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Answering the Call: Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Leaders in the Quest for Access, Excellence, and Equity in American Higher Education

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## Flipping the HSI Narrative: An HSI positionality

**Anne-Marie Núñez**

*The Ohio State University*

In the landscape of higher education research and in media discourse around higher education, the study of less selective, broad access institutions too often gets lost, dominated instead by discussions of selective admissions to and affirmative action in what are thought to be the nation's most "elite" institutions (Deil-Amen, 2015). This historical tendency obscures the contributions of less selective, broad access institutions to the country's workforce, civic development, and knowledge production, leading Deil-Amen (2015) to characterize these institutions as the "marginalized majority," because they in fact serve the majority of students in U.S. postsecondary education. Likewise, it might be said that HSIs play a key role among the "marginalized majority" of institutions (Núñez, 2017), because they enroll 62% of the fastest growing racial/ethnic demographic in the nation, the Latinx population (*Excelencia in Education*, 2016).

Historically, the predominant narrative framing HSIs is that they are monolithic and underperforming, inscribed in a false dichotomy as "Hispanic-Serving" or merely "Hispanic-Enrolling" (Núñez, Hurtado, & Calderón Galdeano, 2015). Together, these narrative threads weave a deficit perspective on HSIs that manifests itself too often, either implicitly or explicitly, when HSIs are addressed in research, policy, and practice. Unfortunately, such tendencies can result in unintended negative consequences for HSIs, including reduced institutional resources if inappropriate evaluations of institutional performance are conducted for performance funding purposes (Núñez, 2014; Núñez & Rodríguez, in press; Webber & Ehrenberg, 2009).

To authentically support HSIs and their students, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners need to flip the traditional narrative around HSIs. This does not mean superficially celebrating the accomplishments of HSIs without being critical of their limitations in serving Latinx students; it does mean conducting the most rigorous research to reveal the complex realities in which faculty, staff, and students at HSIs operate. It also means being self-reflexive about how one conducts the research and how one frames their relationship with the researched. Exercising this self-reflexivity is particularly critical for researchers at more

selective and well-resourced institutions who have had less exposure to the inner workings of HSIs.

Serving as a researcher of HSIs, as a past faculty member at an HSI, and as a public scholar engaged in policy work to support HSIs has shaped my conviction that although knowledge about HSIs is increasing, future research about HSIs needs to be more rigorous to achieve an “intimate knowledge” (Rose, 2012) of these institutions. Specifically, I argue to advance an “HSI positionalality” that centers HSIs’ realities, rather than externally imposed frames, as a central departure point to infuse future research, policy, and practice concerning HSIs. This move can mitigate the *epistemic injustice* (Frank, 2013) that traditionally has characterized the description and recognition of HSIs through deficit perspectives that do not fully recognize the contexts and contributions of HSIs.

As research on HSIs grows, I take time here to suggest how to build dispositions to conduct equity-oriented research on HSIs. First, I outline the importance of mitigating epistemic injustice, by advancing a more socially just, holistic, and informed way of understanding HSIs. Second, I discuss the importance of distinguishing between methodology and methods in higher education research, calling on researchers to employ a *transformative paradigm* (Hurtado, 2015; Mertens, 2009) in studying HSIs (Núñez, Hurtado, & Calderón Galdeano, 2015). Third, I delineate how three components of a transformative paradigm—epistemology, ontology, and axiology—can constitute an *HSI positionality* that can shape the last component of a transformative paradigm—methodology—to be more inclusive of the perspectives of HSIs and the personnel in them. Finally, to empower HSIs from the HSI positionality and the transformative paradigm, I address how researchers can partner with faculty and staff at HSIs to flip the narrative around HSIs.

### **Mitigate Epistemic Injustice**

When I arrived in 2007 to take my first faculty position at the second largest HSI on the U.S. mainland, the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), I had the unique opportunity to work with and serve Latinx students and faculty on issues related to equity in higher education. Upon arrival, I quickly set out to find the research on HSIs, so I could learn more about how to enhance my own research, pedagogy, and practice to promote Latinx success in HSIs. Soon it became clear that, at that time, just a handful of peer-reviewed articles, and no books, existed

on HSIs. Many of the existing pieces were by Berta Vigil Laden (e.g., Laden, 1999, 2001), who passed away in an untimely manner as she was launching this important line of scholarship, and to whom scholars of HSIs owe an enormous debt. This was before the first edited volume on MSIs, which included a subset of chapters on HSIs (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008). Looking back on my own experiences, I now realize that was searching for the epistemic resources (Frank, 2013), or knowledge grounded directly in the environmental contexts of HSIs, to navigate my role as a faculty member at an HSI. Subsequently, I have spent nearly a decade aiming to contribute to the epistemic resources to understand HSIs not only from my perspective as a scholar, but as a participant-observer faculty member in an HSI.

The concept of *epistemic justice* (Frank, 2013) provides a useful guiding principle for researchers seeking to conduct rigorous research on HSIs. The concept of epistemic justice is based on Frank's call to mitigate *epistemic injustice*, the exclusion of marginalized groups (and in this case, personnel at HSIs) from knowledge creation that has resulted in a lack of understanding of their lived realities and consequently, a lack of available knowledge resources (epistemic resources) for them to make sense of their everyday experiences. The study of HSIs has been conducted within the context of the broader landscape of higher education research that has emphasized the study of the most selective and elite institutions, rather than the "marginalized majority" (Deil-Amen, 2015) of less selective four-year or two-year institutions that enroll the most students (Núñez, 2017). In fact, only six percent of students in U.S. postsecondary education enroll in the 172 institutions considered to be the most highly selective in the country (a group that comprises just 2.5% of all postsecondary institutions) (Rodríguez 2015). Thus, the historical research trend of both explicitly and implicitly focusing on topics like selective institutions, affirmative action, and selective admissions has perpetuated epistemic injustice about institutional diversity and the experiences of diverse students in higher education. With respect to HSIs, this trend has limited the epistemic resources available to make sense of HSIs and their organizational cultures and identities.

Promoting epistemic justice means expanding the traditional concept of "diversity" in higher education to include the role of *all* institutions in fostering postsecondary opportunity (Deil-Amen, 2015). To reach and reflect more students from historically underserved backgrounds, the traditional notion of diversity in higher education, which tends to focus on selective admissions, ought to include *institutional diversity* as well as individual student diversity

in a small subset of highly selective institutions. When considering how to broaden diversity in higher education and in the workforce, the focus on selective institutions obscures possibilities to reach the greatest number of low-income students and students of color. As Deil-Amen (2015) suggests, "...the diversity agenda [in higher education] needs to expand to recognize that privilege is structured, and equity needs shift as institutional contexts shift" (p. 145). She adds that "...there is almost no discussion of how nonselective nonprestigious four-year colleges and universities have increased their racial/ethnic minority enrollments drastically..." (p. 145). According to several annual indicators from *Hispanic Outlook* magazine, at least half of the top institutions that produce Latinx BAs in math and science are perennially HSIs.

To mitigate epistemic injustice, it is important that scholars be current on scholarship on HSIs. Fortunately, epistemic resources have recently increased to understand the institutional contexts of many HSIs, as exemplified in this special issue of the *Association of Mexican Educators Journal*. In addition to the growth of peer-reviewed scholarship, within the past five years, the first books emerged about HSIs (e.g., Núñez, Hurtado, & Calderón Galdeano, 2015); broad access institutions (Kirst & Stevens, 2015), and comprehensive institutions (Schneider & Dean, 2015). Notably, most four-year HSIs can be characterized as broad access institutions. Such institutions can overlap, for example, in the case of non-flagship public schools in state systems that offer significant postsecondary regional access for Hispanics. Notably, the research of Vega and Martinez (2012) indicates how the non-flagship public institutions that are HSIs in Texas generally do a much better job of enrolling and graduating Hispanic students in Texas than do flagship institutions (see also Perna, Li, Walsh, & Raible, 2010). This illustrates the importance of considering access as a dimension of institutional performance in broadening demographic diversity in higher education (Deil Amen, 2015) and for more fully recognizing HSIs' contributions.

With respect to epistemic resources on HSIs, it is critical to have a grounding in the history of HSIs. Between the years that HSIs were initially designated to receive federal funding as part of the *Strengthening Institutions Act*, 1994, and 2016, the number of HSIs has more than doubled, from 189 to 472 (*Excelencia in Education*, 2017). Moreover, HSIs have grown not only in numbers, but also in institutional diversity. While HSIs have historically been highly constituted by community colleges and less selective four-year institutions, in 2015, the University of California Santa Barbara became the first American Association of Universities

(AAU) school to become an HSI. In 2017, the University of California Irvine became the second AAU to become an HSI.

Despite this development, HSIs on the whole remain woefully under-resourced (Ortega, Frye, Nelligan, Kamimura, & Vidal-Rodríguez, 2015). The entrance of such highly active research universities into the pool of HSIs poses a watershed moment for HSIs. It also poses a watershed moment for higher education, demonstrating how the provision of access to demographically diverse groups does not have to preclude high research activity, or high student retention in institutions, which are measures often associated with high institutional performance.

Notably, the two AAU institutions that have become HSIs as of 2015 and 2017, UCSB and UCI respectively, now stand in second and first place, respectively, in a 2017 national *New York Times* ranking of institutions that provide college access in terms of economic diversity, entitled “The Top Colleges doing the Most for the American Dream” (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/25/sunday-review/opinion-pell-table.html>). These HSIs are leading the way in combining excellence in and access to higher education, which too often are framed as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, this particular recognition reflects the fact that HSIs tend to provide significant access to postsecondary education not only for Latinx students, but for low-income students as well. Indeed, HSIs enroll student bodies among whom half, on average, receive Pell grants (Núñez, Crisp, & Elizondo, 2016), and enroll more African American and Native American students than Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Tribal Colleges and Universities (Núñez et al., 2015).

With respect to epistemic justice, this recent development reinforces the importance for HSI researchers of recognizing HSIs’ institutional diversity when designing studies, or situating particular HSIs within a broader context. Too often, I have heard scholars, practitioners and policymakers erroneously express the view HSIs are mostly composed of community colleges. In fact, the reality is that about half of HSIs are four-year institutions and half are community colleges (Núñez et al., 2016). While the entrance of two research universities (out of 472 HSIs) might not significantly alter the composition of a recent typology of HSIs, this development does pose questions for the organizational identities of HSIs, which have diverse missions; span the 2- and 4-year, and public and private, sectors; and are located in Puerto Rico as well as the U.S. (García, 2017, in press; Núñez, 2017; Núñez et al., 2016). For

example, administrators in less selective and less well-resourced HSIs have expressed concerns that such newly minted and relatively well-resourced HSIs may draw away funds from the institutions that serve the largest shares and numbers of Latinx students (Cortez, 2015).

In addition to recognizing HSIs' institutional diversity, researchers seeking to promote epistemic justice on HSIs should be cognizant of how they as scholars both implicitly or explicitly compare the institutional performance of HSIs to that of other institutions, and consider the extent to which other institutions constitute an appropriate comparison group for HSIs. These researchers should be cognizant of research indicating that HSIs have lower retention rates than other institutions largely because, in comparison to other institutions, these particular institutions often enroll students who have fewer financial resources and are less well academically prepared, and because HSIs are institutionally under-resourced. That is, when student and institutional resource characteristics are statistically adjusted for, students at HSIs, compared with their counterparts at non-HSIs, have equivalent graduation rates (Rodríguez & Calderón Galdeano, 2015) and equivalent post-graduate earnings (Park, Flores, & Ryan, 2017). Furthermore, researchers who wish to advance epistemic justice on HSIs must recognize that research indicates that Latinx students at HSIs, compared with their counterparts at non-HSIs, experience multiple benefits beyond the common metric of graduation rates, including increased academic self-concept and community involvement (e.g., Cuellar, 2014). This may be related to the distinctive organizational cultures in some HSIs in which faculty and staff orient their teaching and practice toward supporting the well-being of Latinx students (e.g., García, 2017) and toward creating knowledge and fostering epistemic justice that enhances an understanding of Latinx communities (e.g., Gonzales, 2015, 2016).

Although HSIs' numbers, institutional types, and organizational identities may be in flux, the following trends look to have future momentum. First, HSIs will continue to grow in numbers, as the Latinx population grows. Second, HSIs will continue to diversify institutionally – by sector, mission, location, or control. Third, more HSIs will be competing for less funding. Fourth, as trends in performance-based funding increase (Dougherty & Reddy, 2013), HSIs will increasingly be called on to demonstrate the adequacy of their institutional performance, both generally and specifically with respect to Latinx students (García, 2017, in press; Núñez, 2014; Núñez & Rodríguez, in press).

In the current economic, political, and social climate, and postsecondary landscape in which over 6 in 10 of Latinx students are enrolled in HSIs, rigorous and thoughtful research on HSIs has never been more critical. How can scholars advance epistemic justice and flip predominant deficit-oriented narratives about HSIs to provide more authentic portraits of these institutions? Similar to what Rose (2012) says about community colleges and broad access institutions, it can be said of HSIs that there is a “need for intimate knowledge of [such] institutions” (p. 15) and an imperative “to use methods of investigation that capture a fuller story of the institutions and the people in them” (p. 16). In the next section, I suggest how to expand research approaches to be less more institutionally inclusive and cognizant of HSIs’ complex realities.

### **Employ the Transformative Paradigm**

Many researchers do not explicitly write about the distinction between methods and methodology in their work, or they may use the term interchangeably, to denote the “means by which data are collected” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 9). Researchers may not delineate between methodology and methods because it is not the normative practice in educational research articles, possibly because of limited journal space (Jones et al., 2014). When examining historically marginalized institutional types or demographic groups, however, it is important to specify components of methodology including epistemology (assumptions about how knowledge is accessed) and ontology (assumptions about the nature of reality/what we see), because hidden assumptions can obscure oppressive power relations (Hurtado, 2015). According to Jones and colleagues (2014), methodology may be characterized as “that which guides research design” (p. 9).

In this section, I follow arguments my colleagues and I have made elsewhere (Núñez, Hurtado, & Calderón Galdeano, 2015), and argue that researchers must employ a *transformative paradigm* (Hurtado, 2015) in designing research on HSIs. This means scholars on HSIs must go beyond “identifying a method and its appropriateness for a question” to “clarifying their own worldview[s] and [their] implications for research and practice” (Hurtado, 2015, p. 286). Put differently, I encourage researchers to focus on methodology as well as methods. There are four components of a transformative paradigm: methodology, ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Hurtado, 2015; Mertens, 2009). In this piece, I focus on the latter three, because they

tend to receive less attention than methodology. However, together ontology, epistemology, and axiology influence the “worldview” that shapes a researcher’s methodology (Hurtado, 2015, p. 286). Thus, in this piece, I sketch a methodology that can promote epistemic injustice for HSIs, highlighting assumptions in traditional higher education research that need to be challenged. As such, I encourage higher education researchers, to challenge their existing *mental models* (Argyris & Schön, 1996), to lay bare the assumptions they may be making that limit research that authentically portrays the realities and contributions of HSIs.

Before exploring ontology, epistemology, and axiology, it is important to begin by noting that a historical emphasis on selective institutions has perpetuated what could be called “methodological elitism,” as adapted from Shahnajan and Kezar’s (2013) notion of *methodological nationalism*, which reveals predominant, yet limited, assumptions about educational research as a domestic, rather than global, phenomenon. In response to the tendencies of methodological elitism, Deil Amen (2015) promotes a broadening of lenses for higher education researchers—moving beyond a narrow vertical, hierarchical, and elite conception of U.S. institutions to incorporate a horizontal dimension that includes the full range of institutions that provide access. For Latinx, low-income students, and other historically underrepresented groups, HSIs are critical institutions constituting that horizontal dimension that provides significant access.

A transformative paradigm as applied to the study of HSIs encourages researchers to step back, clarify, and apply a mindset, or mental model (Argyris & Schön, 1996), to enact methodological choices that seek to challenge epistemic injustice perpetuated by methodological elitism and move toward recognizing the experiences of historically marginalized institutions. This process involves attending to the following guidelines:

...an awareness of contextual and historical actors, considering forms of oppression. Multiple methods, techniques, and theories may be necessary. Relies on crystallization (multifaceted perspectives and data sources) rather than triangulation, assumptions of heterogeneity rather than homogeneity, and attention to structures of opportunity and inequality, conditional effects (specific groups are affected differently by the same practices), and cultural norms in their influence on individuals and groups. Avoids an acontextual focus on individuals [and by extension, institutions]. (Hurtado, 2015, p. 291; also see Mertens, 2009)

What does applying the transformative paradigm to the study of HSIs look like, then? Any research on HSIs must be grounded comprehensively in the growing body of peer-reviewed research that provides increasing epistemic resources to make sense of HSIs and their organizational dynamics.

This brings us to ontology as a critical dimension of the transformative paradigm. In this case, ontology might be thought of as assumptions about the working reality of HSIs, recognizing that “privilege influences what is accepted as real” (Hurtado, 2015, p. 291). Understanding the reality of HSIs includes examining the history of HSIs and how they have changed over time. In terms of considering oppression and power dynamics, it means taking into account the differential access to institutional resources that HSIs have, compared with other institutions, and, even compared with one another, as signaled by the entrance of AAU institutions into the HSI pool. In tandem, research seeking to actualize epistemic justice on HSIs should recognize the institutional diversity of HSIs. Aiming to accurately depict the reality of HSIs entails being transparent about sample selection, the characteristics of the subset of institutions one is studying, and the extent to which these institutions are representative of all HSIs. Recent typologies of HSIs based on structural and demographic characteristics (Núñez et al., 2016) and on organizational culture and identity (García, 2017) can inform dimensions of research design such as site selection and representativeness.

Another dimension of ontology with respect to HSIs is employing asset-based theoretical perspectives in understanding the contributions and organizational behavior of HSIs. For example, employing a funds of knowledge perspective (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) highlights how and faculty and students in HSIs can be positioned as knowers and thinkers who contribute to new kinds of knowledge, particularly about Latinx communities and histories (e.g., Gonzales, 2015, 2016). Employing asset-based theoretical perspectives is especially crucial, when we consider that in research and teaching grant applications, Minority-Serving Institutions and HSIs are often treated as inferior to other institutions. Specifically, they are too often positioned merely as suppliers of students to selective institutions in the educational pipeline, or required to partner with selective institutions to conduct research, as if HSIs themselves cannot foster environments in which students and faculty independently conduct innovative research.

Applying the transformative paradigm to inquiry on HSIs with respect to the dimension of epistemology, or assumptions about how knowledge is accessed through research, arguably requires immersion and contextualization. Immersion entails spending extended time in HSIs, to gain a fuller understanding of the activities, norms and behaviors in these institutions. This approach contrasts with the approach of merely conducting “drive-by” research (Hurtado, 2015) in which a scholar visits HSI campuses only briefly. The guideline of immersion is particularly salient when a scholar has never had lived experience—that is, attended or worked—in an HSI. Scholars who have not had such immersion in HSIs should be particularly conscious and self-reflexive about their positionalities when examining HSIs. As part of epistemology, such scholars should especially attend to spending time to get to know and engage personnel at HSIs directly in shaping research, policy, and practice agendas. I will return to this particular point when I discuss axiology, another component of the transformative paradigm, in the next section.

Beyond immersion, contextualization involves the assumption that understanding the broader historical, economic, and institutional contexts within which HSIs operate as organizations is essential to capturing the fuller lived realities of HSIs. The implications of immersion and contextualization are that a scholar must draw on extensive and multiple data sources, and multiple ways of gathering data, to understand the dynamics of HSIs. For example, recent research on the organizational culture and identity of HSIs has drawn on extensive immersion in HSI campuses, involving data collection through document analysis, observations, and interviews with multiple stakeholders (e.g., faculty, students, staff), in multiple units (e.g., academic affairs, student affairs) to provide a multifaceted picture of organizational identity at HSIs (e.g., García, 2017, in press). An epistemology guiding research in HSIs assumes that there are multiple ways of knowing and consequently, of gathering and/or analyzing, data that can work toward common goals.

### **Apply an HSI Positionality**

In addition to epistemology and ontology, axiology, or the way a researcher positions herself in relation to the object of inquiry, poses an additional dimension of the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009). Accordingly, axiology entails how and the extent to which a researcher is conscious of her own views and is transparent with others about those views

regarding her study (positionality), her relationships with the individuals or institutions she researches, how and the extent to which she accounts for ethics in her work (including reciprocity with the researched), and goals for the research itself, such as empowerment and advocacy for the marginalized communities of inquiry. In the transformative paradigm, ethics of “inclusion” are followed, and goals for the research are “empowerment” for the community (Hurtado, 2015). In the transformative paradigm; scholars work directly with communities they are studying to establish and reach common goals. Consequently, not just the researcher, but both the researcher and the researched, profit from the efforts. The resulting “...continuum of engagement and impact stands in contrast to ‘drive-by’ research which takes information from marginalized communities but rarely informs research participants about the findings and much less empowers communities to create change based on the research” (Hurtado, 2015, p. 288).

Although higher education researchers rarely discuss axiology, addressing one’s positionality in relation to the object of inquiry is standard and expected in qualitative research (Jones et al., 2014). An “HSI positionality” integrates the concept of axiology in the transformative paradigm with specific dispositions to advance epistemic justice on and empowerment of HSIs. One disposition is that scholars should be “self-conscious enough to understand how our own language and framing contribute to the marginalization and continued reification of the traditional college student and traditional college-going patterns” (Deil-Amen, 2015, p. 140), and then take steps to correct these tendencies.

One such tendency is the methodological elitism referred to earlier. If it is the case that higher education researchers have traditionally focused on “elite” and selective institutions, valued the behaviors in these institutions, and worked in these institutions, they may unconsciously be carrying mental models that are incongruent with the realities of the mental models of personnel who work in HSIs. For example, researchers may unconsciously impose assumptions that HSIs operate under the same institutional capacities as those of other institutions, when the research evidence clearly illustrates that HSIs have far fewer resources (e.g., Ortega, Frye, Nellum, Kamimura, & Vidal-Rodríguez, 2015). When researchers and policymakers judge HSIs under the standards of institutions that have more resources, they can perpetuate unwarranted deficit perspectives of HSIs that can have unintended negative consequences, including reducing the resources of HSIs even further, when HSIs are evaluated on an uneven playing field (Núñez, 2014; Núñez & Rodríguez, in press).

With respect to practice, recommendations about how to better serve Latinx students must be grounded in the realities of HSIs, including the limited resources that HSIs may have. Otherwise well-intentioned recommendations that are not made in the context of such resources can have the unintended negative consequence of creating unrealistic or blame-worthy expectations for HSIs. By contrast, working alongside HSI personnel by developing new and/or building on existing innovative strategies in HSIs (e.g., Gasman & Conrad, 2016) demonstrates more possibilities to recognize the potential of these institutions, because designs that evolve from such contexts are more responsive to HSIs' institutional realities. Put differently, it is critical, when making recommendations to guide HSIs' institutional practice to recognize, name, account for, and challenge "structures of opportunity and inequity" (Hurtado, 2015) that affect HSIs' capacities to serve their students, particularly those from Latinx backgrounds.

To authentically advance the interests of HSIs and their students, it is important for higher education researchers to be reflexive about the institutions they have attended and taught in, and to be cognizant of the historical predominance of scholarship in higher education, other social science fields, and the media, on selective institutions. Because I myself had attended highly selective, well-resourced, predominantly White institutions with high levels of prestige or "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) for my degrees, working in an HSI exposed me to nature of exclusion and invisibility that too often characterize HSIs. At the same time, this experience introduced me to the distinctive impact that I could make as an equity-minded researcher (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) in conducting more informed scholarship on and training students to promote equity in higher education. As I have described elsewhere (Núñez, Murakami, & Cuero, 2010), my students at UTSA taught me about the Latinx communities I was researching, and helped me to crystallize my findings through sharing their perspectives.

While I was presenting policy briefs to federal audiences about how narrowly framed ratings systems might have adverse consequences for HSIs (Núñez, 2014; Núñez & Rodríguez, in press), one observer pointed out virtually all of President Obama's cabinet members had only attended Ivy League schools. Thus, the responsibility of portraying HSIs to such individuals and staffers, whose mental models likely positioned HSIs as invisible or inferior, took on particular importance. Since my mental model around HSIs prior to working at UTSA was probably like theirs, I aimed to shift their mindsets, to portray a fuller picture of the realities of HSIs,

stressing the tremendous responsibility HSI take on for educating large shares of demographic groups who otherwise might not attend college.

Serving at an HSI also raised my awareness of the multiple talents and distinctive knowledge students at these institutions bring to higher education, following a “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992) framework that highlights how students and faculty cultivate distinctive skills that build culturally relevant frameworks to guide research, policy, and practice (Gonzales, 2016). Many students who performed less well on traditional admissions metrics (e.g., GRE scores) and who might not have been accepted to pursue graduate study at more selective graduate institutions demonstrated their talent and thrived at UTSA. Recognizing that the symbolic capital of the institution might be limited in comparison to more selective institutions, I saw that faculty at UTSA connected many students with national opportunities, and several students demonstrated that they could make distinctive contributions to the field on a national scale. Working at an HSI taught me how far hard work and motivation (*ganas*, in Spanish) could take a student in their studies. Some students were extremely proactive at seeking out constructive feedback and opportunities. Others worked many hours to support themselves and their families, and demonstrated incredible capacities to balance many personal and professional responsibilities. My experiences with these students have taught me the most about strengths that diverse learners bring to the classroom (Núñez, Murakami, & Cuero, 2010).

In addition to reflecting on their own direct exposure to HSIs (or lack thereof), researchers who seek to advance epistemic justice on HSIs must consider how their research will serve the communities they are studying. This entails reflecting on and enacting ethics and values that center inclusion. It requires working directly with personnel at HSIs to decide on the goals of research, establish the research questions, collect data in non-exploitative ways, and develop the research products, whether that be new scholarship, policy briefings, and/or interventions. It is important that researchers interrogate how their own individual careers benefit from their own research on HSIs, and the extent to which their own research will actually improve conditions in HSIs. That is, scholars following a transformative paradigm must consider how they will give back to the HSIs they are researching, rather than merely “drive by” (Hurtado, 2015) and ride away with all of the profits from the research. Thus, reciprocity between the researcher and the researched is a fundamental principle of an HSI positionality.

How can such reciprocity be enacted? Scholars, especially those from more selective and well-resourced institutions, should engage personnel at HSIs in designing research that supports capacity building for HSIs. Those researchers conducting qualitative case studies, for example, might work directly with personnel at these institutions to address research questions that will generate effective organizational strategies to serve Latinx students, while those conducting larger scale quantitative analyses might work directly with associations of HSIs and advocacy organizations, to advance knowledge and policies that will benefit the functioning of these institutions. One guideline to follow is to engage HSI faculty and administrators as *equal* partners in grant applications, to develop capacity-building grants toward pure or applied research, or toward building academic support programs for students. Such an approach contrasts to several examples I have heard from personnel at Minority-Serving Institutions, in which these personnel only learned that their institutions had been included on grants with the more selective institutions, *after* the grant was submitted. That is, the Minority-Serving Institution was not aware they were a “partner” in the grant until after the grant had been submitted.

Recognizing faculty, administrators, and staff at HSIs as producers of knowledge in their own right (Gonzales, 2015, 2016) and jointly engaging in intellectual work with these personnel is another way to offer reciprocity. Such intellectual work can include authoring publications as well as research grants. Facilitating contact with academic networks that may typically be closed to personnel at HSIs, through mentoring, making introductions with individuals at foundations, or other types of connections, can also help personnel at HSIs access the academic, cultural, social, and economic capital from which these institutional personnel are too often excluded, because of their institution’s comparative lack of symbolic capital and perceived prestige.

In short, rather than imposing external frameworks that do not apply to their institutional contexts, or assuming what is right for HSIs, valuing and working directly with personnel at HSIs to build professional development opportunities can most effectively engage HSIs’ faculty and staff to support Latinx students. Researchers can learn more about the contexts within which specific HSIs operate, and work with personnel at those institutions to design professional development or interventions that are based on those contexts. They can also work with HSIs to challenge what are too often deficit narratives around these institutions.

### Engage HSIs to Flip the Narrative

As the accountability in higher education movement grows, it is increasingly evident that if HSIs and other higher education institutions do not tell their stories, they will have their stories told for them. Accordingly, researchers can also enact reciprocity and authentic partnership with HSIs through working with HSIs to flip the narratives in which these institutions are too often represented. By flipping, I mean developing more well-rounded narratives that are grounded in the organizational complexities of diverse HSIs. Personnel at HSIs themselves must better engage in internal conversations to review the range of activities that are going on at these institutions in order to be able to tell their stories to external constituents, such as state and local policymakers. Such conversations are not a given; *Excelencia* in Education annually identifies exemplary programs at HSIs, and it is not rare for leaders at these HSIs to learn about these programs for the first time, when these initiatives are celebrated by a national, external audience.

Sharing findings and applying them toward empowerment is a key dimension of the transformative paradigm, and researchers could solicit what HSI personnel perceive as helpful in making sense of their organization's behavior as HSIs. Once, I gave a talk to leaders at one HSI, in which I presented general research on HSIs' organizational characteristics, while also addressing diverse indicators based on that institution's various activities, to illustrate how that institution specifically served Latinx students. The talk evolved into a more interactive conversation that began with leaders asking me about the meaning of these indicators and proposing different interpretations. This conversation continued into a lively question and answer period; even after my talk, several leaders were waiting to speak to me, wanting to make sense of their own organizational experiences as part of an HSI. This experience shaped my view that, in responding to interests articulated by HSI personnel, researchers could facilitate conversations to educate personnel about the general research on HSIs. Then they could present specific data about the institution itself, engage leaders in conversation, and coordinate common themes that emerge from the conversation. In working directly with personnel to distill these themes, scholars could support HSIs in articulating their internal and external organizational identities, and in developing strategies to better serve Latinx students at their particular institutions.

Beyond supporting single HSIs, researchers could help groups of HSIs identify and represent the commonalities of their organizations to forge a collective HSI identity. Being able to present a multi-faceted collective HSI identity could help federal policymakers and other external constituents build mental models of HSIs as organizations that serve important and distinctive functions to serve Latinx students. Such collective sense making would benefit efforts to advocate for federal and other sources of funding based on the distinctive contributions of HSIs to the nation. HSI researchers seeking to advance epistemic justice can work as true partners with HSIs to: (1) sort through the nuances, complexities, and differences in organizational behavior across institutions, (2) distill common themes across institutions, and (3) to articulate and present a “collective HSI identity” to targeted external audiences.

In short, scholars can help HSIs tell their stories, both as individual institutions and as a collective group of institutions, that are at the vanguard of advancing the educational attainment of historically underserved groups in the U.S. Employing multiple methods and multiple metrics of success (e.g., retention, academic self-concept, community engagement, return on investment) can enrich these stories, creating new narratives that are more well-rounded, attuned and compelling to multiple audiences. (See García, 2017, and in press, in this special issue, for a range of ideas on how to identify meaningful indicators.) Skillful deployments of large scale statistics, case studies, and anecdotes, complemented by details grounded in the local realities of audiences (e.g., the economic and social dynamics in a congressman’s district) can generate more realized portraits of HSIs and help external audiences build mental models to recognize HSIs as distinctive and critical institutions.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have drawn on extant research, my experiences as an HSI faculty member, and my experiences working in the policy arena to sketch what an HSI positionalality that advances epistemic justice (Frank, 2013) and employs the transformative paradigm (Hurtado, 2015) would look like. I encourage researchers on HSIs to reflect on, expand, and transform their own mental models (Argyris & Schön, 1996) to be more responsive to and reciprocal with personnel in the HSIs they work with. Researchers can take active roles to work with HSI personnel so that these personnel can clarify their own mental models about HSIs, and extend this work to engage other external audiences in expanding their own mental

models about HSIs. Scholars who want to conduct equity-minded research can not only employ an HSI positionality in their research framing and design, but also be transparent about it in their presentations and written work to: (1) illustrate the nature of their specific relationships with HSIs, including the extent of their respect for and reciprocity with these institutions, and (2) serve as models to future researchers about how to apply the dimensions of a transformative paradigm (Hurtado, 2015; Mertens, 2009) to working with HSIs.

In sum, I call on researchers who wish to advance epistemic justice on HSIs to fully engage the emergent body of research in this area, including the articles in this special issue that are expanding this field of inquiry. Similarly, scholars should reflect on their own particular individual and institutional positionalities, to become more cognizant of how they can be most attuned to learning about, representing, and supporting the realities of HSIs. To truly support HSIs, scholars must enact reciprocity and work with HSIs and their advocates as true partners. Only by engaging in a constant cycle of informed personal and professional reflection can research, policymakers, and practitioners best serve HSIs and the students enrolled in them.

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