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Review of Anne-Marie Núñez, Sylvia Hurtado, & Emily Calderón Galdeano (Eds.). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Advancing Research and Transformative Practice*

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Anne-Marie Núñez, Sylvia Hurtado, & Emily Calderón Galdeano (Eds.). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Advancing Research and Transformative Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015. 228 pp. Paper: \$47.95. ISBN-10: 1138814318.

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Institutions, just as the people who create them, inevitably change. What we believe describes and drives that change and what it means for everyone involved depends largely on our values and points of reference. In this edited volume, Núñez, Hurtado, and Calderón Galdeano invite readers to question prevailing ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding one of the most widespread, but least understood, institutional changes in higher education in the United States: a proliferation in the number of colleges and universities designated by the federal government as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) that has coincided with the remarkable growth in the Hispanic population.

In contrast to fellow Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs; e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Tribal Colleges and Universities), HSIs were not founded—with only a few exceptions—to serve any particular group at all. Rather, all not-for-profit institutions of higher education can receive a federal HSI designation when they cross the threshold of 25% Latina/os among enrolled students, regardless of whether or not they choose to embrace that designation. This process is playing out among all sectors, sizes, and types of postsecondary institutions throughout the United States. Núñez, Hurtado, and Calderón Galdeano report that the 370 current HSIs represent 11% of all U.S. colleges and enroll 18% of all college students, a number set to increase with another 277 emerging HSIs (colleges with between 15% and 24% Latina/o student enrollment) that researchers have identified (Calderón Galdeano & Santiago, 2014).

Yet their numerical growth and ubiquity, the authors of this book contend, contrasts sharply with how little we know of their diversity and potential to transform the national higher education landscape. Part of the problem, the authors argue, is that HSIs are too often studied as a monolithic block despite their institutional diversity and that limitations to data completeness and reliability

complicate the ability to sufficiently identify and describe HSIs, not the least of which is a lack of any official list. Relatively low persistence and graduation rates have led to “questions about the extent to which HSIs are actually *servicing* versus merely *enrolling* Latina/o students” (p. 66, emphasis in the original); this despite the “possibility that, rather than inhibiting student success, HSIs are actually doing ‘more with less’” (p. 67). In response to such critiques and limitations among others, the book synthesizes the research literature to date and aims to “advance the study of HSIs as complex organizations as they undergo change and respond to external pressures, including demographic change, increased institutional accountability, and resource constraints” (pp. 2–3), phenomena that are observably shared by higher education institutions everywhere.

Following an introductory chapter by the editors in which they provide a historical, sociopolitical, and theoretical context for the development and study of HSIs, the book is divided into three parts: (1) “Contextualizing the Culture, Structure, and Identity of Hispanic-Serving Institutions,” (2) “Framing Institutional Actors and Experiences Within Hispanic-Serving Institutions,” and (3) “Building Capacity and Accountability in Hispanic-Serving Institutions.” These division titles are broad-reaching, and so it takes time browsing the chapters to get a good sense of the relationship among them. An important key to understanding the book’s organization and approach is that all its chapters primarily “use an organizational lens to understand HSIs, gaining insights from constituencies (students, faculty, and leaders) within them” (p. 13). In this light, the three parts correspond essentially to concerns of institutional identity (the what), experiences (the who), and capacity/impact (the how).

In addition to an organizational lens, the book is designed to bring to bear transformative paradigms that go beyond familiar post-positivist, constructivist, and pragmatic paradigms in order to question the “dominant research narrative, based on selective, four-year institutions, and the transference of unquestioned assumptions about definitions of institutional ‘success’ and the behaviors that contribute to it” (pp. 10–11). The book delivers on this premise, and the heavy emphasis on critical and transformative theories is a major strength. Regardless of a chapter’s topic, data source, or level of analysis, the authors consistently foreground an asset-based approach while illustrating the pitfalls of falling into familiar deficit frameworks.

Ultimately, the chapters vary in the degree to which they strictly employ an organizational level of analysis, a feature of the book which happens to be in agreement with García’s (Chapter 5) observation that “a majority of [HSI] studies have

used individuals as the unit of analysis and few authors have constructed studies using an organizational lens” (p. 89). Chapters that do employ an organizational level of analysis appear throughout. Hurtado and Ruiz Alvarado (Chapter 2) describe the intricate Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) along with several ways to understand whether and how institutional transformation may be occurring. García (Chapter 5) reviews four major bodies of organizational theory literature (organizational environment, organizational culture, organizational identity, and social movements) useful for unpacking institutional behavior and transformation. Ortega, Frye, Nellum, Kamimura, and Vidal-Rodríguez (Chapter 9) illustrate the utility of such approaches to understand the financial decisions and resilience of HSIs. Lastly in this group of chapters, Hurtado, González, and Calderón Galdeano (Chapter 10) provide an example of institutional learning and reform arising from a collaborative project among MSIs that was conducted through mutual institutional-level mentoring relationships.

Other chapters employ what essentially is an individual-level of analysis, even if they do account for the institutional environment. Most of these are empirical studies of student outcomes. This is the case for Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo’s (Chapter 3) study of transfer in Hispanic-serving community colleges and Cuellar’s (Chapter 6) study of HSI student outcomes beyond narrowly-constructed success indicators of persistence and completion. Rodríguez and Calderón Galdeano’s (Chapter 11) investigated whether HSIs really underperform in graduating their students as commonly observed (in short, no, when drawing more careful comparisons than typically done).

Núñez and Elizondo (Chapter 4) elaborate descriptive profiles of variation across institutional characteristics of four-year HSIs. Though an institutional-level analysis, the focus throughout is squarely on what variation means at the student level. Drawing on a conceptual framework that examines the relationship between organizational behavior and student outcomes, their analysis relies on a mix of financial descriptors and aggregated student and faculty data in relation to full-time equivalent student counts.

This mix of institutional-level analysis with a special concern for individual experiences and outcomes, and even outright individual-level studies, might be seen as a compromise or shortcoming for readers accustomed to organizational research that privileges the viewpoint of executive leadership, governing boards, and with a primary consideration of field dynamics (Bastedo, 2012). However, that the book does not refer extensively to “classical” organizational theory makes sense, given its rhetorical stance. Furthermore, where the

book does refer to the organizational literature, the scholars are known for their approach to higher education through critical and transformative frameworks including Michael Bastedo, Estela Bensimon, Patricia Gumpert, Adriana Kezar, and William Tierney, among others.

Moreover, the book would be sorely incomplete without the complementary institutional and individual views, since, again in the words of García (Chapter 5), “the cultural identity of Latina/o students [attending HSI] is largely intertwined with the culture of the institution” (p. 89). Indeed, organizational theories do not exist in a vacuum for their own sake, but rather always are grounded in institutions’ societal roles. For higher education institutions, their identity and function ultimately and fundamentally revolve around new generations of students in a dialectical power-laden relationship with faculty and administrators. Therefore, what these chapters provide are examples of what transformative organizational research of HSI means for students in particular, and are necessary for accomplishing the goal to “challenge commonly held conceptions” (p. 14) regarding HSI.

A wide variety of conceptual frameworks and methodologies make this book an excellent reference for any reader vested in the book’s vision for “advancing research and transformative practice,” according to its subtitle, even as this theoretical sophistication might inform the practice of researchers most directly. For this latter audience, the book is an invaluable resource of raw materials (literature reviews, data sources, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks) for moving forward with the research agenda it proposes.

Still, because the book so well compiles and synthesizes the extant research to date, it cannot help but be a reference point for practitioners and policymakers whose work involves HSI or other broad-access institutions that face similar issues. This group of readers will find useful information throughout the book, though the text is far from providing ready-to-use self-study guides, protocols, assessment tools, or nuanced policy recommendations. Nor should it, really, in light of the fundamental gaps in the research literature that ultimately form the rationale for the book in the first place.

Some portions of the book that more closely inform practice deserve special attention. Hurtado and Ruiz Alvarado (Chapter 2), provide one of the more theoretically rich and sophisticated chapters. Yet the authors intersperse an abundance of indicators and resources throughout the chapter that practitioners can extract to understand if and how their institutions are undergoing deep, pervasive, and intentional change or pursuing isolated and superficial adjustments. Gonzales (Chapter 7) posits that “HSI faculty members have extraor-

dinary potential to (re)shape the production and legitimization of knowledge inside academia” (p. 121). This chapter especially is relatable to faculty members in their work lives. Through a review of first-hand accounts of teaching approaches and methods culled from the qualitative literature, a reader can glean ideas for what those practices might look like in her or his own setting. Cortez (Chapter 8), through richly-described qualitative data, gives voice to individual HSI leaders that readers can connect to on a professional and human level. The study, set in Texas’ Rio Grande Valley, presents a context that is uniquely distinct from most HSI, and so there are limitations to just how well lessons can be adapted to other institutional settings whether “current HSI, emerging HSI, [or] predominantly White institutions (PWI) that are struggling to find systematic ways to support Latina/o students” (p. 150). Nonetheless, it certainly provides a model for leaders anywhere.

Lastly, in terms of readership, despite its deliberate consideration of the two-year college sector where over half of HSI are found, there is limited insight for community and sub-baccalaureate college settings. Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo (Chapter 3), provide a chapter fully dedicated to this sector, but it is concerned narrowly with two-year colleges’ transfer function. Another example is found in Núñez and Elizondo’s (Chapter 4) analysis of institutional variation, which, for pragmatic reasons, excludes those institutions that primarily award associate’s degrees and other sub-baccalaureate credentials, thereby missing a potential opportunity to add nuance to findings from Chapter 3. This shortcoming is perhaps more indicative of the relative lack of research focused on community colleges broadly speaking more than it constitutes a criticism of this one book. To be sure, one of the authors’ main tasks in defining a research agenda is to make bare existing gaps, and this is a big one.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Advancing Research and Transformative Practice is, in a literal sense, a one-of-a-kind book. Though there is now a burgeoning research literature related to HSI and an emerging critical mass of scholars for whom HSI are an integral part of their research agendas, nowhere in print form are such a “wide variety of topics, data sources, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies” (back cover) brought together and synthesized in such a thorough yet succinct package. At 228 pages, the book is readily accessible in part or in whole in research and professional settings and in the classroom, at either the graduate or advanced undergraduate level. Overall, what the authors have accomplished is to survey the groundwork of three decades of emerging scholarship and pave the way for the next stage in research needed to understand “the implications of the growth of [HSI] for higher education [and] the institutional

behaviors and changes required to address the needs of the their diverse student bodies” (p. 2).

Future work could conceivably focus even more exclusively on organizational culture, identity, and transformation. But it is clear that researchers will do well to remain focused in the near term on implications for students, as there is no time to spare in addressing gross inequities in higher education that are being exacerbated by the rapid growth of Latina/o youth and whose future success is inevitably linked with that of all of the United States, its citizenry, and democracy. HSIs are uniquely positioned to address the challenges if only their transformative potential is tapped and leveraged. With changes in the regulatory, economic, and demographic environments throughout the country, all but the most narrowly-tailored or isolated institutions find themselves compelled to change their practices to better serve students who, like many Latina/os, historically have had less access to higher education, tend to be first-generation students, have limited economic means, prioritize cost in their college choice decisions, and who typically elect to attend college close to home. This book is well positioned to inform the work of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in such work.

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