decentralized structure. "Many units tend to operate independently, and when we inform them that they cannot do something, people often respond rudely to me and my colleagues. They raise their voices and interrupt us all the time."

Even with these professional difficulties, Veronica approaches her work with a sense of purpose and lightness, focusing on her values and potential for positive impact while finding support and understanding within her personal network. Her friends, both within and outside NSU, have provided a crucial source of solidarity and empathy, recognizing the unique challenges faced by women in higher education. Veronica has also cultivated solid self-care practices, which have been essential in maintaining her well-being amidst her demanding career. However, this self-care awareness did not come easily. After experiencing severe burnout, she realized she needed to prioritize her well-being over her career. This realization was difficult to accept, especially within the Latinx culture, where women are not typically seen prioritizing their own needs. "I don't think that we have as many models of women really taking care of themselves," she says. However, Veronica has always been the one person in her family who challenges the status quo of gender roles. Something she brings into her professional role.

Veronica strongly supports and actively advocates for Latinas' representation in leadership roles within higher education. She believes such representation is crucial for institutions to understand and effectively serve their student body. To support the

advancement of Latina administrators, she recommends implementing more formal mentorship and professional development programs, ensuring that emerging leaders receive the guidance and opportunities they need to succeed. Acknowledging that each institution is different, receiving guidance from someone familiar with specific institutional practices can be invaluable in navigating the challenges of integrating into an environment that may not readily embrace your presence.

Veronica's journey is a testament to the power of resilience, cultural identity, and dedicated leadership. Her experiences reflect the complexities of navigating a career in higher education as a Latina, highlighting the challenges and the meaningful contributions she has made along the way.

Written

Veonica's papelitos emphasize mindfulness for herself and others. When asked what advice she would give her younger self about a higher-education career, she wrote, "Trust whatever comes with lightness," trusting when something feels right, and instead of overthinking or forcing a situation, approach it with openness or ease. When we adopt this light attitude, we do not bear unnecessary weight and are more likely to make better decisions. When asked what advice she would give an emerging Latina scholar, she wrote, "Be your authentic self, let your values guide you, pick places and people who are aligned and supportive, and do not be afraid to leave something that is not aligned or not working." For emerging Latina scholars, her guidance focuses on being authentic, letting personal values guide decisions, and aligning with supportive environments. She underscores the importance of being true to oneself and having the courage to move away from situations or people that are not supportive.

Expressive

Veronica's collage centered around the word "Impact," which encapsulates a profound commitment to making a difference through her work. "Everything I have done in my career has been aimed toward making a positive impact. Impact is one of my core values, and what stood out for me when I read the prompt." By selecting this word as the focal point, she emphasizes that her professional journey has always been guided by a desire to contribute positively to her community and beyond.

Her expressive activity suggests that she values not just career success but the meaningful outcomes of her efforts. This shows that she is highly conscious of the effect her actions can have, whether in her work environment or a larger social context. This demonstrates an intentional mindset as she actively attempts to align her skills and passions with initiatives that foster growth, support others, and inspire change.

Moreover, Veronica reveals a fundamental part of her identity by stating that impact is one of her core values. It speaks to her motivation and the principles that guide her decisions. This could manifest in various ways, such as mentoring others, championing sustainability, advocating for social justice, or fostering innovation that benefits society. Each project or task she takes on likely reflects this philosophy, ensuring that her work meets professional standards and contributes to a greater purpose. Veronica's collage serves as a personal manifesto and a visual representation of her journey, one that prioritizes making a meaningful difference in the world.

Gigi *Testimonios*

Oral

Gigi's story is like her expressive activity item, a woven tapestry constructed of various cultural influences and professional experiences. As she reflected on her journey, she realized how influential the rich cultural heritage of her upbringing was for her journey through higher education. Gigi was born and raised on the East Coast. Her mother, who is of Costa Rican descent, and her father, who is of Italian descent, contributed to a unique blend

of cultural experiences. Gigi's early years were spent on her grandparents' farm on the Eastern Shore, where the customs of rural life and her grandmother's traditional Costa Rican cooking played a central role in her childhood.

Despite not being fluent in Spanish, Gigi felt strongly connected to her Latina heritage thanks to her grandmother. All through sharing special moments over her cooking and watching the show, *I Love Lucy*. Those moments provided a cultural attachment, giving her a sense of belonging and identity. Gigi's childhood was filled with feelings of belonging to her community, mainly thanks to her acceptance of her multicultural heritage and the resilience she witnessed within her own family.

Gigi's higher education journey began in Baltimore, where she completed her master's and doctoral degrees. At the beginning of her professional career, she aimed for a traditional academic career, seeking to secure a tenure-track faculty role as many people in academics do; it just seemed like the desired path. However, an eye-opening experience with a faculty member changed her mind; she recalls that he said, "If you want to get tenure at this institution, you are going to have to learn to eat your young." This harsh and competitive academic environment was not something she desired or valued. Discouraged by the pressure and challenges that come with this type of environment, she shifted her focus to the non-profit sector. This move allowed her to combine her interests in education, research, and community support. She directed her efforts to applied research and community programs that supported and assisted the needs of underserved populations.

Gigi's personal and professional experiences have significantly shaped her approach to work. As the Assistant Vice Provost at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), she oversees a complex setting filled with individuals who are both sincerely caring and self-serving. Nevertheless, the values of empathy, community support, and appreciation for diverse perspectives instilled by her family have greatly enhanced her leadership style. This influence

stems from the resilience, integrity, and strong family commitment her grandparents and parents demonstrated. Her servingness is superb, as she actively advocates for easily overlooked and marginalized students. She aids their belonging by enhancing their learning environment.

The support from significant mentors, both men and women, has enriched Gigi's career and provided her with essential support, advocacy, and candid advice. Gigi highly values mentorship and sponsorship and dedicates herself to helping others, especially those pursuing their degrees. She says:

> I don't think I can overstate the importance of mentors. They are the people who I've been very fortunate to have, the mentors that I've had, who help explain the big picture, but also help think through different situations and help figure out where I need to go and how I need to get there.

However, her journey has not been without challenges. As a Latina with a typically American surname, she has encountered assumptions about her identity and sometimes sensed that perceptions tied to her name and background limited her opportunities, she says:

> I try not to focus on it. I just try to focus on doing a good job. The people who I care about know, and the people that don't and who don't bother to look past my last name, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about them.

In many ways, she has felt left out of the Latinx community and was genuinely excited to be invited to this study. Although these challenges can deter many, Gigi chooses to concentrate on her work and what she can contribute to the institution and her students rather than fixating on these hurdles. She also prioritizes respecting and serving others rather than popularity and focusing on personal advancement.

Moreover, she also highlights the importance of career exploration and exposure to the diverse opportunities available within the university setting. She believes that the representation of Latinas in executive positions in higher education is essential, as it provides both windows and mirrors for aspiring scholars. "Windows offer views of worlds that are real and familiar, and mirrors offer a reflection of our own lives and experiences as part of a

larger human experience; representation offers the same." Gigi used a quote by Rudine Simms Bishop (1990), reinterpreting the analogy about books into her discussion on representation. She also shares insights on the role of networking, the impact of social media, and the necessity of upstream interventions to attract, retain, and support Latina administrators in higher education. She believes the HSI designation benefits students and staff, noting the strong leadership and dedication to leveraging this status to effect meaningful change.

In conclusion, Gigi advocates for career exploration, mentorship, and discovering opportunities early in everyone's professional career. Her journey features the value of utilizing personal experiences and knowledge to create a significant impact. She is, without a doubt, a source of inspiration and guidance to many through her dedication to education and community support.

Written

Gigi's "*papelitos*" underscore the significance of concentrating on oneself rather than on others. When asked what advice she would give her younger self about a higher-education career, she wrote, "Listen to your conscience; opinions of others are a double-edged sword and focus on the work." When asked what advice she would give an emerging Latina scholar, she wrote, "Be honest, be true to yourself, and protect your time for yourself and your family." Her advice for Latina scholars emphasizes honesty, staying true to oneself, and protecting personal time and family. Her advice mirrors the balance Gigi discussed during her interviews between her professional dedication and individual well-being.

Expressive

Gigi shared an artifact her mother bought while working in Paraguay for her expressive activity. The artifact is made from straw, painted, and crafted to show a scene with

a man, a woman, and a donkey. Gigi explains that she interprets the image as a symbol of the intricate and timely work it takes to create something meaningful, reflecting on her grandmother's saying, "A bird builds its nest one straw at a time." This idea strongly echoes Gigi's philosophy regarding education, as she believes that improving academic results often means tackling complex problems little by little and one day at a time.

Gigi understands that each person's educational journey is different and multifaceted, involving various elements of a learner's success. Her passion for teaching and servingness is fueled by her desire to address these diverse needs. The artifact reminds her to focus on the details, the little things that initially might seem insignificant, but together, in collaboration with other efforts, lead to meaningful change. This reflects her commitment and efforts to evolving and enriching learning environments so all students can thrive.

Aside from the metaphoric meaning of the artifact, it also holds personal significance. The artifact is a strong connection with her mother and the values she represents. It represents her family's resilience and dedication. This artifact is kept in her office, reminding her that she possesses a piece of her family history and knowledge. This connection is a motivation in all her pursuits to serve others and honor her family legacy by positively impacting her students.

Paloma *Testimonios*

Oral

Paloma was born and raised in the sunny Southwest, in a notably Latinx-populated side of town. Her journey is not just her own but a culmination of the experiences of generations before her. Her commitment to equity and justice rose from the example and hard work of her immigrant grandparents, who worked tirelessly as farmworkers. Their struggles and dreams for a better future profoundly affected Paloma's drive and sense of purpose. She recalls her experience of going to visit her grandparents at the farm.

> The farm was like a magical place. It was fun as a child. It was a place to kind of not feel the pressures, restrictions, or busyness of city life. It was simple. It was pure. But now, as an adult, and when I think back on that experience, it is certainly a magical sense or magical memory you create in your child-like mind. But I can only fathom now, as an adult, what the hardships were of that particular lifestyle, she says.

Her childhood experience was magical and remains a fond memory. However, as an adult, she understands that lifestyle is demanding. They ate what they grew, did not have an operational restroom in their home for a long time, and had to manually pump water from a well, "What the experience must have been like to raise as many children as they had in, in a home like that and under that set of circumstances." Nevertheless, they did it all, demonstrating to Paloma that their unity made them more powerful and capable of achieving anything.

Paloma grew up with a deep appreciation for her cultural roots, which helped her tackle the obstacles of being a young professional Latina in predominantly white, male-dominated academic environments. She encountered challenges linked to her identity, such as situations where fellow women of color sought to "tone her down" or restrain her voice. She shared a notable experience that involved a Latina colleague, an associate director, who suggested that an appropriate hairstyle for women in the workplace should be slicked back into a bun, "something restrained, restricted, not in sight," she says. Other obstacles and microaggressions included being passed over for leadership roles, having her ideas dismissed, her contributions ignored, and feeling pressured to adapt to the prevailing culture, she says:

> I felt like I had a lot to prove in the workplace…trying to definitely project this professional persona so that I could be taken seriously. And just really have feeling like I had to overcompensate for the things about me that they saw that perhaps they didn't value.

Nevertheless, Paloma found resilience in her cultural identity, the unwavering support of her family, and a network of trusted colleagues, which empowered her to persevere and succeed in her career. In fact, a mentorship experience with a Latinx faculty member during her master's program was a turning point in her academic journey. She was uncertain about

pursuing a doctoral degree, and having this faculty member be sincere and supportive sparked her research interest and reinforced her abilities. This experience was also reflected in her work, as she integrated research into her work and embraced pursuing leadership roles. This particular experience manifests the importance of mentorship and the impact that guidance can have on someone's journey.

In her current Vice President position at NSU, Paloma advocates and develops initiatives that benefit faculty, staff, and students throughout the university and the state. However, she notes that this work is not easy; she even described her journey as "discouraging at times" due to the lack of preparedness and support from prior leadership and not being clear on the future of her role in the institution. "I got all these gaslighting reasons," she says. Thus, her current role was only possible when the university's leadership recognized the significance of her contributions and shifted her reporting structure directly to the president, allowing her to have a broader impact.

Undoubtedly, Paloma has faced several obstacles that many other Latinas encounter within higher education, like the challenges of academic bureaucracy as a woman of color, doubting her expertise, trying to silence her voice, minimizing her work, and denying a well-deserved promotion, "when you deny a title change, that will allow us to be much more intentional. You are almost like denying me and who I am," she says. These experiences can and do significantly affect the representation of Latinas in top executive roles within higher education. However, Paloma remains committed to intentional change and inclusive environments. She attributes much of her resilience to her family values and the possibility of mentorship.

That one experience with a faculty member was the beginning of many mentorships, sponsorships, and networking opportunities that have been instrumental in Paloma's career development. However, it was challenging to find mentorship opportunities; she strongly

needed guidance and support, but needed more social capital to access it. Over time, she formed connections and relationships, particularly with other women of color, that offered her "tough love" and invaluable counseling. She attributes national professional organizations such as the National professional organizations, such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), Excelencia in Education, and the Alliance of Hispanic-Serving Research Universities, as instrumental in strengthening her social capital and her development at a national scale. She also recognizes the excellent effect mentorship has had on her journey; thus, she tries to do the same for others, noting that she learns from the perspectives and experiences of those she mentors.

Paloma's move to NSU was not just a professional transition but a significant personal disturbance that required much from her and her family. She had to rebuild her entire life, creating a new network, environment, and routine. She emphasizes that this transition is often overlooked and particularly challenging for underrepresented families. She stresses the need for a holistic approach to supporting faculty and staff during such transitions, especially those who need cultural and racial guidance to feel welcomed.

Paloma's move to NSU was a tremendous professional and personal transition that demanded many sacrifices from her and her family; she had to rebuild her whole life. This transition is complicated and is hardly ever discussed.

> I was striving to find a sense of cultural community. I was like, where are my people? Where is my food? Like, where are these things? You know, like, I obviously knew all of those things back at home where I was from, but it's a very disorienting experience to have later in life, she says.

She highlights that a holistic approach to supporting faculty and staff transitioning to a new state is crucial, specifically for underrepresented families needing cultural and racial guidance to feel more welcomed. She had to create a new network, environment, and identity, but feeling a sense of belonging with the local community took time.

Accordingly, Paloma is passionate about advocating for more representation of Latinas in executive roles in HEIs, especially at HSIs. She highlights the important work that many other Latinas across the country are doing and how they have played a vital role in advancing progress. However, she admits that representation alone is not enough. There is a dire need to create executive positions dedicated to HSI initiatives, along with a call for essential resources that support Latina leaders' success, "There is this a cross-section of Latinas who are at the very least at a director level. So not all these institutions (meaning HSIs) are creating opportunities for senior-level positions in this work." It is not enough to have the designation, as there must be the people, the titles, and the money to advance servingness intentionally. This appeal stresses the importance of diversity in senior leadership and institutions' obligation to create equal opportunities for all.

In summary, Paloma's story is a reflection of determined vision, tenacity, and resilience. These are strengths needed to thrive in higher education, especially for women with multiple marginalized identities. The experiences shared by Paloma underline the impact of mentorship, the significance of cultural identity, and the constant demand for systemic change to promote diverse leadership in academic settings.

Written

Paloma's "*papelitos*" are both empowering and practical. She encourages emerging Latinas to remember their worth, not let others diminish their value, and recognize their crucial role in the profession. When asked what advice she would give her younger self about a higher-education career, she wrote:

> It is not going to be easy, but your career journey will serve as an important means to advance equity within the system. It will be lonely at times, but you will have allies to guide and support you along the way, and remember to find balance between your career and yourself.

When asked what advice she would give an emerging Latina scholar, she wrote, “You are more than enough. You have value to offer. Do not let others make/keep you small. This profession needs you!” Her advice features the importance of finding balance, building partnerships, and her natural passion for serving others and giving them their flowers.

Expressive

Paloma shared several photos; they will not be included in this study for privacy reasons. The photos depict Paloma receiving a medal that symbolizes optimism and resilience in overcoming adversity. The president of North Star University (NSU) was also honored at the same ceremony. One of the pictures captures them together, wearing the medal. Paloma did not explain why she considered this moment part of the expressive activity. However, receiving a prize involves more than recognition; it embodies the sentiment of being seen and appreciated. It demonstrates that your work is recognized and valued. Since the city grants this medal, it is believed to foster a sense of community and pride. It is also believed that this medal demonstrates that Plaoma's efforts have positively impacted the area beyond NSU and into the community; it reinforces that her work is part of a larger narrative and serves as a source of inspiration for others to contribute in the same way. While the explanation is based on an assumption, a medal symbolizes the achievement of hard work and acts as motivation to continue making a difference.

Isabella *Testimonios*

Oral

Isabella’s story is a relatable and powerful story of perseverance, identity development, and leadership. Her journey begins in the Southwest, where she was born and raised by an American father from the East Coast and a Mexican mother from the North of Mexico. Isabella is an only child; thus, her mother was somewhat protective and dedicated to her upbringing, “It was a lot of pressure being an only child.” Both of her parents greatly

valued education and discipline. Her father was a high school teacher, and her mother was a stay-at-home mother who provided the resources and time for Isabella's academic success. While her father was less involved with her daily activities due to having two jobs, Isabella still connected to her father's heritage. However, because of their physical location, it was easier to develop and maintain her Mexican roots through the influence of her mother's family.

> My mom was not fluent in English, so I would, the majority of my language at home was in Spanish, and then I would go to school, and it would be English…at times I was the translator for her (meaning her mother).

She spent her summers in Mexico as a child but has not returned in 25 years. She attributes this absence to her desire to stay focused and compartmentalize different aspects of her life. Isabella describes her upbringing as an only child as "quiet all the time," which has contributed to her introverted nature, "You know, for me, it's like, I love talking to people and I love being around people, but I also like, look forward to that, that time where I'm not doing any of that." Despite her introverted and shy personality, she was determined to learn and further her personal development through her educational journey. In K-12, she studied at local public schools, including the high school where her father taught. She experienced the North Star University (NSU) campus early in her life as it was her father's alma mater, "NSU has always been home," she says. Her determination for education comes not from her father's example, as many might think; it was her mother who was adamant that college was the next step, "Like school for me has always been my center." She followed the expectations and enrolled at NSU. During her first year as an undergraduate, she became acquainted with student affairs, which ignited her passion for student services. This shaped her future career path and desire to develop her education further. She continued her academic journey by pursuing a master's degree, which propelled her into various roles at NSU.

The evolution of these roles has expanded to include over 30 years of career at NSU. This long career has brought many challenges, including her Latina identity. She has felt she does not fit the "typical" mold that her other Latina peers embody. "I always had that feeling where I was not enough, or I was too much; it just did not feel like I fit right with folks. You know what I mean?" she says. As a woman of color in academia, she encountered microaggressions and instances of discrimination, such as intentionally sabotaging her interview, which affected her chances of promotion. The latter experience, in which she was sabotaged, was perpetuated by a white woman in a senior leadership position, and this experience changed how she approached work and her relationships with supervisors; she says:

> You know, there were interesting dynamics. There's no competition with the men, right? So the men, if they see value in the work that you're doing, they're very, transparent in helping you move forward. I had that experience, too. I think with the women, there is a natural competition there…I always had to ensure that they had my 110%. I would provide them with the work and I didn't strive to be in the forefront. And so I think for some supervisors that was more comfortable. They liked being in the forefront, which could have been perceived as their work.

However, she also had a different experience from other white women who became her mentors. At that time, there were no Latinas available to mentor her, so she was thankful for a couple of white and African American women who provided invaluable support. They offered her guidance and understanding, helping her navigate her challenges. They continue to be part of her professional support system.

These experiences were compounded by the difficulties of balancing her career with family life, including the challenges of nursing her children and finding reliable childcare. Nonetheless, Isabella remained committed to NSU despite these personal challenges. She views loyalty, situational awareness, and organization as core aspects of her leadership style. Nevertheless, her devotion is not solely to the institution but extends to the students and the community. She is interested in making a significant difference through her service, she says:

> I think what inspires me is, you know, a genuine interest to support the things we know our students need. So you have leaders who have like a directive and, and their goal is to just to meet that directive, right? And whatever it is, generate revenue, whatever it is. But they're not paying attention to how some of these decisions impact students, right? So for me, someone who can juggle having those directives and make the decisions to better impact, positively impact our students is a true leader.

However, accomplishing change is sometimes difficult due to situational reasons; for instance, with the pandemic's impact on the economy, NSU has struggled to return to a fruitful economic state. This has kept Isabella genuinely worried because this affects budget cuts, leadership changes, and re-organization of personnel and resources, affecting all staff's morale and mental state. Despite these unprecedented difficulties, she hopes the institution will become stronger, as it has done previously. She also highlighted the importance of focusing on the positive contributions the university has achieved, recognizing the tremendous work the staff accomplish daily, short-staffed and with low resources. Also, she is thankful to be able to be involved in conversations and advocate for student success initiatives. She does not take her Associate Vice Provost (AVP) position for granted and is unafraid to break the status quo towards equitable practices.

Much of the growing support for student servingness has been apparent since the HSI designation. Isabella reflected on this and provided her dual opinion on this recognition. First, she sees it as an opportunity for additional resources and a chance to expand the already successful initiatives. Second, she stressed that the designation demands a genuine commitment to serving Latinx students beyond enrollment rather than through their educational development and graduation. This looks different for every student, especially at an HSI, and that must be understood by everyone serving these students. Third, she views the designation as an opportunity to create visibility for Latinas who are already on the field, doing the work, but not getting the recognition or visibility, she says:

> So we have some faculty that have been highlighted. We've had some departments that have programs that have been highlighted. But I think that we need to use what we have in place to maybe recruit more…I mean, it needs to be representative in all different

> spaces. I think really using our strengths, when we are recruiting for leadership roles and for faculty roles.

Isabella also shared that in her long higher education journey, she has had personal experiences that reveal considerable tokenism and unrealistic pressures. Her inclusion in specific roles or projects seemed more about meeting a diversity quota than acknowledging her capabilities. In many ways, this tokenism practice also prevented her from advancing in her career earlier because there were already a couple of women of color in executive positions, "They already had someone who is African American in a leadership role. They had another Latina in a leadership role. You know, they were good," she says. Furthermore, Isabella explored the more significant problem of Latina underrepresentation in leadership roles, linking it to issues like not enough self-advocacy, stereotypes of being "too loud," and the focus on terminal degrees, which impacts Latinas disproportionately. Isabella shares:

> I think that in order to be taken seriously, you know, as a woman, as a Latina, and other women of color. What is backing your standards and your ability? I think that the degrees have always been that for women in general, women of color.

Isabella's journey exemplifies resilience, identity development, and commitment. Her narrative demonstrates the complexities of growing up with dual cultural identities, bilingualism, and not feeling like you belong. These feelings extended to her professional development in academia as a Latina who did not feel many times like she belonged with other Latinas. However, her commitment to her role, advocacy, and service for students and her persistent belief in diverse perspectives have shaped and continue to influence her career. Isabella's journey underscores the necessity of inclusion within academia.

Written

Isabella's "*papelitos*" stressed the significance of building relationships, increasing your capital by finding mentors, championing oneself, and understanding the organizational dynamics of higher education institutions. When asked what advice she would give her

younger self about a higher-education career, she wrote, “Take risks, be confident, and know your value.” She was provided detailed guidance when asked what advice she would give an emerging Latina scholar:

> Make connections with staff and faculty, and find mentor opportunities. As you find mentors, people will share perspectives, ideas, and thoughts, but taking what you think you can use is important. Also, pay attention to your instincts and your gut. We know what is right for ourselves. Take in what you are gathering, but also your internal voice. Advocate for yourself, and educate yourself in the structure and environment you find yourselves in.

Her advice encourages upcoming scholars to remain authentic and uphold their core values, which can significantly affect and influence their interactions with and support others.

Expressive

Isabella submitted two items for her expressive activity: the song Rise Up by Andra Day (7clouds, 2019) and the poem Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou (Phenomenal Woman, 2024). Her submission reflects her profound connection to themes of resilience, empowerment, and the importance of community support. These two expressive pieces resonate deeply with her personal experiences and values, showcasing the multifaceted nature of her journey.

The song Rise Up captures the essence of perseverance in the face of adversity. The song’s message of overcoming challenges speaks to Isabella’s experiences navigating difficult situations, whether personally or professionally. The line “I have gotten myself and others up many times” highlights her role as both a self-advocate and a source of support for those around her. This duality supports the transformative power of mentorship and the idea that individuals can lift each other out of moments of uncertainty and difficulty. For Isabella, this is not just about personal triumph but about nurturing a sense of community where encouragement and shared strength empower everyone involved. The song serves as a

reminder that resilience is often a collective effort, emphasizing the significance of connection and support in overcoming life's hurdles.

On the other hand, Phenomenal Woman (2024) celebrates women's innate strength and confidence, emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance and authenticity. Maya Angelou's words resonate with Isabella as they champion the idea of staying true to oneself amid societal pressures and expectations. This mirrors Isabella's advice to herself and others as part of her *papelitos* activity. Also, this poem encourages women to embrace their unique qualities and assert their worth. This message strongly aligns with Isabella's belief in the importance of self-esteem and personal integrity. For her, the poem acts as a powerful affirmation that credits the beauty of individuality and the strength that comes from being unapologetically oneself.

Together, these works embody Isabella's values of resilience, self-worth, and maintaining personal integrity. They reflect her understanding that while life may present challenges, it is crucial to rise up for oneself and others and embrace one's identity without compromise. This dual appreciation of personal strength and the supportive role she plays in the lives of others illustrates her commitment to fostering empowerment, both personally and for those around her.

Cristina *Testimonios*

Oral

Cristina was born and raised in the Southwest, where her academic journey was greatly influenced by her Mexican Catholic mother and Caucasian Mormon father. Her household's differing traditions and values often felt like a balancing act, navigating two worlds that occasionally appeared to clash. Her parents were very young when they had her, and her grandparents did not get along, which created a complex environment while growing up due to religious and cultural debates. Nonetheless, she and her siblings spent much time

with her mother's side of the family. "We didn't live with them, but we were with them very, very often, and we got to grow up on, you know, shucking the corn and making tamales together, doing all the things." When her parents divorced after the birth of her younger sister, her relationship with her father was nonexistent, "we lived in the same town, but he was very separate from us and didn't interact with us." Years later, her mother entered a new relationship and got a job for the first time, which meant less time at home. Thus, Cristina would babysit a lot. She did not know then, but this gave her a desire to nurture, which became evident in her leadership style and work ethic.

Precisely because her mother did not go to college, she encouraged Cristina and her siblings to pursue higher education, "You must attend college, Mija," her mother frequently urged, emphasizing the life-changing potential of education to bridge divides and open doors that might otherwise remain closed, her mother was crucial in her journey. Cristina's path to higher education began with anxiety and determination. She decided to attend North Star University (NSU) because they offered her scholarships and financial aid to cover tuition and fees. However, the shift from high school to college included challenges like financial limitations and societal expectations. She had a bad first year and lost her scholarship; she begged her mom to return home because she knew remaining at NSU was a significant hardship. However, her mom was adamant about her continuing, "My mom, you know, taught me you never leave anything like halfway done. You follow through…so she told me you are staying, you can do this." Isabella battled with self-doubt and the pressures of academics but was determined to fulfill her mother's dreams for her. Cristina's tenacity paid off as she slowly thrived, finding her place in the academic world and discovering a passion for learning and helping others.

As Cristina began her professional career, she faced numerous challenges. Initially, she received several rejections for job applications, and each setback felt like a blow to her

determination. However, everything changed when she landed an interim program coordinator position. This chance enabled Cristina to demonstrate her talents, showcase her capabilities, and prove her value to both colleagues and supervisors. Cristina has been lucky to encounter key mentors, mostly white women, who acknowledged and supported her potential. Their mentorship played a significant role in determining her career path and boosting her confidence to take on more extensive responsibilities, strive for higher leadership positions, and further her development. Especially when it came to one of her oldest mentors, who unfortunately passed away when she received her doctorate. She recalls that her support and belief in her potential were strong motivators for earning a doctoral degree:

> You know, she always would say, today is a good day to have a good day. And I always have taken that to heart to try to be positive about things, even in dire times. But, you know, it has really taught me to be positive and to not give up. I mean, I don't know that I would have continued on with my doctorate if it wasn't for her.

Cristina's Mexican American identity was a personal trait and a fundamental aspect of her professional work. At first, she felt the need to fit in with the predominantly white leadership around her. However, as she became more confident in her identity, she saw her cultural background as a valuable asset. She recognized that her experiences gave her distinct perspectives on the challenges students from marginalized communities face. This change in viewpoint significantly shaped her approach to her work, as her focus on accessibility and equity was influenced by her personal experiences and cultural awareness.

> I think all influences it because of who I am and what I believe in and believe in…I feel like it really makes a huge impact in the work that I do and not just for, you know, Latinos, but for all that are coming from marginalized backgrounds or maybe just don't have that full understanding of different types of education and opportunities. But being able to provide that, it really guides my day to day thinking.

Even with her achievements, Cristina continued confronting challenges tied to her identity. She shared an experience where a white male coworker consistently belittled and disrespected her contributions by continuously overstepping in her responsibilities and

projects, interrupting her in meetings, and mansplaining her input by saying, “What Cristina failed to say...” The situation with this individual had her fed-up, and she resolved it by directly addressing it with him and making it clear that it was unacceptable behavior, “I am not going to let you do that to me anymore,” she said. Navigating the fine line between asserting oneself and appearing confrontational was difficult in that instance and in many others. These situations underscore the gender and racial biases she encountered in her professional environment multiple times.

Another professional challenge she encountered was balancing her growing career with family life. However, she and her husband divided the responsibilities of raising their two kids, with him frequently handling more household tasks to assist with concentrating on her job. His reliable support played a vital role in her achievements. Their partnership enabled her to chase her professional goals while still fulfilling her roles as a mother and a wife. She shares:

> I was very fortunate to have a husband who was very dedicated to taking care of the kids when I had to travel and do all these kinds of things. And that doesn’t always happen, no matter who you’re married to or what your spouse’s or relationship might be.

Reflecting on her career, Cristina acknowledged that while there have been advancements in diversity and inclusion, significant work still needs to be done. She expressed worry about the lack of representation of Latinas in executive positions and the additional obstacles they encounter. To tackle these issues, she suggests that Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) create authentic, trust-based relationships where Latina administrators can freely discuss their experiences and challenges. She proposes a safe space to “have some calm, true conversations and really feel that connection with one another… sharing information and support related to what’s happening on campus and those connections are so critical to feel like you’re a part of it.” She also highlighted the importance

of having visible Latina leaders who can act as role models and mentors, and the necessity for institutional leadership to engage with Latina professionals actively.

Cristina's narrative includes themes of resilience, empowerment, and advocacy. Through her experiences and insights, Cristina actively shapes opportunities for Latina professionals, ensuring their voices are recognized and valued. Her journey within higher education highlights the importance of mentorship, embracing cultural identity, and the ongoing need for systemic change to support Latina leaders' advancement.

Written

Cristina's "*papelitos*" focus on encouraging and practicing mindfulness for herself and others. When asked what advice she would give her younger self about a higher-education career, she wrote, "Do not be scared. You have the ideas; share them." When asked what advice she would give an emerging Latina scholar, she wrote, "This will be a journey. Do not give up. Lean on us. Ask questions. Cry with us. We got you." Both pieces of advice reflect Cristina's growth and dedication to helping others, highlighting the transformative influence of self-encouragement and mutual support.

Expressive

Cristina submitted a vibrant collage for her expressive activity. It was decorated with inspiring quotes like "Use your voice, Evolve, always, The key to change is to let go of fear, and You can do this!" The collage acts as a powerful visual narrative of her personal and professional experiences. Every quote captures her ambitions and development while emphasizing the fundamental values that have shaped her evolution from a small-town individual to a prominent executive Latina at a leading public research university.

"Use your voice" holds great significance in Cristina's journey. It represents her growth from shyness and uncertainty to confidence and assertiveness. This change highlights

her realization that her voice serves as a means for advocacy, transformation, and empowerment, particularly in her role where she leads initiatives to improve college access. The expression “evolve, always” captures her conviction in the importance of continuous growth and adaptability. Cristina understands that both personal and professional development are ongoing processes. This perspective has enabled her to navigate the challenges of her VP position and view obstacles as opportunities for learning. The saying, “The key to change is to let go of fear,” resonates with Cristina’s experience of breaking through personal barriers. Initially reluctant to express her ideas, she discovered that fear can hinder progress. By recognizing and facing her fears, she has allowed herself to assume leadership positions and advocate for necessary change in higher education. Finally, “You can do this!” is a guiding principle for Cristina and an encouragement she hopes to share with others. It reflects her commitment to nurturing resilience and self-confidence among students, particularly those who may question their capabilities or potential.

Cristina’s collage serves not just as an artistic creation but as a deep reflection of her experiences, values, and dreams. It embodies her growth and the insights she has gained throughout her journey, honoring her origins and celebrating her achievements. By expressing her opinions to promote educational opportunities, Cristina is not only undergoing personal development but also contributing to transformations within the educational system, positively influencing the lives of many individuals.

Findings

Oral

Latinas have been empowering themselves and others through storytelling, sharing their personal stories and educational journeys, and expressing their struggles and hopes (Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2021). This has contributed to building community and resilience. Sharing their experiences helps them find other women with similar struggles, create connections and relationships, and strengthen their sense of

belonging. This study is no exception. The oral *testimonios* from Veronica, Gigi, Paloma, Isabella, and Cristina offer valuable information on the experiences of Latinas in executive positions in academia. Each of their narratives highlights the critical role of cultural identity, personal background, mentorship and representation, professional challenges, advocacy, and balancing personal and professional life.

1. Cultural Identity and Personal Background (FOK)

Cultural identity and personal background played a crucial role in shaping the professional journeys of *las ejecutivas*. Across the narratives, Veronica, Gigi, Paloma, Isabella, and Cristina highlight how their cultural heritage and early experiences have influenced their values, leadership styles, and career choices. Their backgrounds provide a foundational context that informs their approaches to navigating academic environments and addressing systemic inequities. For instance, Veronica integrates her cultural background into her professional life, using it to guide her leadership and advocacy. Gigi speaks to a deep connection between her heritage and professional purposes, stating, “As I have gotten older, I have become more and more comfortable in my skin; this has influenced some of the things that I spend more time focused on.” Paloma views her personal and cultural background as essential to her role within a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), emphasizing that “there is a value for all the identities that we hold.” Isabella discusses the complexities of her identity as a Latina woman in academia and the way she was raised, reflecting on the challenges to belonging; “Maybe my mom raised me and dressed me in a way that was to blend in, so it is not that I necessarily changed myself to blend in, but that is kind of how I was raised.” Similarly, Cristina integrates her cultural and family influences into her professional practices, demonstrating how these factors enhance her advocacy and leadership, “my identity really gauges the work that I do, for all that is coming from marginalized backgrounds, understanding their needs really guides my day to day thinking.” Their

experiences and insights explain the deep connection between their cultural identity and professional development, demonstrating that their backgrounds have given them valuable resources in dealing with systemic barriers within the higher education field.

2. Mentorship and Representation (SOC)

Mentorship and representation emerged as recurring themes with all the participants. They all accounted for the importance of mentorship in their development and advancement. They also strongly stressed that having other Latinas in executive roles for those mentorship opportunities was significant because it cultivated their confidence and belonging. Veronica champions the need for representation and guidance for emerging leaders, reflecting her dedication to promoting diversity. She recognizes that throughout her journey, there were very few Latina role models in leadership positions; however, she feels fortunate to have had the support of her supervisors. Gigi stressed the significance of representation and individual development:

> Representation cannot be separated from merit, as representation alone is not enough. We need to make sure that underrepresented groups have the very best education they can possibly have, the very best support, and the very best role models.

Stressing the impact of mentorship on aspiring administrators and how crucial it is to not only have that person to look up to but to develop your skills to benefit fully from that representation. Paloma regards networking and mentorship as vital elements of her professional growth, as well as the growth of others. She actively participates in peer mentorship programs but also discusses how she is an "open access administrator," supporting others by creating and sharing. The projects, positions, and initiatives she has developed have informed others nationwide to follow suit. She is always open to discussing how these ideas were realized with fellow scholars so that they can also advocate for change in their institution, "everything and anything that we do exists for the good of all," she says. Isabella also highlights the importance of mentorship for strength building and the need for

true inclusivity in career advancement, “sometimes you just need someone to empower you, to go that step that you were already leaning towards, but you just were not sure,” she states while discussing why mentorship is vital, and also acknowledging the difficulty in seeking those connections, it takes courage. She recalls that at first, she was unsure how to approach someone and “be like, would you meet with me?” Those interactions can be stressful since some people may not be interested in making time for others. Finally, Cristina recognizes the significant impact of mentorship on her journey and its influence on future Latina professionals, “having information and support related to what is happening on campus and mentorship connections opportunities are so critical to feeling like you are a part of it,” reinforcing the necessity for widespread support and encouragement.

3. Professional Challenges and Advocacy

Their narratives also feature major professional hurdles that most of *las ejecutivas* encountered, including systemic discrimination, obstacles to advancement, and various others. Their experiences emphasize the strength and tenacity needed to overcome these challenges. Veronica has faced systemic inequities and dealt with both personal and professional difficulties, demonstrating resilience in a field that continues to be gendered and racialized, stating that “having kids and working at NSU, which was not a very supportive environment, was really, really hard.” Veronica realized that she was burned out, that she was sacrificing her family over a place that was treating her terribly. Thus, she decided to spend more time with her children and work part-time.

Paloma also shared her journey through systemic challenges within higher education, achieving notable successes along the way. However, this success was the culmination of hard work and years of wearing multiple hats and doing the workload of numerous people to be noticed, taken seriously, and permitted to put forward initiatives that break the status quo. She attributes this success to how she is “internally wired” to “pursuing excellence and going

above and beyond is one of my navigational strategies," she says. Thus, her funds of knowledge are used to persevere and achieve a more significant impact, but this can also become an immense pressure.

Doing more and doing it exceptionally well can be motivating, but it can also lead to burnout and losing oneself. Something that Isabella also argues with her narrative. Isabella addressed witnessing many instances of discrimination within academia, asserting the need to maintain her values amid pressures: "You always want to have your values in check because you can get easily compromised, and it is not worth it." Success is important, but how it is obtained matters; you want to be proud and feel good about what you have accomplished and worked on. Isabella shared an instance when the VP at the time sabotaged her promotion, and she was given the familiar defense that she needed to do more. She needed to get her PhD and a vision. Nullifying her hard work for years, her ideas, and her projects, all of which had been attributed to her supervisor; hence, she "did not have a vision." This showed her that she was not part of what she called "the means girl club," a group of white women who were accustomed to putting non-white women down. This same VP practiced evident tokenism because she allowed one Latina (not Isabella) to be part of the club to seem diverse and equitable. However, Isabella was not willing to jeopardize her values to advance professionally. She acknowledges that she could stand up for herself at the right moment when it mattered and with whom it would make a difference. Although controversial, she advocated for herself and the initiatives that support underrepresented students.

Advocacy for systemic change was another emerging theme in their narrative, reflecting their commitment to improving conditions for underrepresented groups in academia. Veronica advocates for addressing systemic inequities, emphasizing her role in driving change within higher education. Having an impact is significant to Veronica: "I'm always very focused on trying to make a difference. So even if I don't want to do something

or I find something hard or scary, I'm very motivated by trying to make a change," she indicates. Similarly, Gigi constantly seeks to make a meaningful impact through services and community support, advocating for increased representation, resources, and funding. Her plans include getting more funding through donations and the institution so that her office's services are free to Pell-eligible students. "So, we are working on doing a better job of bringing in Latinx students, students of all underrepresented groups," she says. Like many amenities at NSU, there is a charge linked to these services, which can pose a challenge for marginalized students, limiting access to student services for those with the financial means to afford them. Paloma is focusing on leadership and advocacy within the university, striving to tackle broader systemic issues and promote equity in academic leadership. Acknowledging that the few executive Latinas nationwide are achieving systemic change and advocating for initiatives that foster change, "Latinas are stepping into leadership, you know, and getting to own that work, vision it out," she says. From an agency lens, many positions across a university allow for significant change, like in faculty affairs, academic affairs, enrollment management, student success, and many other areas where Latinas can take their expertise, values, and knowledge to lead toward change. Similarly, Isabella and Cristina's drive comes from their lived experiences. Isabella says, while reasoning about women having to prioritize based on a primarily male-dominant model:

> I think as a Latina, and as a woman, in academia, when I was working on my degrees, I mean, you could clearly see, sort of the divide in equity and expectations, right? I had many faculty mentors that were women who had put their childbearing years on hold to get tenure and to do their research.

Cristina similarly commented:

> It's scary. It's a scary place to be sometimes. I mean, and I don't think that there's always that full level of opportunity. I think that there's, you know, it depends on you, your family structure, and all these other things too.

While discussing being an executive and the underrepresentation of Latinas, both are heavily committed to fostering inclusivity and driving systemic change, utilizing their

experiences to support diverse voices. Thus, it is safe to say that *las ejecutivas* actively advocate for educational access and equity and ensure that Latina leaders' contributions are valued and supported.

4. Balancing Personal and Professional Life

Finally, the challenge of balancing personal responsibilities with professional ambitions was a common theme in the narratives, highlighting the unique challenges faced by many leaders, particularly Latinas. Veronica reflects on her struggle to maintain equilibrium between her personal and professional life; as mentioned before, she decided to work part-time at some point in her journey. However, this decision only came after she was completely burned out and realized what she was jeopardizing. In comparison, Paloma has been able to balance her role as vice president with her personal commitments because she now has experience doing so. However, at the beginning of her professional career, starting a family was a struggle, and she depended on her family's support. This is just one way that shows the intricacies of managing multiple responsibilities. Isabella highlights the struggles of aligning conflicting priorities and the pressures of navigating career advancement with childbearing, "the balancing act of that, that guilt feeling that you have all the time. I think that is what is hard," she says about the sacrifices she endured in her executive journey and balancing motherhood. In addition to juggling the complex field of academia, these competing demands can be tough. Similarly, Cristina confronted the dual challenge of balancing career and family, underscoring the importance of her husband's support and her resilience in managing these responsibilities. However, Cristina acknowledged that it was still difficult to think about those times, saying, "The time away... I still feel guilt about it." This persistent guilt is something that most of the participants expressed when asked about the sacrifices they endured and when talking about their children. It is evident they are extraordinary women, and it is also evident that their strong support system was vital in their journey.

The combined oral *testimonios* from Veronica, Gigi, Paloma, Isabella, and Cristina offer a deep and nuanced perspective on the experiences of *las ejecutivas* in academia. Their narratives highlight how cultural identity significantly influences professional life, the strength needed to navigate systemic challenges, and the importance of mentorship and advocacy. Each story stresses the need for ongoing support, representation, and systemic change to uplift and empower diverse voices in higher education. Figure 3 below provides a visual of the main themes and their subcodes. The thickness of the lines indicates the frequencies of the subcodes. The connected dotted lines indicate a correlation between themes and/or subcodes. Additionally, Figure 4 provides a second visual to help us understand the frequency of codes. Word clouds display words in various sizes, with more frequently occurring words shown larger and less frequent ones smaller. This figure shows the frequency with which the code mentorship and representation were used in the data collected.

Figure 4: Coding Map of Themes and Subcodes

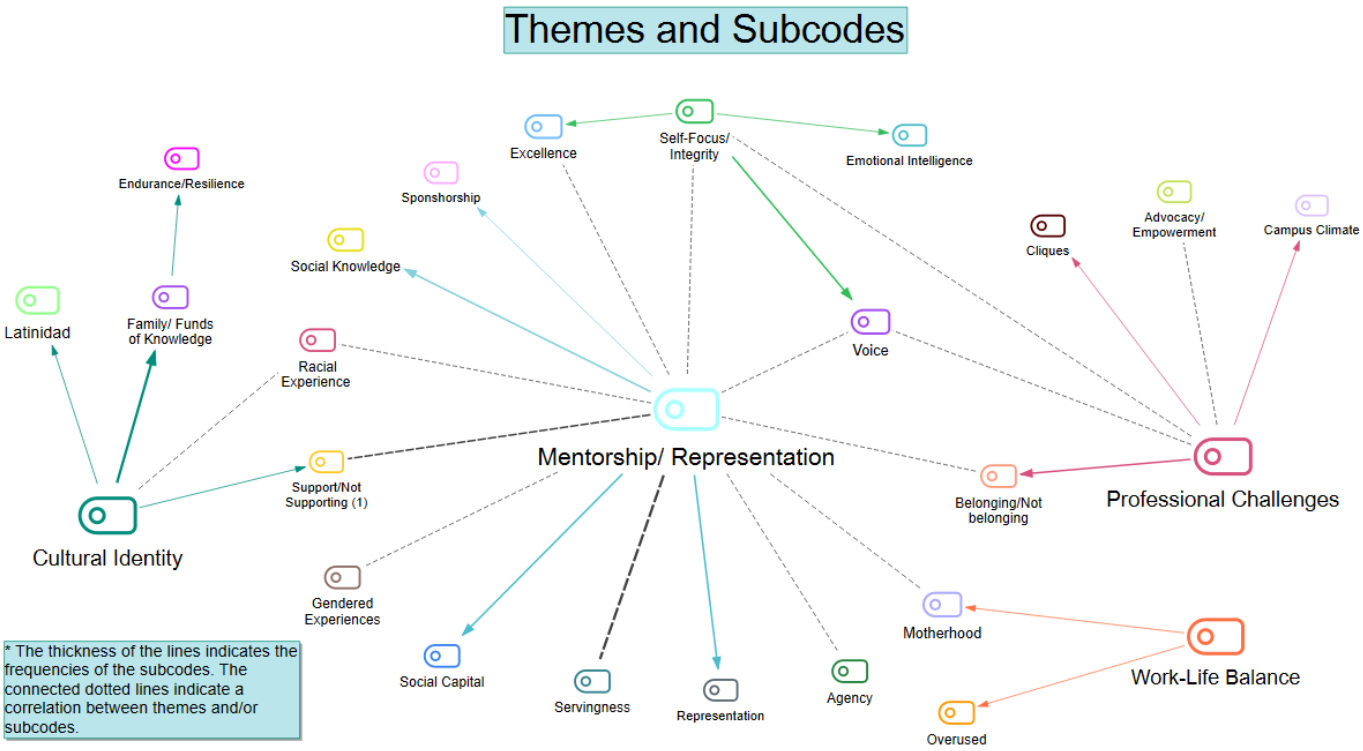
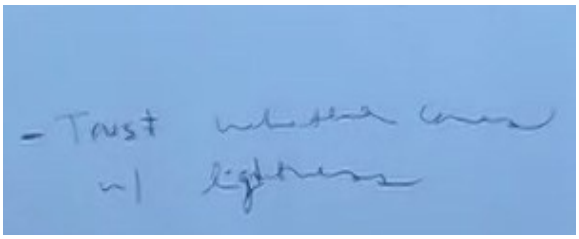


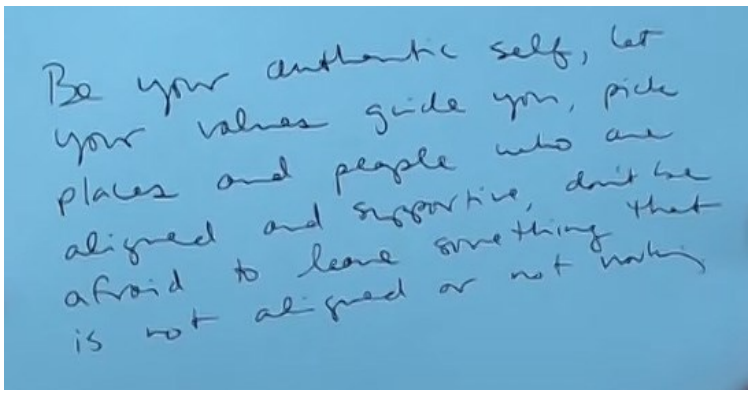
Figure 5: Word Cloud of Codes

Written

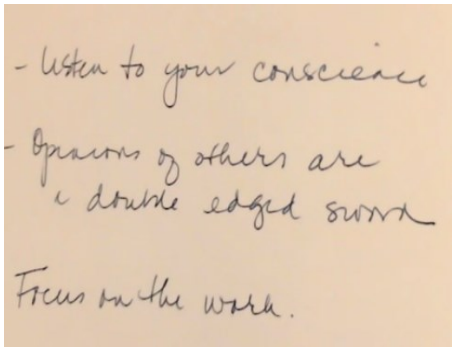
The written *testimonios* activity was inspired by the mere curiosity of discovering if the participants' advice to themselves would align with the advice they give to others. Demonstrating their natural mentorship ability and care. The exercise was based on two key questions: one in which participants thought of the advice they would give to their younger selves, and another in which they offered encouragement to emerging Latinas. Most of their responses expressed a profound sense of collective support and mentorship, recognizing that the road ahead would present challenges. The written *testimonios* provided insights into what they have experienced, and each offered unique guidance for navigating a higher-education career and supporting emerging Latina scholars. Here is a breakdown of the key themes from the *papelitos*:

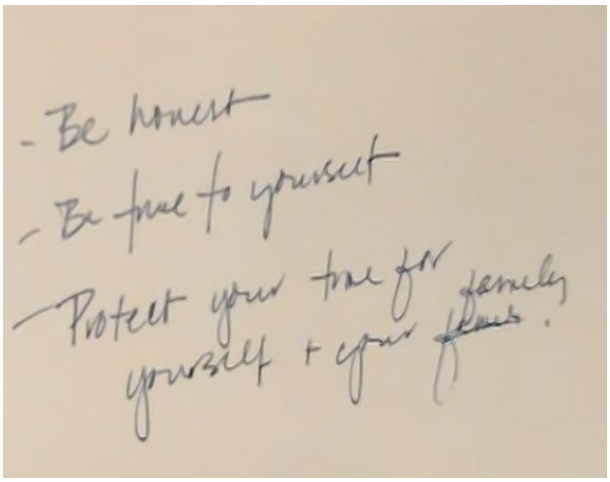
1. **Mindfulness and Authenticity**



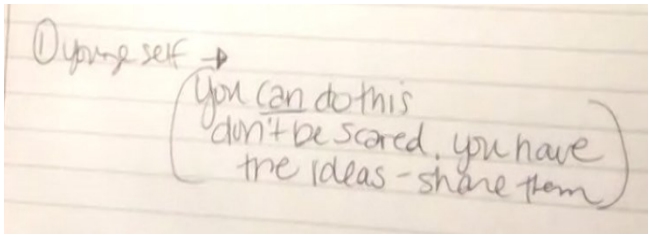


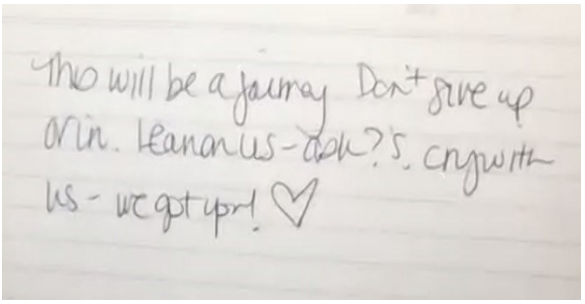
2. **Self-focus and Integrity**



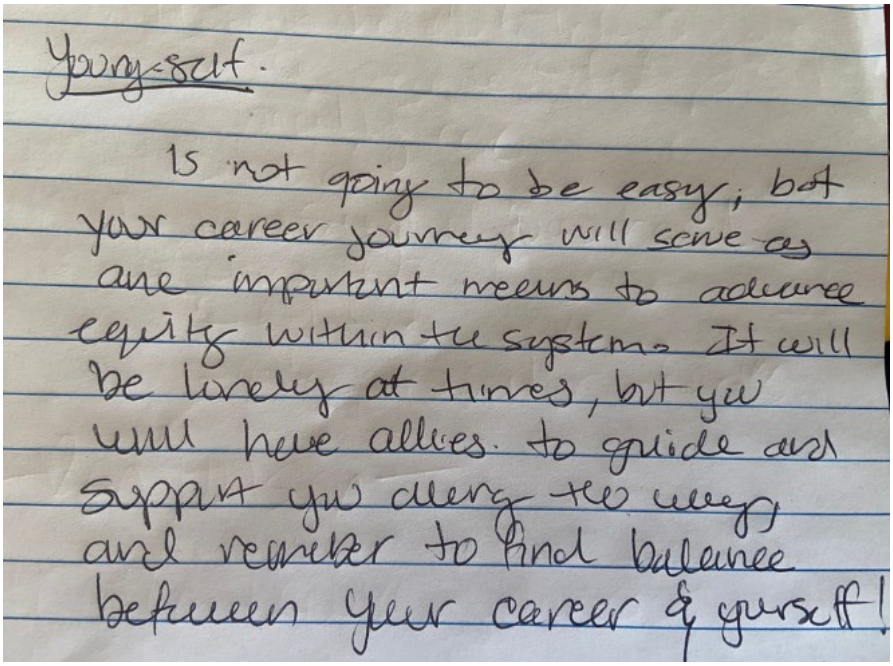


3. **Empowerment and Balance**

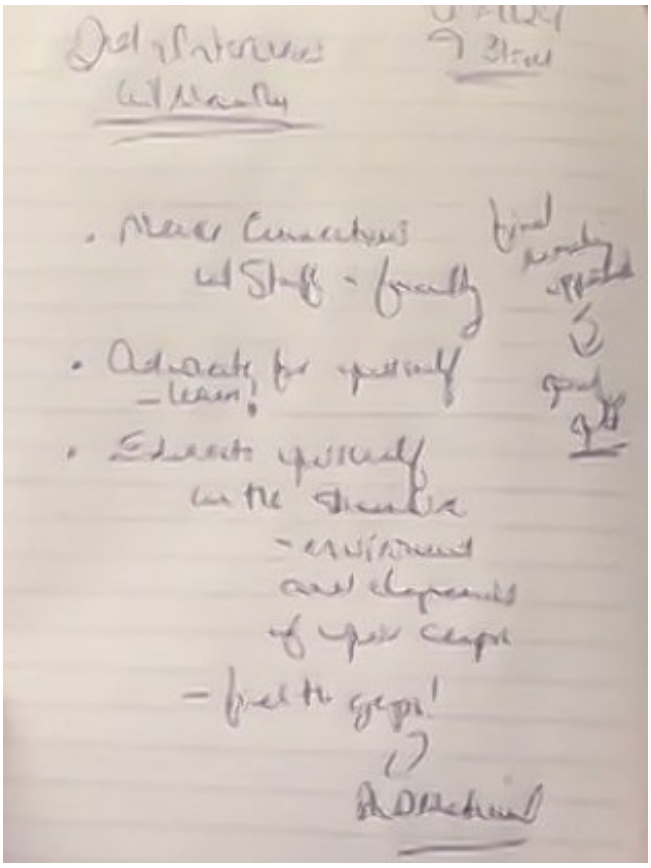


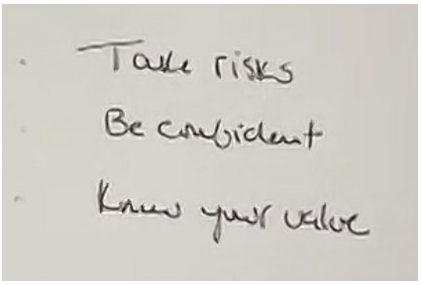


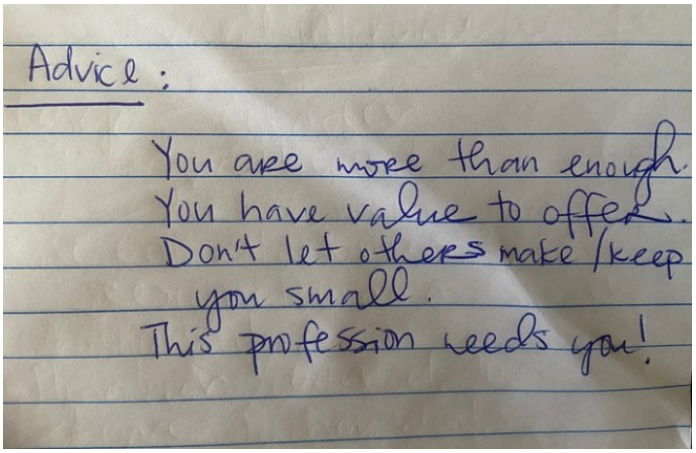
4. **Connection and Advocacy**



5. **Encouragement and Support**







Each participant offered a unique perspective shaped by their journey and values. Veronica and Cristina emphasized mindfulness and communal support, Gigi and Paloma focused on personal integrity and empowerment, while Isabella stressed strategic connections and self-advocacy. Together, the *papelitos* reveal a subtle understanding of the challenges faced by Latina scholars in higher education and offer a holistic approach to navigating these

challenges. The approach integrates personal growth, professional strategy, and the importance of supportive networks, underscoring the need to balance professional aspirations and individual well-being.

The oral and written *testimonios* connect on several central themes: the significance of cultural identity, the need for mentorship and representation, the resilience needed to navigate systemic obstacles, and the importance of self-care and support networks in balancing work and personal life. These shared themes not only emphasize the individual experiences of *las ejecutivas* but also highlight the collective struggle and mutual support among Latina scholars in academia. These *testimonios* present a compelling narrative of empowerment, self-advocacy, and dedication to systemic change, offering valuable insights for future generations of Latina scholars and leaders.

Expressive

The goal of the expressive *testimonio* was to encourage participants to share their experiences and feelings in a different and unique way, focused on their path to becoming an *ejecutiva*. The idea was for them to look at their journey and identify something significant. This could have gone either negatively or positively; for all of them, it was a positive thought. The analysis section of this study describes the personal and professional significance behind the expressive pieces provided by Veronica, Gigi, Isabella, Cristina, and Paloma. Each piece offers insight into their values, influences, and professional journeys. Below is an overview of the common themes found in their expressive *testimonio*:

1. **Personal and Professional Identities:**

   Each artifact demonstrates the connection between personal values and professional goals. Veronica's impact, Gigi's steady determination, Isabella's perseverance, and Cristina's focus on empowerment all highlight how personal journeys and core values influence their professional identities.

2. **Influence of Support:**

   All of the expressive submissions stress how external factors, including mentorship, family knowledge, and individual accomplishments, influence their professional journeys. The support from others (like Isabella's mentorship), the impact of family heritage (as seen in Gigi's artifact), and personal development (reflected in Cristina's quotes) are vital components of their stories.

3. **Symbols of Encouragement:**

   Each submission symbolizes broader concepts, such as Veronica's focus on impact, Gigi's gradual craftsmanship, Isabella's resilience and self-worth, Cristina's empowerment and voice, and Paloma's recognition and acknowledgment. These symbols reflect their personal journeys and professional beliefs. They provide insight into their approaches to overcoming challenges, achieving success, and receiving encouragement through professional recognition, family heirlooms, or support from others, providing reminders of strength and worth.

   1. Word Cloud

   2. Generational Artifact

3. **Collage**

The expressive *testimonios* offer a rich exploration of how personal experiences and core values shape professional identities. It also provides valuable perspectives on the experiences of Latinas in leadership roles and highlights the unified effort for equity, representation, and systemic reform in higher education. The oral, written, and expressive *testimonios* collectively show Latina executives in academia who navigate systemic obstacles with resilience, advocate for their rights and those of others, and consistently work to uplift

future generations. The figure below shows another word cloud, but this time, the analysis documents for each participant were the source. This figure shows the most common words used in all three data collection methods. Some of these words can automatically be attributed to positive experiences, such as professional, career, personal, and educational. However, we also see some that can be attached to negative experiences, like challenges, resilience, impact, and commitment.

Figure 6: Word Cloud of the *Testimonios* Analysis

Ultimately, through data collection and analysis, the narratives shared by Veronica, Gigi, Paloma, Isabella, and Cristina highlight their unique professional experiences as Latinas in executive roles, revealing a shared story of empowerment, resilience, and advocacy. Their paths emphasize the importance of cultural identity, mentorship, and representation in navigating the complex world of academia. These women have utilized their cultural backgrounds and values to overcome systemic obstacles, advocate for change, and forge opportunities for future Latina leaders in higher education. Their experiences also underscore the significance of building support networks, balancing personal and professional obligations, and maintaining a robust sense of identity when faced with challenges. Through

their *testimonios*, these leaders demonstrate the influence of shared experiences and the transformative power of community and mentorship. As they work towards equity, diversity, and inclusion in academia, they inspire future generations to respect their cultural identities, pursue their goals with determination, and advocate for systemic reforms to ensure the voices of marginalized communities are acknowledged and valued.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

"So, in spite of my nurturing instincts, I have begun to call you on your war. I now stand up to your defenses, unleashing my very own Latina fire right in front of your face…"

– Eliana Rivero, Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 319.

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Discussion

As a prelude to this section, I revisit the focus and frameworks driving this study. The data collected provides important insights into how *las ejecutivas* navigate their career paths within a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), utilizing their funds of knowledge (FOK) and social capital (SOC) to progress in their professions and strengthen their sense of agency in service to students and communities. The findings emphasize the intersectionality of their experiences, showcasing how Latinas leverage personal and professional assets to tackle obstacles, assert their agency, and support others. The following research questions are designed to guide the study and address specific aspects of the experiences of *las ejecutivas*:

1. What are the experiences of *las ejecutivas* in a Hispanic-Serving Institution regarding practices that encourage and/or deter their advancement, agency, and service contributions (servingness)?

This question examines the influence of the institutional setting, particularly one that serves a Latinx demographic, on the ability of *las ejecutivas* to exercise their influence (agency) and contribute to service (servingness). It seeks to identify the practices within the HSI that either facilitate or hinder their professional and personal development.

2. To what extent do *las ejecutivas* leverage their social capital and use their funds of knowledge to advance professionally, exercise their agency, and enhance their service contributions (servingness)?

The purpose of this question is to investigate how *las ejecutivas* employ their social connections (social capital) and their collected knowledge and experiences (funds of

knowledge) to navigate their roles and duties. The goal was to discover how they use these resources to support their career development and involvement in the community.

Las ejecutivas FOK embody familial, cultural, and educational experiences that shape their professional identity and how they approach work. The elements identified through the data collection as the influence of FOK include:

- Handling the Spanish and English languages in multiple aspects of their lives.
- Family culinary rituals, enjoying cooking, and home-cooked meals.
- Contact with diverse cultural influences.
- Navigating between their Latinx and conventional American cultures.
- The value put on education and hard work by the family.
- Learning to balance their personal preferences with those of social expectations.
- Valuable familial support systems include childcare, household support, emotional and mental support, and more.
- Respecting and preserving family legacy and cultural traditions.

Furthermore, their SOC provides connections, interactions, and relationships that enable them to navigate the institutional structures and take advantage of opportunities. The elements identified through the data collection as the influence of SOC include:

- Engaging in cross-institutional collaborations
- Relying on trusted colleagues and advisors
- Leveraging relationships for opportunities
- Participating in mentoring relationships
- Learning from diverse perspectives
- Involvement in national organizations
- Building a broad professional network

- Connecting the institution with external stakeholders
- Maintaining intentional visibility

Using FOK and SOC collaboratively offers a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of how *las ejecutivas* navigate their work environments. Combining both methods recognizes their inherent cultural strengths and the importance of external connections in fostering their advancement. Additionally, this research study shows that both FOK and SOC were instrumental in their journeys. *Las ejecutivas* have overcome career challenges and advanced professionally because these two resources have strengthened their capabilities and efficacy. This indicates that their backgrounds and professional relationships were integral to their accomplishments.

This study revealed that *las ejecutivas*, who identified with multiple marginalized identities (such as gender, race, ethnicity, and language), have been underrespected and overused by the institution, peers, and supervisors. They have been torn between family and career, making their path at times mentally and emotionally draining. The emerging themes, depicting their challenges and strategies in pursuing professional success and personal empowerment in academic settings, are listed and discussed next.

Themes

(1) Latinas greatly benefit from **mentorship** and sponsorship, which help break down barriers to advancement, advocacy, and empowerment;

(2) Latinas derive invaluable support from their **families** and **cultural identity**, significantly impacting their integrity and self-focus;

(3) Latinas face a unique set of **professional challenges** that stem from the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity;

(4) Latinas struggle to reconcile the demands of their professional roles with their familial responsibilities **(work-life balance)**.

1. Mentorship – Advancement, Advocacy & Empowerment

Mentorship and sponsorship play vital roles in the career advancement of *las ejecutivas*. There is an important distinction between mentorship and sponsorship (Hernandez & Longman, 2020). Sponsors go beyond the typical responsibilities of a mentor, who usually offers guidance, by actively participating in helping others advance in their careers (Ehlers-Zavala, 2024; Hernandez & Longman, 2020). Sponsors play a crucial role in recognizing peers, and it is essential for women, especially Latina women, to identify potential sponsors who have influence, institutional authority, and leverage in addition to mentors (Ehlers-Zavala, 2024). *Las ejecutivas* consistently emphasized the significance of having mentors, especially if they shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences; only Veronica noted having sponsors. This observation about the importance of support from others aligns with current research that emphasizes the crucial role of mentorship in advancing Latinx careers, especially from individuals who share similar identities. (e.g., Chang et al., 2014; Kosoko-Lasaki et al., 2006; López et al., 2021; Tran, 2014). Mentors provide essential guidance, emotional support, and advocacy that assist Latinas in facing systemic obstacles linked to racial and gender discrimination. Additionally, having other Latinas in leadership roles within higher education institutions (HEIs) fosters a sense of possibility and visibility, paving the way for more significant career advancement (A. Gonzalez, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2021). Conversely, the lack of representation has been shown to limit the professional aspirations of Latinas, highlighting the need for institutional efforts to improve diversity in leadership roles (A. Gonzalez, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2021). In fact, *las ejecutivas* indicated that it was often difficult to find mentors with similar cultural backgrounds; therefore, many of them had white mentors. They also pointed out that at the beginning of their careers, it was challenging to seek mentorship; some lacked confidence, while others lacked the time to be mentored.

However, it was clear that mentorship was a valuable resource for personal growth. Gigi shared:

> I think as a Latina, I mean, as a woman, right? Just in general. I think in academia, when I was working on my degrees, I mean, you could clearly see, sort of, the divide in equity and expectations, right? I had many faculty mentors that were women who had put their their childbearing years on hold to get tenure, to do their research. They had put, you know, they had prioritized based on a model that really is primarily dominantly male, right. And so they had to sort of find their way through that. And then to add being a person of color on top of that. And there's just a whole other level of challenges.

The mentorship, sponsorship, and support they received from others helped their empowerment and advocacy. *Las ejecutivas* recognized that empowerment arises not just from inner strength but also from supportive external networks. These networks, created through mentorship, professional organizations, and cultural groups, offered them vital resources for career progression and acted as platforms for joint advocacy. The results are consistent with Gonzalez's (2020) research, which emphasizes the significance of unity and collective efforts in advancing the rights of Latinas within academia. By collaborating, Latinas can confront institutional standards, advocate for inclusive practices, and guide the next generation of Latina leaders.

Similarly, research by Chang, Longman, and Franco (2014) highlights the importance of mentoring underrepresented groups in HEIs, especially women with multiple marginalized identities (just like *las ejecutivas*). Mentoring can be essential for managing institutional obstacles, aiding in social integration, building essential skills, and offering "psychosocial support" (p. 3), all vital in settings not inclusive of underrepresented populations. Moreover, my study aligns with previous research in that *las ejecutivas* convey that their experiences with mentoring significantly influenced their leadership growth and sense of community and have been essential in addressing the additional challenges they face in their current positions concerning race and ethnicity. Also, just like the participants in Chang et al.'s research, *las ejecutivas* found mentoring in untypical places among friends, family, and outside

stakeholders because that is where they felt most safe. While this support may not directly impact their professional growth and career progression, it plays a vital role in enhancing their emotional intelligence and expanding the FOK they utilize to bolster their agency and shape their leadership approach.

North Star University (NSU) currently offers several mentorship programs. The first, ROAD mentoring (pseudonym), is tailored for students in the honors program, making it exclusive to a select group on campus. The second program is a peer mentoring initiative offered by the student support center. This program focuses on students helping one another by sharing the university's best practices, tools, and services to support their success and foster a sense of community. Another student service center mentors first-generation college students during their first or second year. They provide numerous resources and tools to guide students in their transition to the university. Some colleges may also offer support services designed to provide mentoring. However, all of these initiatives focus on students. The only two programs classified as formal mentoring initiatives for faculty and staff are the *Mentor Certification* program and a *Mentor Association* (pseudonyms). The *Mentor Certification* program began in 2023, and this certification serves as a recruitment resource for faculty and graduate students. It recognizes that university departments are committed to fostering inclusive, equitable, and innovative mentorship values for future academics. A department, school, division, unit, or program within the university receives a certificate if at least 75% of its full-time faculty and doctoral students complete both levels of mentoring training. Next is the Mentor Association, founded in 2024, which offers faculty, staff, and graduate students a space for peer-group mentoring. This program pairs a mentor with multiple mentees and facilitates online internal training, peer group mentoring communities, and mentoring strategies and resources. It requires a one-year commitment, with monthly

meetings. Before each meeting, the program director shares mentoring materials, including articles, best practices, and activities for the groups.

Both programs seem well-structured and effective. However, *las ejecutivas* who have participated in some capacity in this program acknowledged that there is a significant issue with a lack of commitment from both mentors and mentees. This presents a significant hurdle for structured mentoring initiatives, as securing enthusiasm and engagement from both parties depends on their willingness and availability (Bung, 2015). Regrettably, many organizations think that simply having a mentoring program is a strategy for managing people, helping keep and nurture their human resources (Baker, 2015). Mentoring programs have significant potential to provide a strategic advantage at both individual and organizational levels. However, they do not achieve this advantage when there are failures at the policy level due to insufficient detail, neglect of people's needs, and ambiguity regarding the expected outcomes and related behaviors (Baker, 2015). The lack of commitment often arises from competing priorities, insufficient time, mismatched expectations, a lack of accountability, and overly rigid or loosely structured programs. Some potential solutions offered by Vikki Baker (2015) to these issues include:

(1) Establishing clear expectations and goals right from the beginning of the program (p.10);

(2) Creating a flexible structure that facilitates natural discussions and shared modifications of expectations (p. 9);

(3) Providing mentoring support through training and resources (p. 9);

(4) Integrating into the organizational culture and aligning the program with its values and goals makes it meaningful and engaging (p. 5).

(5) Support mentees by offering resources and strategies to encourage a more proactive approach to their growth (p. 10).

A lack of commitment should not deter the development of formal mentoring programs; it simply means the institution needs to enhance these programs. Baker examines the crucial role of mentoring in higher education and suggests that mentoring serves as both an individual tool and contributes to the institution's growth. She proposes an alignment, defined as “the fluid dynamic that allows for variation and flexibility” (p. 2), between the individual and the organization to increase the effectiveness of mentorship. She provides three types of alignment: vertical (the link between human resource strategy and organizational objectives), horizontal (the link between various individual HR policy domains), and implementation (the extent to which measures are implemented to execute the people strategy) (Baker, 2015, p. 1). This alignment can cultivate talent, improve employee retention, and foster a more inclusive academic culture (Baker, 2015). Mentors also give direction on research, share perspectives on academic politics, and counsel on how to sustain a position (Delgado-Romero et al., 2003). Effective mentoring offers direction and support to those who may face challenges in their career advancement, such as Latinas (Bung, 2015). It helps dismantle systemic inequalities by fostering supportive environments where diverse perspectives can be recognized and valued.

2. Families & Cultural Identity – (integrity & self-focus)

The research study identified various aspects of the women’s cultural and familial backgrounds that contributed to their professional lives. As shared by the participants, their cultural background provides them with resilience, a sense of purpose, and pride, allowing them to confront the challenges presented by the institutions. For instance, *las ejecutivas* embody a rich cultural capital that shapes their leadership styles and decision-making processes. This capital includes bilingualism, familiarity with diverse cultural perspectives, and similarity with lived experiences, all of which aid in understanding Latinx students and the community’s systemic challenges. These attributes enable them to advocate for inclusive

policies and practices that resonate with a broad scale of stakeholders. Recognizing and valuing their FOK within institutions can facilitate the advancement of other Latina administrators, as their unique insights contribute to more comprehensive and effective leadership. Paloma reflects on this when asked about her cultural identity and knowledge:

> I really draw upon the full scope of, the 20+ years that I've been in higher education, I'm drawing upon my family's journey, everything is informing how I show up to the work that I do, is framing my strategies. I feel a great sense of opportunity and responsibility to constantly go back and dram from thise things because they have been given to me, you know, over my life in different ways.

Moreover, this finding is consistent with earlier studies that emphasize how cultural identity is a source of individual development, building relationships in professional settings, and preparing roadmaps for others (Delgado-Romero et al., 2003; Espino et al., 2010; A. Gonzalez, 2020). Executive Latinas in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) frequently utilize their cultural insights to establish connections with colleagues, students, and other key stakeholders, forming a supportive network that enhances their professional development. This cultural foundation also motivates their advocacy for policies that advance equity for the broader Latinx community within these institutions (Ehlers-Zavala, 2024). This cultural foundation and understanding are reciprocal; they contribute their wealth of knowledge to the institutions and take their social capital and insights back home. For example, Isabella noted:

> When I get home, we would have our own class with my husband and my kids, because I feel like there was just so much they needed to know and pay attention to and understand. So that was, it was interesting that I brought a lot of what I was learning home, and be able to explain and identify for like my kids. Right. Like these are the things that we experience by being a person of color. It's not to make them feel less confident or that there aren't opportunities out there. It's just they need to know how we're perceived in a lot of cases. And what are some of the things we can do to change.

Las ejecutivas often faced significant barriers, including systemic bias and underrepresentation in leadership roles, hindering their advocacy efforts. Nonetheless, the resilience they develop in response to these challenges is a crucial component of their FOK. Their ability to adapt and innovate in the face of adversity (just like their ancestors) allows

them to navigate complex institutional dynamics effectively. By highlighting stories of resilience, institutions can better understand the unique pathways of Latina administrators and implement strategies that support their continued advancement. Therefore, for Latina administrators to thrive, higher education institutions must recognize the wealth of knowledge they bring. This includes developing policies that promote equitable hiring practices, provide professional development tailored to their unique needs, and ensure access to leadership opportunities. Institutions should prioritize the creation of supportive environments that validate and leverage Latinas' cultural and experiential assets. Embracing this theoretical framework enriches our understanding of *las ejecutivas'* unique challenges and highlights their critical contributions to fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments.

With cultural identity comes cultural responsibilities. *Las Ejecutivas* stated that they could identify the extra responsibilities they hold compared to their white colleagues due to their increased participation, and they viewed this as an act of servingness. For example, they are invited to present to Latinx students, participate in luncheons hosted by multicultural centers, deliver bilingual presentations, serve on panels, and provide mentorship to both staff and students, all to be recognized and valued while supporting their Latinx community. This finding aligns with prior research by Delgado-Romero et al. (2003), wherein Latina faculty members express that their work "consumes their emotional and psychological energy given the constant organizational, social, and cultural responsibilities coupled with a lack of respect and active exploitation" (p. 264). Both the Latinas in their study and *las ejecutivas* stated that they remain in this work, even though it is highly demanding and unjust, because of the difference they are making and the significance of their work for other Latinx individuals. These two studies are more than 20 years apart, and we continue to see the same sentiment, struggles, and systemic barriers.

A common systemic barrier is the lack of resources. The study revealed ongoing patterns related to the unequal distribution of resources and the various challenges *las ejecutivas* face in driving and sustaining institutional change. Through a complete analysis of the interviews, the study illustrates how their social connections have sustained their efforts to advocate for marginalized students and enhance their professional growth. This was in the form of collaborating on and off campus with various stakeholders and other institutions, seeking mentorship, and expanding their social capital. These connections and learning from diverse perspectives are crucial for accessing resources, opportunities, and support that facilitate their professional development and service contributions. The personal beliefs, values, and culture of *las ejecutivas* contribute significantly to their academic self-efficacy and success. Their cultural identity is challenged many times, but their funds of knowledge provide them with cultural congruity and the drive to advance, not only for themselves but also those who will follow them; they are paving the way. Similar to what Delgado-Romero (2003) shares, "We have to congratulate ourselves, and our *familias* (families), for giving us *las ganas* (motivation) to be pioneers, role models, and leaders in the privileged world of academics" (p. 279). Furthermore, the findings suggest that institutions, particularly those catering to specific demographic groups, should consider how their practices influence the agency and effectiveness of their members. Additionally, by supporting and enhancing social networks and valuing diverse backgrounds and experiences, these institutions can promote the success and well-being of all individuals within their environments. This approach benefits the staff and enriches the institution's overall effectiveness and service contributions.

3. Professional Challenges - Underrespected & Overused

All of *las ejecutivas* had to juggle demanding schedules, often feeling stretched thin. When asked if they felt the need to exceed expectations to gain visibility and respect, Isabella argued that for women, especially Latinas and other women of color, possessing terminal

degrees is often considered a prerequisite for being taken seriously in their fields. This highlights a societal bias that prioritizes educational qualifications as a measure of professional credibility. Paloma mentioned that when she was initially considering a PhD, an Associate Vice President told her that he looks for team members who either already have a PhD or are in the process of obtaining one. She respected his perspective, which led her to think:

> Well, if that's the way he thinks, who else thinks like that at that level? Because if that's the case, then I would hate to be prevented or held back from promotions and other opportunities because I didn't have that.

Similarly, Cristina noted that in a predominantly white male academic environment, she needed to excel academically and professionally. Thus, pursuing a terminal degree gave her new opportunities and strengthened her confidence. She established herself as a respected national leader by actively participating in numerous, often too many, initiatives. This observation underscores a societal bias that highly values educational qualifications as a measure of professional legitimacy and overcommitting to being relevant and seen. For example, Cristina was completing her doctorate but was in no rush. However, she was told, "If you finish your dissertation and get it approved, and you earn your doctorate by December, we'll offer you this job permanently." Thus, she was pressured to complete it to secure the interim position she had been temporarily filling for some time.

Advanced degrees are just one of the additional challenges women of color encounter. All women face hurdles, but those from marginalized backgrounds deal with compounded difficulties that demand even more validation of their qualifications and interrogation of their qualities (Dillard, 2018). This internal struggle underscores the pressure to adhere to perceived achievement standards within their professional community. Systemic structures often favor educational qualifications, extensive involvement on and off campus, and in shaping career opportunities (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group,

2017). *Las ejecutivas* are no exception; they are so dedicated to their advocacy and agency that they engage in what I term the *"Institutional Dance of Serving."*

This 'institutional dance of serving' refers to Latina women's complex and often challenging role in balancing the institution's needs with the community and student population they represent. More specifically, they are engaged in a metaphorical *quebradita*, a Mexican dance style where one dancer lowers another almost to the floor, emphasizing acrobatic skill and balance. In this context, the *quebradita* metaphor adequately captures the work of Latinas striving for equity as they perform intricate plans to foster inclusivity, often under constrained resources and among institutional resistance. These women find themselves in challenging positions, requiring them to navigate the delicate balance between institutional expectations and the student body's needs. Some participants excel in this "dance," skillfully maintaining equilibrium between satisfying institutional demands and addressing community needs. However, this alignment poses a dual challenge: the more they engage with the community and students, the more they may be perceived as threats to the institution; conversely, aligning too closely with institutional priorities can lead to accusations of sellouts by the very populations they aim to serve. The challenges women of color face in this balancing act are significant and underline the need for support and change. Paloma shared examples of her participation in various committees and initiatives, seeing these as opportunities for exposure and specific activities to gain knowledge for her benefit and advancement. She discussed serving on a senior-level position search committee:

> I have obviously been pretty busy lately serving on search committees but to be honest, like, I actually, you know, very much jumped at the opportunity to do that because the thing is too, I think as a woman of color, the more exposure that I get, the more opportunity that I can gain insight into that process. Right, and what a great opportunity to come to understand that process by not having to put myself, you know, as an applicant to do it right.

More than personal gain, the significance of their work lies in the underlying motivations that drive it. Despite feeling pulled in multiple directions, these women demonstrate remarkable resilience in their roles, fueled by their commitment to equality and service. They have faced the hardships of inequality in various forms. It is concerning that executive women who aim to serve the Latinx community often encounter systemic barriers that hinder their effectiveness, as institutions frequently fail to provide the necessary resources for success. Nevertheless, these women continue to push forward and are often held accountable for outcomes beyond their control when challenges arise.

Despite these limitations, influential executive leaders, like *las ejecutivas*, collaborate with campus partners and local communities to effect transformative change. This potential for transformation is a source of hope. However, the complexity of this "dance" becomes evident: not all individuals possess the skills necessary to cultivate community relationships effectively. Successful change requires occupying a position of influence within the institution and actively constructing and nurturing networks that facilitate meaningful connections with community leaders, student organizations, and key stakeholders.

Unfortunately, the complexities of this "Institutional Dance of Serving" remain a mystery for many women who aspire to hold these positions. It is essential to emphasize the challenges they will face. Most Latinas in middle management aspiring to advance professionally are probably unaware that they will need to be balance experts between institutional obligations, community/student needs, and the networks they must foster to achieve meaningful change.

Another thing they may not realize is that mid-level administrators can remain stagnant at that level for an extended period and experience what Bazner (2021) refers to as "racialized middleness" (p.575), feeling caught between senior-level administration and frontline staff, which results in a sense of isolation. Mid-level administrators are tasked with

executing programs and policies while navigating complex institutional politics and bridging the gap between decision-makers and those who must implement those decisions and deliver the services. This is a difficult task that, unknown to them, will prepare them for future executive roles. Racialized and minoritized administrators, such as las ejecutivas, continued to encounter unique challenges, including biases, microaggressions, overt aggressions, and inequality, which impacted their professional relationships and opportunities throughout their journey. However, *Las ejecutivas* do not operate in isolation. Their success centered on strong community ties and, significantly, the direct support of their families. This support has been instrumental in their resilience, nurtured their professional aspirations, and reinforced their commitment to institutional transformation. Understanding and acknowledging these challenges is critical in supporting these women in their roles.

4. Work-Life Balance

The issue of balancing personal and professional lives is a crucial aspect of this research. *Las ejecutivas* frequently experience guilt while trying to juggle the demands of their jobs with their family obligations. This ongoing struggle, often characterized as persistent tension, aligns with previous research on work-life balance for women of color, emphasizing the emotional labor required in managing career and family expectations (Murakami & Murakami, 2012). Nevertheless, many Latinas, like *las ejecutivas*, depend on their families to maintain their equilibrium and continue progressing in their professional and personal journeys (Castro, 2025; Hernandez et al., 2015; Murakami & Murakami, 2012; Murakami-Ramalho & Pankake, 2012; Saldaña et al., 2015). The deep connections with family also act as a source of empowerment, providing the emotional strength needed to tackle both professional and personal hurdles.

Researchers like Elizabeth Murakami-Ramalho have done extensive work on women, specifically Latinas, and the institutional practices needed to reculture the work environment.

In most of her work, she addresses the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and professional roles and how this phenomenon of work-life balance is experienced differently by marginalized groups. Murakami-Ramalho and Pankake (2012) present a social justice approach to work-life balance and examine how educational leaders, such as Latina Leaders, foster intellectual and professional growth in others while balancing their personal and professional responsibilities. They emphasize the importance of creating supportive environments that enable educators to thrive both professionally and personally. This significantly describes *las ejecutivas*; the social justice agenda of these women is a vital aspect of their work and a reason to balance their personal lives with professional responsibilities. They advocate for systemic changes that support their communities and those who need assistance the most. It is crucial for *las ejecutivas* to create supportive environments for not only the students they serve but also their teams and the individuals they mentor.

In contrast, other Murakami-Ramalho works do not connect with the findings of this study, but it is important to mention them because of their relevance. For instance, *Las Ejecutivas* did not indicate they felt pressure about the cultural expectations of caregiving and homemaking. Whereas the participants of Murakami-Ramalho (2008), "La Reina de la Casa Quiere Democracia: Latina Executive Leaders and the Intersection of Home and the Workforce," noted that they had to constantly negotiate the roles of "queen of the house" and "leader of the workplace" and were caught between two demanding worlds (p. 4). These participants indicated that they had to ask for support from their partners and facilities constantly; it was not automatically given, and they did not necessarily understand their struggles. It is interesting to see the two sides: having a support system and not having it, not intentionally, but because of family traditions and cultural norms. Although *las ejecutivas* did

not directly indicate that family obligations were an issue, they did express it as the most significant source of guilt, which still bothers them now.

This can be attributed to the fact that *las ejecutivas* hold many roles, more than women in academia and executive leaders; they cherish motherhood's most important role. This role has often been jeopardized in many ways by the demands of their work responsibilities and workplace culture. Most *ejecutivas* had two primary comments about motherhood and work: that it was the most brutal sacrifice they had to make, that they still felt guilty about it, but that it was also the reason for doing their work. Paloma says:

> I cannot help but feel both hopeful but also certainly impatient about the level of progress that we are making across our higher education institutions and particularly our HSIs. I often will say, you know, that this work, yes, it is professional, but it is also immensely personal …I want them to be able to show up and feel like they can bring all aspects of their identity and their lived experiences to the educational setting.

These women are deeply committed to the students they serve and the institution, yet their vision extends beyond their immediate responsibilities. They strive to improve academic environments, create more significant opportunities, and provide enhanced support for their children and loved ones. They aim to transform higher education institutions into better places for future generations, ensuring that those who follow do not have to face the same constraints, microaggressions, racism, inequalities, and numerous challenges that they have confronted and overcome.

This experience of being torn between their personal and professional lives is similar to the *institutional dance of serving*; they have to master a balance between two entities, and the moment they give more to one side, the other side will suffer. However, the difference here is that they have a support system at home that shows up in many ways to alleviate the struggle. For *las ejecutivas*, it was husbands who took more than their fair share and parents who would babysit or feed the kids, which also meant dinner for the family, tíos who would go to the grocery store to save you the trip, all of which allotted for extra time on doctoral

degrees, night events, or work travel. Numerous higher education institutions hold convictions regarding the nature of parental and family support. It is vital to demonstrate both the importance of education and the sources of support that help them persevere professionally: their families and friends. Several of *las ejecutivas* indicated that when they had children, the environment at NSU was not supportive and that they had to reduce their workload by going part-time. This choice is often seen as a lack of commitment to their work and professional development. They also observed that many Latinas in leadership positions had postponed motherhood because they believed that professional growth was not compatible with being a mother. Much of the argument presented in prior research (Asbari et al., 2020; Bichsel et al., 2022; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022) regarding factors that promote a lack of support is that institutions do not provide flexibility, on-campus childcare, and impose heavy night and weekend workloads. In their mid-twenties, the participants likely pursued promotions, eager to ascend the corporate ladder. However, that same participant in their mid-thirties often prioritizes flexibility, family time, or personal growth outside of work. Neither path is wrong, nor is either correct. It is simply life, and life unfolds as it does. Just as life and circumstances evolve, institutions should progress accordingly to meet the needs of all their people.

NSU currently has several programs designed to alleviate some childcare costs through reimbursement; however, these programs depend on annual eligibility. Another recent initiative at NSU is the creation of lactation spaces on campus. These take the form of individual lactation pods or rooms distributed across the campus, resulting in sixteen locations in total. This ongoing project aims to expand throughout Arizona and increase the number of locations to more than thirty. Thus, although NSU may not have been considered an ideal environment for a family-friendly workplace for many years, it is making significant strides in advancing family support, which is particularly meaningful for Latinas.

The work-life balance phenomenon also involves navigating emotional challenges. The many family sacrifices, like missing your baby's first steps, not attending a play or soccer game, or simply not getting home on time to put the kids to bed, take a toll emotionally and psychologically. While they open doors professionally, they also close some wounds personally (Hernandez et al., 2015). Furthermore, the practices of institutions can either worsen or ease the difficulties associated with work-life balance (Bryan & Wilson, 2014). HSIs can provide an environment with a greater sense of community and cultural alignment, but they may also be deficient in institutional support systems to achieve equilibrium (Murakami & Murakami, 2012). Many of these Latinas engage in more emotional labor than others from the institution because of their "motherly" nature or simply because they fit a race or gender quota. This labor is often unrecognized and can impact their ability to maintain balance or emotional stability (Hernandez et al., 2015; Saldaña et al., 2015). The damage that the accumulation of these emotions and this type of work can cause to their work, self, and personal lives is also unique.

After analyzing the common themes, I thought about the emotional toll these personal and professional experiences had on *las ejecutivas*. I considered that they sheltered their emotions away, like cupboards used to store items such as linens and dishes. However, *las ejecutivas* store emotions from aggressions, attacks, and negative experiences. They are accustomed to putting emotions aside to avoid conflict. Nevertheless, just like anything, this cupboard has a space limit; when reached, the individual may explode at the wrong time and with the wrong person or realize that they must declutter. I thought I was coining a new term, but it turns out it is a well-known psychological concept: "emotional cabinet." Dr. Donald Winnicott used this term in child development. It refers to a metaphorical concept where an individual stores emotional experiences in a mental space (Winnicott, 2013).

Winnicott's research (2013) highlighted the importance of the initial caregiver in a child's emotional and psychological development. The concept of the emotional cabinet can be viewed as a representation of how people internalize and navigate their emotional experiences throughout their lives. However, most of the emotional filling that *las ejecutivas* practiced was related to academia, so I will call mine *The Academic Emotional Cabinet*. In a Spanish-speaking podcast called "Se Regalan Dudas" (Shagun & Frangie, 2024), psychologist Adaly Lopez shares a process for decluttering your cabinet. Once a person reaches a limit, it is time to practice mental hygiene by not minimizing what happened or normalizing behaviors. Cleaning the cabinet is done by:

- Identifying what influences our joy: What constitutes a "crusher of thoughts?"
- Once identified, what actions should I take? What do I hope to achieve?

For example, if your boss undermines you in team meetings despite your expertise on the discussed topic, you must first assess the situation to identify what affects your joy. Sometimes, the other person may not realize the impact of their behavior, so it is important to reflect on the patterns (is this constantly happening?) and determine if there is a lack of communication. If it can be addressed clearly and confidently, do so immediately while keeping your composure and avoiding cluttering your cabinet. Additionally, you should have a conversation with your boss after the meeting to discuss the effect of his behavior, leaving emotions out of the dialogue. Thus, you noted that his actions affected your joy and took steps to address it so that your work environment does not take a negative emotional toll. If you let situations like this pass by and file away those emotions, you might begin to feel hurt, anxious, unappreciated, and unsatisfied. The difficulty lies in finding a balance between addressing the issue and taking care of your mental health. While we cannot control our thoughts, we can question them; therefore, most individuals will seek to improve their emotional balance and mental health.

Ultimately, the results of this research highlight the resilience, agency, and resourcefulness of *las ejecutivas*. Despite facing various obstacles related to race, gender, and ethnicity, these women leverage their cultural identity, social networks, and individual strengths to navigate challenges, advocate for institutional reforms, and empower themselves and others. The findings not only enhance our understanding of the professional journeys of Latinas in higher education but also emphasize the importance of institutions providing additional support for these leaders, primarily through mentorship initiatives, equitable policies, and the development of diverse leadership pathways. Future studies should further explore how cultural identity and mentorship influence the professional successes of Latinas in higher education, specifically examining how these elements can be integrated into institutional practices to promote more significant equity and inclusion. Future research should also examine the emotional and mental impacts of systemic practices in higher education on Latina executives. The following section outlines some of these recommendations for reform and future research.

Recommendations

Recommendations for HSIs

-Commitment to Change – (Moving the Needle Campaign)

Moving the Needle campaign is a national initiative launched by the American Council on Education to support women's advancement in higher education leadership (*Moving the Needle: Advancing Women in Higher Education Leadership*, n.d.-b). It was established in 2016, and it encourages leaders to increase awareness by signing a statement of commitment to help achieve the goal of having women in half of the U.S. college and university chief executive positions by 2030 (*Moving the Needle: Advancing Women in Higher Education Leadership*, n.d.-b). By endorsing the pledge, Presidents acknowledge that there is a dynamic pool of women qualified to lead higher education institutions. In 2016, the NSU president signed this petition. However, whether this endorsement was known to the

two presidents afterward is unclear. This is an important campaign, and with comprehensive strategies, institutions can implement practices and actions toward achieving a similar goal, advancing women. NSU and other HSIs can foster a campus-wide commitment to gender parity. This can be achieved in various ways. The recommendations below are designed to support Latinas in HSIs, but in the end, these changes benefit the entire Latinx community.

1. Acknowledgement and Enhance Communication

First, the President, senior leadership, and boards express their commitment through formal acknowledgment in speeches, formal statements, institutional mission, and strategic planning initiatives. Also, it is essential to enhance communication pathways by creating regular feedback opportunities for Latinas to express their views on institutional policies and procedures. Additionally, acknowledging and honoring their achievements through newsletters, social media, and institutional events can significantly improve their feeling of inclusion and recognition. Under the same communication umbrella, HSIs can create more bilingual programs and classes to serve their diverse student bodies better and actively showcase their designation and initiatives on their main university website as part of their core values and mission. The significance of being an HSI should be celebrated just as much as being a public research institution or any other identity, but it often is not. For example, North Star University (NSU) does recognize its HSI designation as a part of its quick facts but fails to incorporate it into its values and mission statement. The university should evaluate and update these elements to reflect its present identity and objectives.

2. Transparent Advancement Pathways

Second, supporting women's advancement by designing specialized programs and clear pathways. These programs should empower women to progress through mid-level and senior-level positions without stagnating in mid-level roles for extended periods. This may

include interim positions that prepare them for higher roles and help them acquire the skills and relationships necessary for a permanent position. Clear advancement pathways are crucial for promoting equity within HSIs. They should define explicit and transparent promotion criteria to guarantee fairness and inclusivity. Additionally, assisting Latinas in navigating their career paths can help uncover potential advancement opportunities within the institution, thus fostering a just and inclusive process. This essential element should be emphasized in the search for equity within HSIs. Similarly, it is crucial to prioritize diversity metrics for ongoing enhancement. HSIs should routinely collect and analyze staff diversity, retention, and satisfaction data to evaluate their effectiveness in serving Latinx communities. Significant organizational transformation can be achieved by establishing clear objectives for diversity and inclusion and holding leadership accountable for meeting them. NSU does have clear advancement pathways for tenure and tenure-track faculty, and they recently reclassified all of their employment categories, making the pay grade and career levels more transparent and comparable to the private sector. However, the opportunities for advancement and professional development have been scarce, according to some *ejecutivas*, as NSU is struggling financially due to the many effects of the pandemic and poor financial administration. They have gone through many layoffs and retirements, and leadership changes have made the consistency of development opportunities challenging.

3. Inclusive Leadership & Training

The campaign can also be realized through targeting advocacy, training, and policy that support women in leadership positions. This means advocating for gender parity by supporting policies that promote equitable pay, family-friendly strategies, and equal opportunities for career advancement. It can also include offering training aimed at implicit bias for faculty and staff. A key aspect of promoting inclusivity in HSIs is implementing cultural competency training. These crucial workshops, which should occur regularly, must

focus on Latinx staff's distinct experiences and challenges, including conversations examining the intersections of race, gender, and class. The material covered in these sessions could involve recognizing cultural details, identifying and confronting biases, and encouraging diversity and inclusion. This essential knowledge lays the groundwork for developing a more inclusive institutional atmosphere and aiding students by highlighting race awareness and social justice.

Additionally, HSIs should incorporate gender sensitivity changes by establishing inclusive hiring processes that support women candidates, involve women in search committees, and create strategies to retain talent derived from these hiring practices. HSIs should focus on cultivating inclusive leadership and hiring professionals who are knowledgeable about and actively engage in race-conscious and equity-centered practices. This can be accomplished by establishing mentorship programs that connect emerging Latinx leaders with experienced administrators, providing them with essential guidance and support. In addition, organizing skill development workshops specifically designed for the goals and needs of Latinx staff will not only enable but also empower these individuals to advance within their organizations, influencing the institution’s culture and ensuring they feel recognized and vital to the organization.

4. Resource Allocation

It is also essential to focus on resource distribution to assist Latinas at HSIs. This includes allocating resources to establish mental health and wellness initiatives tailored for this group. Furthermore, providing grants or financial support for professional development opportunities, such as attending conferences or pursuing additional education, can significantly aid in the professional advancement and success of Latina employees. Another way to purposefully allocate resources is by actively supporting the initiatives that support them, such as establishing and endorsing affinity groups for women leaders that can help

build essential leadership skills, including public speaking, executive training, networking with other leaders, and establishing support networks. These groups, by facilitating networking and fostering opportunities for professional development, play a crucial role in their career growth. Additionally, organizing cultural festivities to celebrate Latinx heritage can deepen the sense of community and inclusion within the institution. NSU has established an affinity group that supports Latinx staff, but this initiative is relatively recent. It was championed and developed by two dedicated Latinx women who overcame numerous challenges to bring it to fruition with a limited budget but abundant passion. Creating spaces that encourage community and a sense of belonging while boosting employee morale should not be challenging. The university leadership should already advocate for and back this type of initiative, and their support ought to include a consistent budget. This presents a significant challenge for NSU, which is currently grappling with a financial deficit. Opportunities for advancement are lacking, and any potential salary increase initiatives are currently stalled. Several *ejecutivas* shared that this situation has undoubtedly impacted employee morale, loyalty, and mental well-being.

5. Engagement in Institutional Decision-Making

Engaging Latinas in institutional decision-making processes is crucial, not just to fulfill diversity quotas but also because of the significant contributions they can offer, which helps create an inclusive environment. Ensuring their involvement on key committees and developing institutional policies can lead to practices that more effectively address their needs and experiences. This also provides an environment where they feel included and heard, their perspectives are considered, and their contributions are valued. Involvement in decision-making at institutions can be achieved through participation in important committees and leadership positions, including diversity councils, hiring groups, student affairs committees, governance bodies, and others. When Latinas hold these roles, they can

represent the unique needs, cultural aspects, and challenges Latinx students, faculty, and staff encounter. This membership holds significant potential since Latinas contribute a vast array of lived experiences, funds of knowledge, and skills that can help shape institutional policies impacting various areas, including financial aid, admissions, and curriculum development, to name a few.

For instance, a Latina staff member participating in a curriculum committee might propose the inclusion of more Latinx authors, historical viewpoints, or cultural references in the course syllabi. Another example is a student affairs committee; they could champion establishing support systems, such as mentorship initiatives or culturally relevant counseling services, to assist Latinx students in feeling more supported. Additionally, involving Latinas in the policy-making process can significantly impact the development of standards for bilingual services, financial support, or community involvement programs to improve the recruitment of Latinx students. Their participation ensures that these policies will be specifically designed to address the unique experiences and challenges often encountered by Latinx individuals, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Furthermore, another form of engagement can be organizing forums for HSIs to share best practices, which promotes collaboration and collective learning. These forums can act as venues for sharing successful strategies and resources to engage Latinx communities and improve their academic and social experiences. They can also help tackle recruitment and retention issues while fostering an inclusive environment that recognizes and celebrates the achievements of Latinas. For example, HSIs can collaborate to share practical strategies for establishing support services tailored to Latinx students, crafting culturally aware teaching methods, or offering professional growth opportunities for Latina faculty and staff.

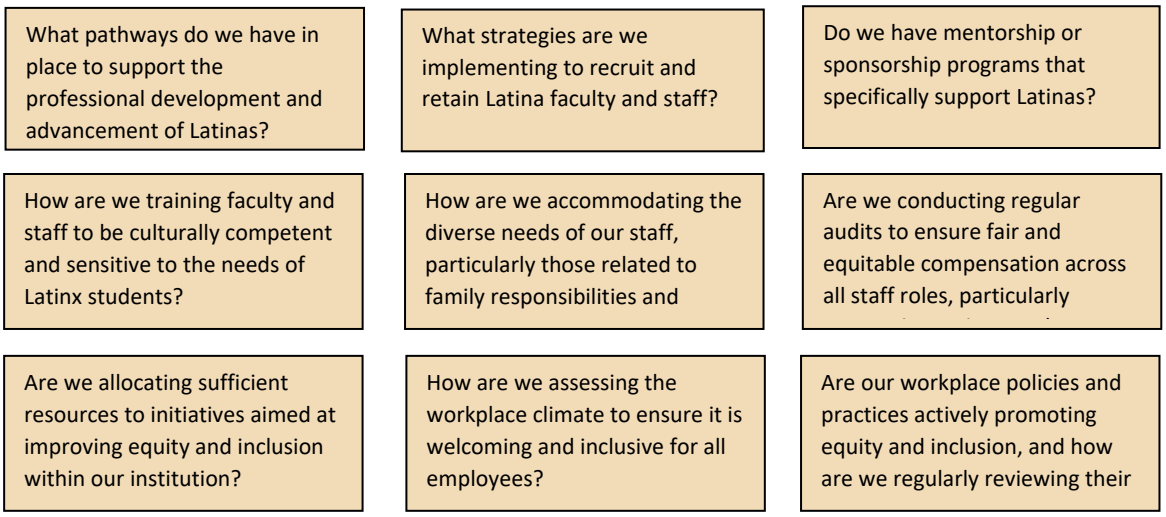
Having these conversations allows institutions to learn from each other and improve their strategic initiatives. It also ensures that Latinx students receive the most effective,

supportive educational experience possible. By including staff with diverse backgrounds in the decision-making process, institutions not only show commitment but also show students, faculty, and the local community that diversity, equity, and inclusion are top priorities for the institution.

6. Holistic Support Systems

Implementing holistic support systems that prioritize work-life balance through flexible working arrangements and family support programs is crucial (Bryan & Wilson, 2014). Moreover, providing wellness programs specifically designed to address the unique stress factors faced by Latinas, including mental health services and peer support groups, can greatly enhance their overall health. As HSIs strive to establish equitable environments, grasping the complexities of Latinas' experiences is vital for promoting inclusivity and support. The questions below evaluate the institution's dedication to equity and justice, along with its initiatives to adopt transformative methods. By asking these questions and taking meaningful action, HSIs can begin to deliberately cultivate fair and just workplaces that meet the needs and aspirations of every staff member.

Figure 7: Equity and Justice-Centered Practices



Note. The figure is guided by the "Questions to Guide the Development of Justice-Centered Support Services," by Dr. Gina Garcia (p.109), 2023, Transforming Hispanic-Serving Institutions for Equity and Justice. Copyright by Johns Hopkins University Press 2023. R. In comparison, Garcia's table emphasizes the services available to students. This is aimed at providing support to staff.

By prioritizing these recommendations, HSIs can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for their Latina employees while enhancing their effectiveness in serving Latinx students and communities. The Moving the Needle campaign provides a strong foundation for each institution to create practices, policies, and initiatives that address the needs of their students and staff. These recommendations demand endorsement, commitment, resources, and authentic change.

Recommendations for Aspiring *Ejecutivas*

In today's evolving landscape of higher education, emerging Latinas face unique challenges and significant opportunities while aiming to advance into executive roles within Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Those seeking to advance professionally in HSIs can benefit from a multifaceted approach focusing on networking (social capital), continuous education, and developing strategic skills.

-Networking

This research study supports the argument that Latinas must grow their social capital by creating a strong professional network. These networks can increase access to opportunities, information, resources, and sponsorship, which are critical for advancement (Crisp & Nunez, 2014; A. Gonzalez, 2020). The strategies Latinas can utilize include leveraging technologies, building relationships, engaging with professional organizations focused on leadership development, and culturally aligned organizations such as the Association of Hispanic-Serving Institutions or the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. Moreover, aspiring Latinas should pursue visibility by taking on leadership positions in committees, organizations, or community projects to showcase their skills. By sharing their personal journeys and highlighting the significance of diverse leadership, they can motivate others and spur them to take action. Digital or culturally specific leadership

platforms, such as LinkedIn and Latinas In HigherEd, are excellent sources for amplifying visibility and connections through milestones and knowledge sharing.

Another way of building relationships is through creating peer networks that later can become sponsorship assets. Forming peer networks creates a supportive community that gives emerging Latinas a safe space to discuss their challenges, share their achievements, and support each other. These networks assist in staying updated on institutional practices, trends, and decisions that impact HSIs. Access to information is a form of knowledge, equating to power. By actively increasing their social capital, emerging Latinas can improve their leadership abilities, cultivate vital networks, and effectively prepare themselves for executive positions within HSIs.

Lastly, and most importantly, Latinas can create a peer network that supports their cultural strength and knowledge. They achieve this by building relationships focused on *familismo* (familism) and *confianza* (trust). *Familismo* can be associated with "privileging the collective above the individual" (Gonzales, 2019, p.3) and is linked to resilience, as it serves as a source of inspiration during adversity. *Confianza* involves building trusting relationships, which are necessary to create "that bridge" (Gonzales, 2019, p.8) of mutual trust. Accordingly, Latinas cultivate connections beyond transactional exchanges, emphasizing authenticity, reciprocity, and purpose. Several participants noted how their relationships with other Latinas have been instrumental in their sense of belonging and their approach to work. These relationships are culturally relevant and focus on fostering trust while remaining true to their identity and heritage. Thus, networking for Latinas can look different, and it should. It may involve cooperation in research that serves their community, a committee that invites *charla* (conversation) to ignite ideas that transform the institution, or simply a *cafésito* (coffee) that builds relationships lasting a lifetime. Hence, relationships formed in *familismo*

and *confianza* promote inclusive environments for Latinas' success. Building connections for Latinas goes beyond being merely surface-level; it is the key ingredient for success.

-Continuous Education

Continuous education is another vital aspect of career advancement for Latinas. Pursuing advanced degrees relevant to their academic fields can enhance their qualifications and broaden their knowledge. Earning a master's degree or doctorate can improve their competitiveness and qualifications for positions they would otherwise be ineligible to apply for. Besides making them eligible for specific roles and opening up greater opportunities, advanced degrees can equip Latinas with specialized expertise, including organizational leadership, social justice, policy development, and curriculum design. Additionally, obtaining an advanced degree in a related field, such as higher education, prepares them to navigate complex institutional structures and practices. A clear understanding of how higher education institutions (HEIs) operate provides an advantage, allowing them to adapt more quickly to roles involving faculty relations, governance groups, budgeting, student affairs, policy, and more. This positions them as subject-matter experts and valuable assets to their institutions, helping to overcome systemic barriers that often prevent Latinas from reaching decision-making positions.

Combined with their funds of knowledge and personal experiences, these degrees enable them to effectively advocate for the distinct needs of Latinx students and communities. These community relations and advanced degrees can open doors for building connections, networking, and mentoring opportunities. Through degree programs, Latinas can participate in conferences, seminars, research, and specialized programs, often at a better cost, or even fully sponsored by their college. Giving them the chance to build strong professional networks and access opportunities that may not be available otherwise. The stories of *las ejecutivas* illustrate how earning advanced degrees helped them shatter

stereotypes, providing both validation and confidence. Additionally, they emerged as role models for students and faculty alike. Their achievements challenge the status quo and serve as an inspiration for Latinas like me and the next generation of *ejecutivas*.

-Developing Strategic Skills

Executive positions often demand strong leadership skills, conflict resolution ability, and organizational management, all of which can be attained by advanced degrees and participation in leadership training programs. Being involved in programs, internships, or research projects that develop essential skills in management, diversity, teamwork, and strategic planning is beneficial.

Developing strategic skills is essential for success in executive roles. Gaining financial planning, thinking in long-term plans, and data-driven decision-making processes is critical. Promoting diversity and inclusion is equally significant, as it is a key focus for upcoming leaders who champion initiatives that enhance equity and are involved in shaping policies for marginalized communities; this is especially significant for HSIs. Developing these skills also prepares them for adaptation and changing demands. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are constantly evolving, that is, with student demographics, technological shifts, and government policies; with the proper skills, Latinas can anticipate changes, adapt accordingly, and seize emerging opportunities that benefit their students. Embracing these challenges also provides them with growth, fresh experiences, conflict resolution, collaboration, and quick thinking.

In conclusion, the path for aspiring Latinas seeking to be ejecutivas within HSIs is filled with obstacles and possibilities. By adopting a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes networking, continuous learning, and the development of key skills, these leaders can effectively navigate the intricacies of higher education. Establishing and maintaining strong professional relationships and pursuing mentorship opportunities are essential for breaking

down barriers and boosting their confidence. At the same time, ongoing education provides them with the necessary qualifications for leadership roles. Furthermore, cultivating their social capital and utilizing their funds of knowledge can enhance their effectiveness as leaders and promote inclusivity. As Latinas engage with their colleagues, stay updated on industry developments, and champion diversity, they position themselves not only for individual achievement but also as influential leaders capable of enacting significant change within their institutions. With these approaches, emerging Latinas can create a fairer future in higher education leadership.

Recommendations from the Participants

-Create Positions

To attract, support, and retain Latina administrators in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), it is essential to establish senior leadership roles, many of which are currently lacking. Creating these positions will not only address the significant gap but also empower the individuals who occupy them, enabling them to influence the future of HSIs. As previously discussed in Chapter 2 and illustrated in Figure 2, the representation of women has increased over the last ten years. This is especially true for mid-level positions aimed at advancing HSI initiatives, such as directors and program managers, reinforcing the argument that there is a growing demand for colleges and universities to commit to creating more senior-level positions.

Historically, many of these roles, even at the director level, relied on grant funding, which created uncertainty about their longevity once grants expired. Fortunately, this situation has improved, and there is now a noticeable increase in institutionalized positions. These roles need proper support during transitions, especially when new staff are brought in. This can be accomplished through various methods, such as providing financial resources,

ensuring appropriate staffing levels, and offering fair compensation. This approach highlights fair treatment and recognizes the contributions of employees. Moreover, understanding the complexities of an employee's situation, including family dynamics and multi-generational households, is essential. This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to employee well-being, reflecting a commitment to supporting individuals beyond their professional responsibilities. Transitioning to a new state and institution involves more than just a physical move; such transitions can be difficult and require thoughtful planning and resources.

Likewise, numerous valuable roles within institutions are essential beyond traditional leadership positions. For instance, a vice president of enrollment management can be crucial in enhancing access, outreach, and onboarding processes for students and their families at HSIs. Similarly, a vice provost of faculty affairs can significantly influence promotion and tenure practices, recruitment, retention, and campus culture, particularly for their Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) staff. Leadership is not limited to the highest roles, such as president or provost; many positions at various levels are vital in shaping the institution's environment and policies.

-Visibility

Enhancing the visibility of Latina individuals actively engaged in the field is crucial. Visibility affirms presence and challenges underrepresentation. It is about attracting more Latina individuals and recognizing and valuing the contributions of those already present. While certain faculty members and departments have gained recognition, it is vital to utilize existing resources to attract more Latina individuals. After achieving its HSI designation, the institution is anticipated to increase its competitiveness with other HSIs, potentially drawing in students who had not previously considered attending because it was not yet designated as an HSI. The aim is not to pull students away from their communities but to make deliberate efforts to attract more Latina individuals, particularly in leadership and faculty roles.

Although many HSIs excel at recruiting faculty members, there is a clear need for increased representation across various positions. The institution can leverage its strengths to improve administrative leadership and faculty recruitment.

-Mentorship

Many research studies have explored the achievements of women of color in academic faculty roles due to mentoring opportunities (e.g., Eiden-Dillow, 2022; Hernandez, 2018; Robles-Goodwin, 2025; Villaseñor et al., 2013). Others have explored the effects of mentoring on the development of women leaders of color in higher education (Chang et al., 2014; Tran, 2014) and those who have studied the effects of staff mentors on undergraduate students (López et al., 2021). Although the premise is different, they all conclude in some way that mentoring has contributed tremendously to leadership development and recognize that mentoring is a valuable strategy for supporting and retaining staff of color. Like these research studies, this one recommends establishing more formal programs to support Latinx administrators within HSIs. Emphasizing the positive impact of initiatives in other HSIs and how the formal structures can facilitate professional development and networking. For instance, the University of Houston (UH), also an HSI, has developed a mentoring program called *Las Comadres College Mentoring Program (Las Comadres).* This mentoring program, as indicated by López et al. (2021), has created a pipeline for the "recruitment, retention and promotion of Latina faculty and higher education professionals" (p.19). Thus, one idea for NSU and other HSIs is to start a group coaching circle for Latinx individuals, a structured program where a group of individuals, led by a coach, share their experiences and learn from each other. This format can be practical due to shared experiences and a broader reach compared to one-on-one mentoring, making it more inclusive and impactful. It can also create a sense of community, foster engagement, and promote inspiration. One more significant advantage of a comprehensive mentoring program is that faculty and staff can

discover shared interests and create research-to-practice initiatives, ultimately enhancing the success outcomes for both staff and students.

Another similar approach is implementing a cohort model for underrepresented voices. This initiative involves identifying mentors and conducting workshops on essential administrative skills and the dynamics of being a minority in the workplace. This idea, similar to the one at UH, focuses on the Latina community members' social, emotional, and cultural components (López et al., 2021). This can foster a sense of belonging and a stronger connection to the institution. However, concerns about the feasibility of managing a cohort and the potential exclusion of individuals who do not make it into the cohort are valid. Instead, having monthly workshops provides broader access to valuable information and resources. This broader and more accessible format is crucial for sharing knowledge about navigating the institution, so that monthly workshops might be more effective than a limited cohort model. The idea is to benefit a larger audience by sharing personal experiences and insights, promoting their funds of knowledge (FOK). Nonetheless, this workshop structure diminishes the qualities *Las Comadres* cherished in their initiative: the close connections, the sense of community, and the trust fostered through retreats and caring activities.

Like *Las Comadres*, California State University at Monterey Bay has a mentoring initiative called *Mujersitas* (Ek et al., 2010; Villaseñor et al., 2013). According to Villaseñor et al. (2013), *Mujersitas* mentoring differs from other mentoring programs, as it connects "academic, professional, and personal aspects within a culturally relevant context to foster a more significant and lasting mentoring connection" (p. 1). The *Mujersitas* initiative highlights the significance of staff mentoring students, while the current study proposes implementing programs to provide mentorship to staff. However, the reasoning and concepts presented in their initiative are relevant because they involve women of color at various stages of their academic journeys, who are eager and willing to share their experiences of

being mentored, mentoring others, and navigating their institutions. This can be easily adapted into a program for staff at different levels of their professional journeys.

These formal programs should provide a space for discussions supporting the participants' growth and development. Moreover, by validating both FOK and SOC, HSIs can enhance the design of mentorship and professional development programs, ensuring they honor and leverage the cultural insights of Latina administrators. Simultaneously, this can strengthen networking opportunities for Latinas, improve their career trajectories, and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive academic environment.

-Early involvement

The last participant's recommendation was the idea of "starting them young." It is crucial to initiate career exploration initiatives for Latinas in higher education at earlier stages rather than waiting until they reach the university level. This proactive approach not only prepares students for their future careers but also promotes a sense of belonging and purpose within the academic environment. It is important to involve students in career exploration activities during their undergraduate studies, at community colleges, and in high school programs. Students and staff have often expressed that they were unaware of the wide range of career opportunities available in a university setting beyond faculty roles until later in their academic journey. Therefore, the idea is for universities to actively facilitate these career exploration opportunities, enabling students to identify and pursue various career paths within the academic environment.

Recommendations for Future Research

- **Include More HSIs**

Future research should include more HSIs. Including more HSIs in similar research is important for several reasons. Not all HSIs are the same. We have learned through many studies that they are complex institutions (G.A. Garcia, 2023a). Thus, multiple HSIs

representing different regions, physical infrastructure, student demographics, and institutional types (public, private, community colleges, etc.) can better address their populations' distinct needs, cultural contexts, and challenges. This research study focuses on one HSI and provides insights limited to the institution's unique characteristics and is more based on the participants' personal experiences, which can be subjective. Future research should incorporate a variety of HSIs to identify broader trends, patterns, funding disparities, access to resources, faculty diversity, and institutional support. Several of the participants commented that HSI initiatives are underfunded and that DEIA is often the area that lacks resources and budget. By exploring these issues across a range of HSIs, researchers can provide evidence to advocate for more equitable funding and institutional policies that benefit a more significant number of Latinx students and communities. By broadening the scope of research, scholars can help create more inclusive, equitable, and practical strategies for supporting Latinx students in higher education across diverse institutional contexts. However, this will require a research team, more time than allotted for a dissertation, and research funding.

- **FOK Contributions**

The primary purpose of this research was twofold. First, based on a review of current research on funds of knowledge (FOK), I identified a need for greater clarity regarding how funds of knowledge contribute to the development and advancement of executive Latinas. More discussion about the contributions of FOK to the field is necessary, as it serves as a call to action for all those interested in this area of research. While there has been extensive research on the contributions of FOK to students' lives and development, a broader discussion must be conducted that collaborates with the more well-known social capital framework and explores how it contributes to staff development. Secondly, I wanted to highlight the significance and value of our family and community knowledge. I aimed to

demonstrate that we are inherently rich in knowledge and that it equips us with the tools needed to overcome adversity, show compassion, be resourceful, and possess many positive qualities that are often overlooked. Through this study, *las ejecutivas* emphasized the importance of their FOK in all aspects of their journey, including leadership, development, and agency. A research study focused solely on staff and their FOK can provide greater insight into how FOK contributes to their development, resilience, and the type of support they offer.

- **Research Other Identities**

The evolution of Latinx staff in higher education has significant implications for policy and practice. Institutions must prioritize diversity in hiring and create pathways for the advancement of Latinx professionals. Future research should focus on the intersectionality of Latinx identities, examining how factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, language barriers, and immigration status impact the experiences and advancement of Latinx staff. Another important identity that requires further investigation is motherhood, particularly for mothers of color in executive positions. As previously noted, all participants in this research were mothers, a valued identity they had to sacrifice at different times of their journey. Future research on this topic can provide a clearer understanding of the effects of professional growth on motherhood and vice versa.

- **Women Not Supporting Women**

Another common theme that is not discussed in this study but is worth mentioning for future research is the issue of women not supporting women, particularly Latina women who do not support other Latina women. One participant provided an example in which another Latina advised her to style her hair differently to be taken seriously. However, this theme did not emerge with all participants or through other data collection methods. This could be due to several factors: the limited number of participants and institutions, the questions posed

during data collection, or the possibility that the situation is currently different. Nevertheless, future research on gender-related support can offer a clearer understanding of the power dynamics among women. Addressing issues related to gender and race is not simple, and there are no easy answers or solutions. However, Pat Heim and Susan Golant (2015) address this in their book "Hardball for Women: Winning at the Game of Business," where they introduce the concept of the "power dead-even rule." This principle clarifies the dynamics that influence women's interactions in both professional and personal contexts, and it applies to their relationships, self-assurance, and impact. In order to be supportive of other women, it is essential for each woman to see themselves as confident and strong as the other women. According to Heaim and Golant, when there is a disbalance in power, such as when other women attain a higher status than their counterparts, it is typical for some women to resort to unsupportive attitudes, gossiping, exclusion, or belittling. This conduct often occurs subconsciously, and many women may not recognize the motives behind their actions. This subtle yet significant dynamic greatly affects why some women may not wholly support one another (Heim & Golant, 2005). It serves as a call to action for transforming these power dynamics. This shows how important it is for women to build supportive connections. When these connections are strong, key aspects of life can work well together.

This theme was completely surprising to me, as it does not match my personal experience. I have been fortunate to receive the support, mentorship, and friendship of other Latinas. I believe this is due to the sisterhood that has developed in recent years; more Latina women are increasingly working together to uplift one another and advance initiatives to challenge the status quo without undermining each other. In my Latina network, we are not interested in putting other Latinas down or taking away power; we thrive in unity, as together, we are truly heard. I wonder if a study examining the relationships among Latinas

two decades ago compared to today will reveal differences in relationships and unity. That is why I am proposing this as a potential research topic.

- **Work-Life Balance**

Several studies have examined work-life balance issues among staff from various racial and ethnic backgrounds (Castro, 2025; Hernandez et al., 2015; Murakami & Murakami, 2012; Murakami-Ramalho & Pankake, 2012; Saldaña et al., 2015), some of which were used to discuss the findings of this study. However, fewer have focused explicitly on executive Latinas. Therefore, research is suggested to explore the predictors of work-life balance conflicts for Latinas: How are institutions proactively addressing the work-life balance challenges Latina leaders face? How are Latinas managing work-life balance, and how does it impact their personal and professional lives? These important research questions can be addressed by conducting comprehensive studies with Latinas at every level in mind. The findings will likely align with those observed among *las ejecutivas*, indicating that institutions must provide essential support to enhance work-life balance through flexible work policies, childcare services, family support, formal mentorship opportunities, community-building initiatives, and recognition of emotional labor. By fostering a supportive and inclusive environment, institutions can help mitigate some of the pressures Latinas encounter at all workforce levels, not just among executives. An inclusive environment embraces everyone and can facilitate a healthier and more sustainable work-life balance for all employees.

Recommendations Conclusion

The recommendations presented across different categories offer a complete and actionable structure for enhancing Latina representation in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). By focusing on strategies that empower Latina administrators, like establishing clear advancement pathways, promoting inclusive leadership, and offering strong mentorship and

support systems, HSIs can lead to transformative changes in higher education. These actions not only benefit Latina professionals but also enhance the academic experience for Latinx students, fostering a more equitable and sustainable environment for everyone.

Additionally, the recommendations shared for aspiring Latinas seeking to enter executive roles within HSIs emphasize the importance of employing strategies such as building unique and strong relationships, pursuing advanced education, and engaging in leadership development to effectively navigate the complex dynamics of higher education and drive positive change. These efforts can help establish a new generation of Latina leaders who advocate for the needs of their communities and contribute to a more inclusive and diverse educational landscape.

The recommendations from participants emphasize the importance of both institutional and individual efforts in cultivating an environment where Latina administrators can thrive. From creating senior leadership positions to enhancing visibility and supporting professional growth through mentoring, HSIs can foster a culture of inclusivity and empowerment that benefits both current and future Latina leaders.

Lastly, the call for future research highlights the need to explore further the diverse challenges Latina administrators face, including the role of Funds of Knowledge, the impact of intersectional identities, and the work-life balance challenges unique to this group. Expanding the scope of research in these areas will provide valuable insights that can inform policy, practice, and the development of more supportive and equitable environments within higher education institutions. Together, these recommendations provide a roadmap for creating lasting change that empowers Latina administrators, strengthens the overall academic community, and prepares future generations of leaders.

FINAL REFLECTION

"It is not inclusion if you invite people into a space you are unwilling to change."
– Dr. Muna Abdi, 2024.

—

It is simple for any environment to declare itself 'inclusive,' but if the environment is not equitable, particularly for people from racialized communities, then it is essentially exclusionary. Haro and Lara (2003) emphasized the urgent need for innovative approaches to nurturing the next generation of Latinx leaders, given the rapid growth of the Latinx population in the United States and the increasing number of Latinx students pursuing higher education, "These emerging leaders will play a crucial role in advocating for underrepresented groups and implementing new strategies to uphold high standards in top colleges and universities" (p.164). The importance of this work remains evident more than two decades later.

The lack of Latinas in leadership positions within higher education reflects wider societal disparities. Increasing the presence of Latinas in leadership positions is essential for better decision-making, fostering a sense of inclusion among students, and breaking down established hierarchies that maintain discrimination. This issue is not rooted in women's lack of drive or capabilities; rather, it stems from deep-seated patriarchal beliefs that normalize men's dominance in positions of power. Consequently, women in leadership roles, particularly Latinas, frequently encounter skepticism regarding their credibility, requiring them to work much harder to prove themselves, whereas men are usually afforded credibility without doubt. This systemic injustice means that women encounter hurdles at every level, and even when they reach the top, their qualifications are often doubted solely because of their gender. However, *las ejecutivas* noted that the challenge extends beyond mere representation; it is no longer just a numbers game. The critical questions are: What will you do with your voice at the table? Will you confront the status quo or choose to remain passive?

This decision is tough for many women because challenging established norms and the status quo can impact their careers and hard-won progress. Nevertheless, opportunities must be seized to redefine the rules and reject complicity in discriminatory practices.

Higher education institutions, especially HSIs, must critically evaluate their structures, policies, and practices to facilitate meaningful change. They must move beyond superficial actions toward substantial initiatives that empower all individuals. They need to prioritize mentorship, establish supportive networks, and create tailored professional development opportunities that acknowledge and appreciate the unique contributions of Latina staff. While progress is being made, we still fail to appreciate the full spectrum of individual diversity. The funds of knowledge (FOK) individuals possess are often overlooked in academic settings, yet this study suggests they are foundational to Latinas' development, sense of self, and agency. Acknowledging their FOK, social capital, and community assets can serve as valuable resources to enhance academic performance, improve campus culture, and foster institutional change.

Students and scholars must engage with marginalized identity narratives, such as those of *las ejecutivas*, and the findings of comprehensive studies like this to understand the significance of institutional change. These narratives highlight the unique experiences of Latinas within their organizations, acknowledging their resilience and eagerness to contribute to institutions that prioritize their growth. The need for institutional change is not merely a suggestion but a pressing demand to ensure that Latinas' efforts have meaningful impacts on inclusion and diversity at the organizational level.

It is important to clarify that this study does not provide definitive answers. Instead, it builds upon existing scholarship, research, and literature, shaping my perspectives and practices. This underscores the issue's complexity and multifaceted nature. With the right approach and further research, we can create meaningful and impactful outcomes.

Current State of Affairs

This section is emotional and crucial to write. When I began this research study, President Biden was in office. In 2022, he appointed Dr. Cristóbal Rodríguez to the White House Advisory Commission on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics and Latinos. Ensuring the progress and success of historically marginalized communities in higher education. His appointment was undoubtedly a victory for our community. However, by the end of the study, much to my disbelief, President Trump had been re-elected despite his racist and sexist rhetoric. With his re-election came an instant attack on many human rights in the form of executive orders (ACE Staff, 2025) that would eradicate essential rights, funding, resources, and benefits. The most recent threat is to end government support for programs promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA), which raises significant concerns about public education, research, academic freedom, and access. On February 14, 2025, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) released a "Dear Colleague" letter (United States Department of Education, 2025), asserting that race-conscious policies constitute reverse discrimination and that DEIA programs are harmful, preferential, and violate federal law. The letter informs educational institutions that they must adhere to these anti-discrimination regulations within fourteen days of its release, or they may lose federal funding (Heilig, 2025). Make no mistake, this is a direct attack on Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) by rescinding White House initiatives that advanced equity among historically underrepresented student groups.

This letter incorrectly characterizes DEIA as illegal and damaging. However, DEIA initiatives across the country have effectively supported marginalized students in achieving success in higher education and are crucial for tackling systemic inequities and fostering inclusive educational environments (Heilig, 2025). Also, race-conscious policies are not illegal, but ensure fair access and success for ALL students. These attacks, in my opinion,

also jeopardize the HSI designation and the advancement of Latinas in academia, which is what this study is focused on. This intimidating approach and unlawful directive can be detrimental to universities with Presidents who will yield without resistance. Complying is a betrayal of the students and staff; it is a betrayal of academic freedom and freedom of speech. If institutions comply, they are succumbing to coercive tactics. Instead, they must follow the example set by *las ejecutivas* on their journey: act with courage and relentless dedication. Like them, institutions must remain resilient in their resolve, collaborate with and for the community, and commit to DEIA. This current state of affairs significantly blows my agency, beliefs, and work. However, it is precisely that, an attack. If there is one thing to take away from this study, it is that Latinas are strong and determined, and together, we are unstoppable! We will rise above this intentional and unfortunate attack.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - REQUESTING PARTICIPATION EMAIL

Dear [insert name]:

I am a higher education doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona. I am conducting a research study on understanding Latinas' journeys and lived experiences in executive positions at four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

The experience you have gained as an executive Latina will greatly benefit aspiring Latinas and help them better understand the path toward achieving this type of position. I want to interview you and learn more about your personal and professional experiences. My research involves multiple data collection methods: written, oral, and expressive. Interviews will be conducted online (via Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, etc.) on your preferred date and time. To ensure confidentiality, you will select a pseudonym for you and your institution upon agreement to participate.

Participation entails:

- Two Interviews (up to 90 minutes each).
- Engaging in an expressive activity (at your leisure time before the second interview).

The Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The University of Arizona has reviewed this study and found it acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and confidential. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you want to participate or have questions about the study, please reply to this email at **HSIejecutivas@gmail.com. The expected date to begin this research is January 2024.** I am excited to hear from you.

Thank you,

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Martha L Sesteaga, MPA

Ph.D. Candidate
Pronouns: She, Her, Hers, Ella

HSIejecutivas@gmail.com

APPENDIX B - CONSENT DOCUMENT

University of Arizona
Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: INVISIBLE NO MORE: THE JOURNEY OF *LAS EJECUTIVAS*

A CASE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EXECUTIVE LATINAS

Principal Investigator: Martha Sesteaga

You are being asked to participate in a research study.

Participation in this research study is voluntary, and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you are part of it. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether to participate.

About the Study

This study is aimed at analyzing the lived experiences of Latinas in executive positions at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) to understand further their path: what inspired them, who supported them, how their networks, culture, and values play a role in their advancement, and what do they see as crucial for transforming HSIs. In understanding these experiences, we will also see the institution's role in their career aspirations.

Participation Commitment

Suppose you agree to participate in this study. In that case, the PI will interview you about your lived experiences and understanding of the institution's practices as a Latina in an executive position at an HSI. The study is set to begin in January 2024. Detailed commitment below:

- Two Zoom interviews (90 minutes each),
- Engaging in an expressive activity (at your leisure time before the second interview).

- With your permission, I want to record the interviews and meetings to make an accurate transcript. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the recordings. Your name will not be in the transcript or my notes. You will have that option if you do not want to be recorded for parts or all of the interview.
- Participants will be able to choose a pseudonym that will only be known by the PI. Your name will not be in the transcript or any notes.
- If you decide to participate and wish to stop the interview at any point, you may do so. No matter your decision, there will be no penalty to you. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with the Institution or the principal investigator. As an employee at your HSI, your decision will not affect your employment status.

Benefits of the Study

The benefits of participating in this study:

- Participation will allow you to share your experiences and highlight those experiences for actively transforming HSIs.
- You can reflect on your time at your current HSI and other institutions.
- For participants interested in the results, the study's findings can be shared once the study has concluded.

Risks of the Study

Risks in participating in this study:

- Topics discussed may include emotional topics or topics associated with strong feelings.
- Also, since this study includes several interviews, there is a risk of losing confidentiality. However, the PI will make tremendous and purposeful efforts to prevent any loss of confidentiality.

Cost and Compensation

You will not incur any costs other than your time and will not be paid to participate in this study.

Confidentiality

The information that you give in the study will be anonymous. Your name will not be collected or linked to your answers. However, the information may be used or shared in future research studies.

- Identifiable research data the PI uses will be encrypted and password protected.
- This study will use pseudonyms. Neither your name nor the name of the institution, program, or department will be used in any report or publication.
- Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.
- Your responses will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password-protected file. Only the research team will have access to the file. The list will be destroyed when the study is completed and the data has been analyzed.
- The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. The University of Arizona Institutional Review Board may monitor the research records.

- Only the following groups may access the research data:
    - I, as the principal investigator of this research project.
    - The University of Arizona Institutional Review Board.
    - Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies when they lawfully require any information.

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you may contact ***HSIejecutivas@gmail.com***

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Subjects Protection Program Director at 520-626-8630 or online at https://research.arizona.edu/compliance/human-subjects-protection-program.

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I know I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and answer them satisfactorily.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form**.**

Printed name of the subject	**Signature of the subject**	**Date**

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or the participant's representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant.

Printed name of the subject	**Signature of the person obtaining consent**	**Date**

APPENDIX C – ORAL AND WRITTEN TESTIMONIOS PROTOCOLS

First Interview – Their experiences as students

Prompt

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research study. It will not only significantly impact my life as it contributes directly to my educational advancement, but I genuinely believe that by learning from the *testimonios* of executive Latinas, like yourself, HSIs and HEIs can work towards active and formative change. Before we begin, for confidentiality purposes, I will use the pseudonym you picked on all of our Zoom meetings and any documents. You are also welcome to turn off your camera if you prefer. To help me with note-taking and transcribing, I will be recording our Zoom meeting. Would that be okay with you? (Wait for response) Great. Thank you.

Before I record, I would like to share a little about myself. I am the Program Manager of University Fees at the University of Arizona. I have worked in higher education since 2006 and have served in middle management positions since 2017. I have an MPA and two bachelor's degrees, one in Criminal Justice and another in Spanish Literature. I am currently a Higher Education Doctoral Candidate at the University of Arizona. I am a first-generation Latina, and I am interested in Latinas like me. So, for my dissertation study, I am using different types of *testimonios* to gather data and analyze the lived experiences of executive Latinas, whom I call *Las ejecutivas*, in the research study. I want to explore Latinas' personal and professional experiences and how those experiences influenced their career trajectories. As one of a few Latinas serving in an executive position in an HSI, you were invited because of the insight you can offer into my study interests. During the 90-minute interview, I will ask you about your background, work experiences, and how your Latina identity may have impacted these experiences. As mentioned in the consent, this can be emotional. Verify that their pseudonym is their viewable name. If not, ask them to change it or hide their name before you hit the record. **TURN ON THE RECORD ON ZOOM**

Written *Testimonio* Question – *Papelito* Activity

Before we begin the interview, I have a quick activity for you. Please grab a piece of paper and a pen and take a couple of minutes to write your answer to the following question. Let me know when you are ready.

> "What would you say to your younger self about the higher education career you are about to start?"

If they agree, ask them to put it on camera and take a picture. Please put away this *papelito* somewhere you will remember, as we will discuss it at our last meeting together.

Oral *Testimonio* Questions

1. Tell me briefly about your personal and professional background and history. Describe your family, educational trajectory, and career.

2. In what ways have your family and or community contributed to who you are today?

    a. Did you receive support, validation, or trust from a family member? What

did this look like, and who was it? **Probe: Family**

3. Talk about some people you view as leaders or role models in your personal and professional life. What is it about them that inspires you? **Probe: Agency**

4. What is your Latina identity, and what does it mean to you? **Probe: Identity & Community.** (How do you identify? Mexican American, women of color, Puerto Rican, and what that Latina identity means to you).

5. How do you think your identity as a Latina has impacted your work experiences and career path?

    a. How has it impacted your professional practice and interactions in the workplace? Can you think of some examples?

6. Who do you turn to when professional life gets tough?

7. **What do you draw on culturally to keep you going in academia? How is your cultural background a resource for you? Probe: FOK** (What knowledge and experiences did you learn from family or your community that helped you keep going in academia?).

8. Who were the key players in your academic and professional socialization (PS)? PS = a process through which a person becomes a legitimate member of a professional society. Four attributes: learning, interaction, development, and adaptation.

9. What personal costs/sacrifices did you endure (e.g., physical, emotional, financial, psychological, etc.) in your journey toward your current executive position?

10. Tell me three words that describe you. Please explain.

Additional one:

- In what ways do your identities interrupt or add to your ability to see other viewpoints? How does this impact your leadership practice?

This concludes our formal questions. Is there anything else you want to share with me that I did not ask? Or What would you say is the most important thing for me to take away from today's interview?

This week, I will send you a poll to schedule the second interview for this summer. In the meantime, I will send you the expressive activity through email. The email will explain the activity and details of the submission.

Once again, thank you for your time. I am incredibly grateful that you have made time to speak with me. As I prepare to transcribe the interview, I may contact you if I need clarification on any part of your interview.

Second Interview – Their experiences as staff

Prompt

We are at the final stretch of your commitment to my research study. I cannot express how grateful I am and how significant your contribution to this work is. Thank you once again.

As you know, I would like to record this meeting to help me with note-taking and transcribing. Would that be okay with you? (Wait for response) Great. Thank you. See if their pseudonym is their viewable name. If not, ask them to change it or hide their name before you hit the record. TURN ON THE RECORD ON ZOOM

Oral *Testimonio* Questions

1. How would you describe your current institution? **Probe: HSI**

    a. Is there something about the institution that attracted you there or something that keeps you there?

    b. What is significant about the university being a Hispanic-Serving Institution? How have you experienced the designation?

2. How did you come to be the [current title]? What or who was the primary source that helped you get to where you are? **Probe: Social Capital**

    a. What influenced your decision to pursue an executive position? Did you hesitate to apply for or fight for your current executive position?

    b. What role did colleagues, supervisors, or other administrators play in helping you attain your current position?

3. **Can you describe personal examples in which you feel your gender or race affected your work environment or your career advancement? (campus realities: stereotypes, whiteness, oppression).? Probe: Racialized org.**

4. What have been your experiences as a Latina in higher education? How have these experiences shaped your understanding of the climate and leadership in higher education?

5. What role did networking, mentoring, or sponsorship play throughout your career? **Probe: Social Capital**

6. What does your involvement look like right now? How many committees are you part of? Are you teaching? Are you a member of any community groups? How many? **Probe: Social Capital**

    a. Do you feel you must go above and beyond professionally and academically (i.e., obtaining terminal degrees) because of your gender or race?

7. What lessons have you learned from your experiences as you progressed through your career?

8. Why do you think there are so few executive Latinas in higher education?

9. In what ways do you think the representation of Latinas in executive positions is essential? Especially at HSIs?

10. **What would you recommend for HSIs to attract, retain, support, and promote Latina administrators?**

Written *Testimonio* Question – *Papelito* Activity

Now, I would like to do another written activity. As we did at the beginning of this journey, please grab a piece of paper and pen and note the answer to the following question.

> "What advice would you give an emerging Latina scholar as she navigates a higher education career?"

(Ask them to hold it up and take a picture if they agree). All right, now, can you please bring out the *papelito* from the first interview? Let us compare the answers.

> Analyze and Discuss -The answers could be similar or completely different. Both deal with advice, either to self or to others. Ask them why it is distinct or why they think it is essential that they are the same.
>
> - (We are our worst judges; we are harder on ourselves, and it will be expected to see that they are kinder, more mindful, and more caring to advise others than self). -

Once again, thank you for your time. I am incredibly grateful that you continued participating, even though it was time-consuming.

Is there anything else that you would like to add that is significant to this study and that we did not cover? Suggestions for future research? Or suggestions for transforming HSIs to be the just and equal institutions they should be?

APPENDIX D – FRAMEWORK MATRIX

This table shows the data collection and framework for answering each research question (RQ). It summarizes the intended research design, which is subject to change once the research begins or upon Institutional Review Board approval.

Research Questions	**Data Collection Method**	**Related Framework**
RQ1 - What are the experiences of *las ejecutivas* in a Hispanic-Serving Institutions regarding practices that encourage and/or deter their advancement, agency, and service contributions (servingness)?	-Interview -Written -Expressive	Racialized Organizations Theory
RQ2 - To what extent do *las ejecutivas* leverage their social capital and use their funds of knowledge to advance professionally, exercise their agency, and enhance their service contributions (servingness)?	-Interview -Written -Expressive	Funds of Knowledge Social Capital

APPENDIX E – EXPRESSIVE ACTIVITY EMAIL

Subject: Expressive Activity & 2nd Interview

Dear [insert name]:

Again, Thank you for your time, commitment, and openness to this study. As discussed in our previous communication, you can engage in an expressive activity. We are at that phase of the study. Please follow the instructions I have included below.

The activity allows you to express yourself through any art form you choose. It may be something that you create or something that has already been made by you or someone else. It may be a collage, painting, photograph, poem, song, drawing, artifact, or whatever else with which you can interpret the following:

> **When you think about your professional journey toward your current executive position, what do you think of? Do you think of a word, a place, a person, or a feeling? Turn this into an art form. It could represent resilience, strength, community, culture, adversity, resistance, hope, etc.**
>
> **-Please also provide a brief explanation of your selection-**

You have two months to complete this activity. Once you are done, please send it to HSIejecutivas@gmail.com. If your art form is a physical item that cannot be emailed, please take a picture and email it with your explanation. Upon receiving your expressive activity, I will download and save it encrypted and password-protected.

Also, please use this StrawPoll link to provide your availability in June 2024 for your second 90-minute interview over Zoom. Please give at least two options that work for you. If you have issues answering the poll or prefer to email your June availability, please do so.

Should you have any questions, please let me know.

Best,

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

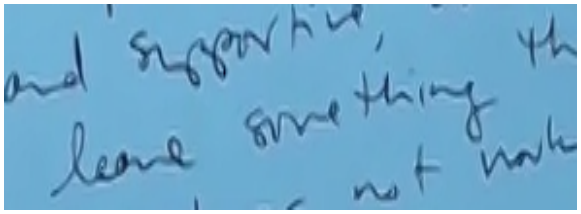
Martha L Sesteaga, MPA

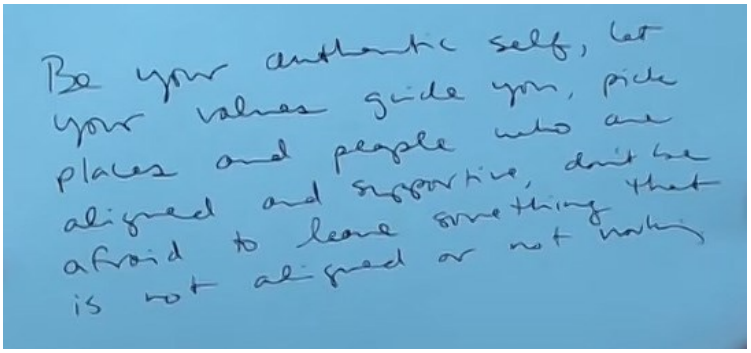
Ph.D. Candidate
Pronouns: She, Her, Hers, Ella

HSIejecutivas@gmail.com

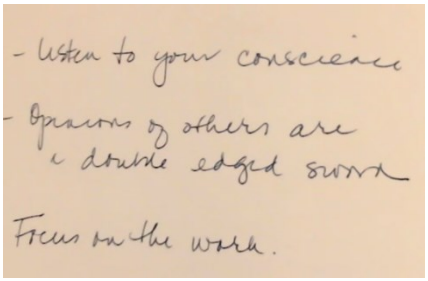
APPENDIX F – *PAPELITOS* IMAGES

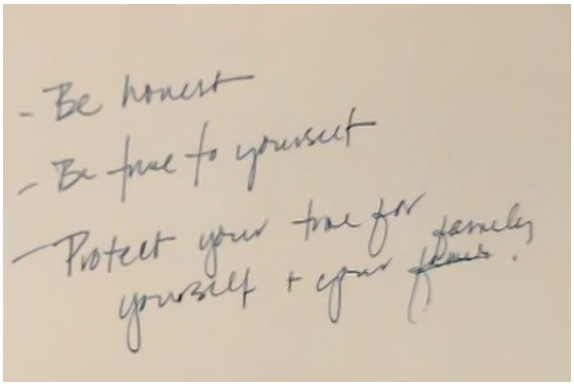
P1.





P2.





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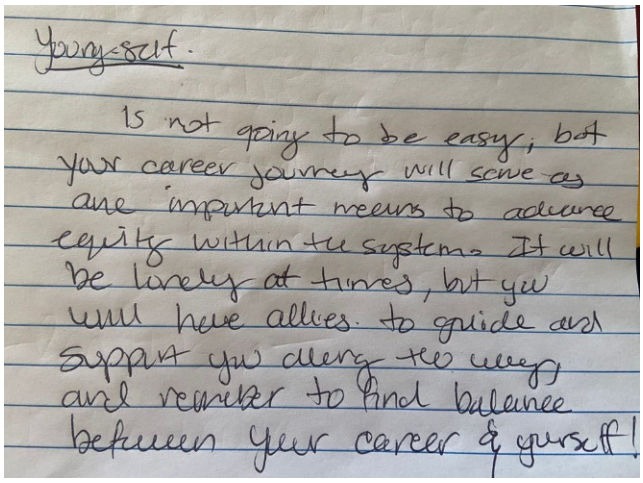

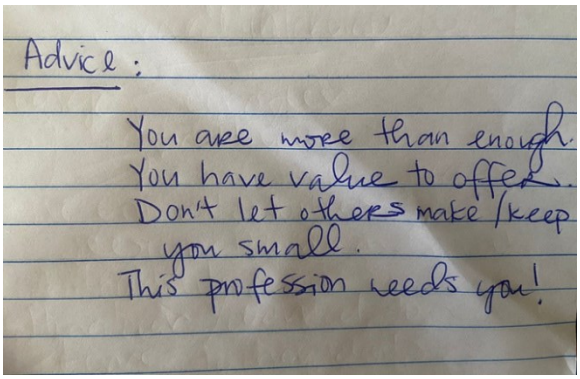

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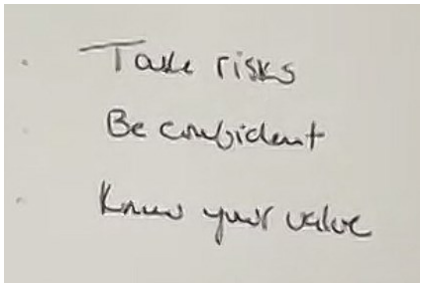
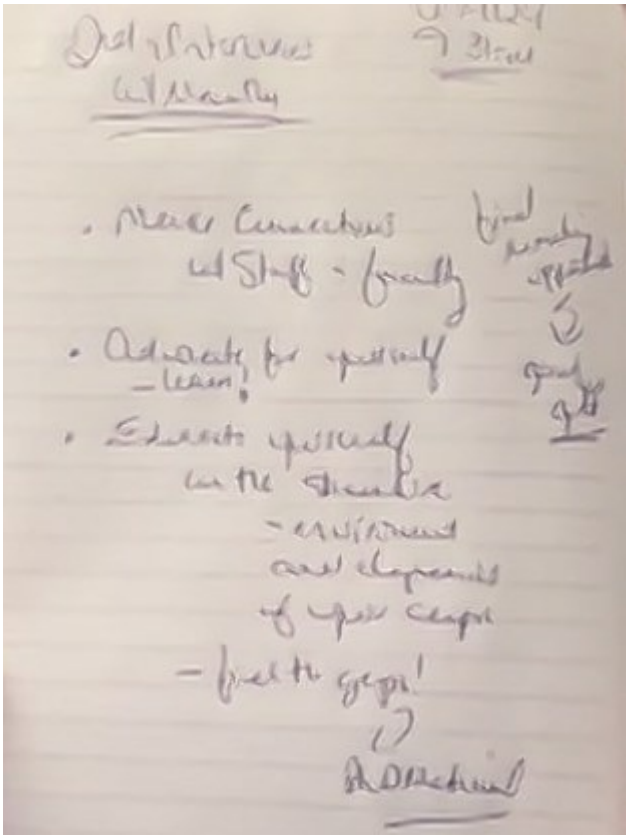
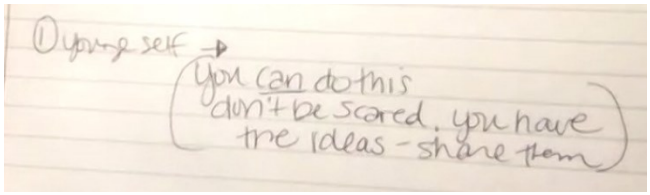
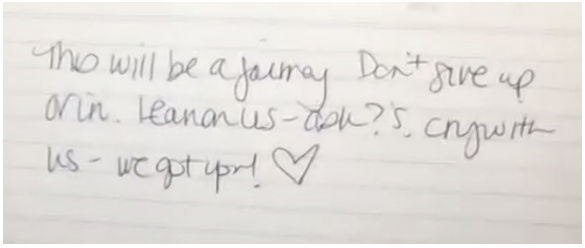

Take risks
Be confident
Know your value

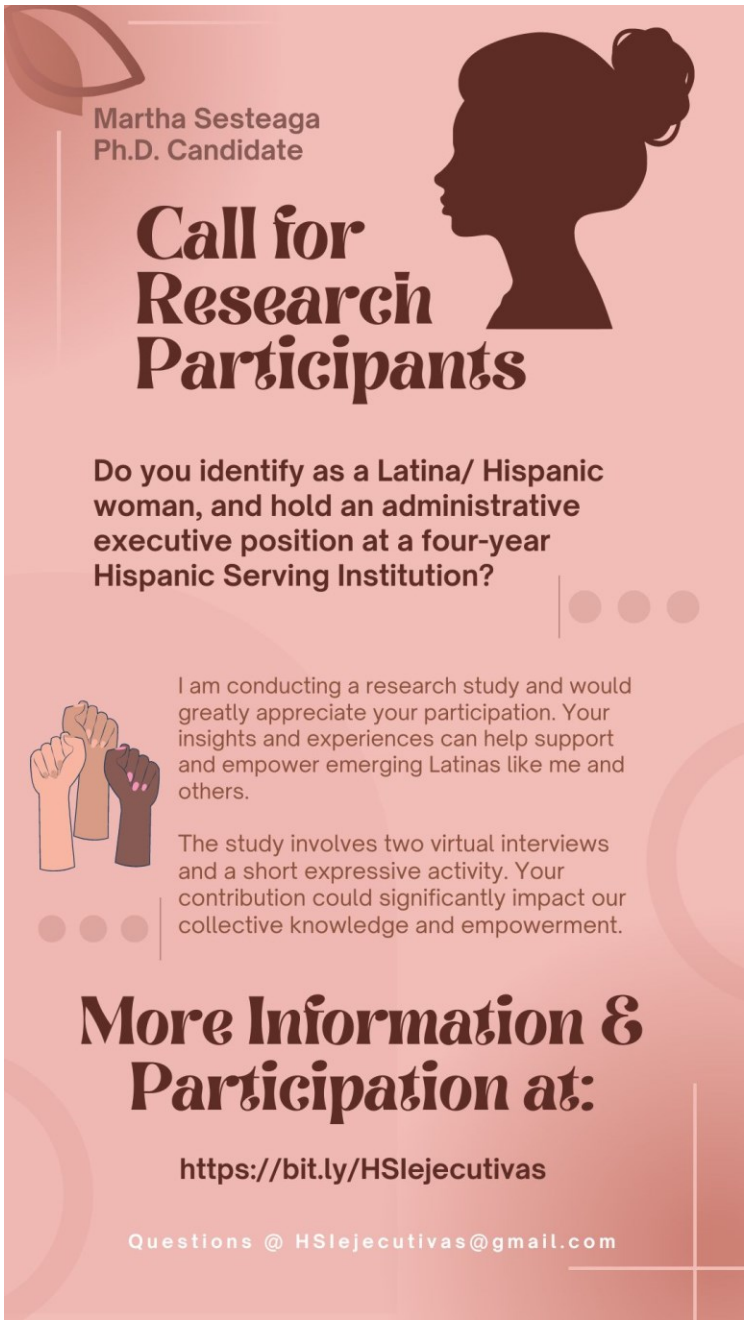


P5.


① yourself →
(You can do this
don't be scared. you have
the ideas - share them)


there will be a journey Don't give up
on in. Learn as us - ask ?'s. cry with
us - we got you! ♡

APPENDIX G – FLYER



APPENDIX H - RESEARCH SCHEDULE

Phase 1 – Fall 2023/Spring 2024

Phase 2 – Spring/Summer 2024

Phase 3 – Fall 2024

Finalize – Spring 2024

Research phase	**Objectives**	**Deadline**
Literature Review	Finalized chapter 3 with the new frameworks.	July 2023
Defend Research Proposal	Schedule oral comps with research proposal defense	August 2023
Submit IRB	Get IRB requirements.	August 2023
	Get IRB approved.	September 2023
Participants	Recruit participants from Institution 1. Then, ask for contact for other HSIs.	October 2023
	Schedule Interviews	December 2023
Data Collection	First Round of Interviews & schedule second interviews. (Leaving February open for any re-schedules)	January 2024
Data Collection	Second Round of Interviews (Leaving May open for any re-schedules)	March & April 2024
Data Collection	Expressive Activity	June 2024
Data Analysis	Finish Transcripts	July 2024
Data Analysis	Review of Transcripts	August 2024
Data Analysis	Verification with participants	August 2024
Chapter Development	Start writing the chapters for each of the participants. Send to them for a facts check.	September 2024
Chapter Development	Start writing the findings chapter. Send the Draft to the Committee Chair.	October – December 2024
Interpretation of Results	Finalize the results section and present it to the committee chair.	January – February 2025
Review Dissertation	Meet with the committee chair.	March – April 2025
Dissertation Defense	Provide a clear overview of the development and significance of the study.	May 2025

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