Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): Disrupting Institutional Whiteness

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BECOMING HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIS):
DISRUPTING INSTITUTIONAL WHITENESS

by

Jacqueline Black, B.A, M.A.

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Marquette University,
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the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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ABSTRACT

BECOMING HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIS): DISRUPTING INSTITUTIONAL WHITENESS

Jacqueline Black, B.A, M.A.
Marquette University, 2024

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) educate disproportionately large percentages of Latinx and other underrepresented minority (URM) postsecondary students. But as most HSIs are also Historically White Colleges, whiteness permeates their campus structures, cultures, and practices. This study bridges gaps in our understanding around how legacies of historical whiteness on campuses that have recently become or are emerging as HSIs affect their efforts to serve Latinx/URM students. The project focuses on the perspectives of those faculty, staff, and administrators most intimately involved in “servingness” work on these campuses: HSI specialists.

Employing a critical qualitative approach and guided by Critical Whiteness Studies and Omi and Winant’s formulation of racial projects, this study examines how HSI specialists encounter and counter whiteness. Through interviews and Community of Practice discussions, HSI specialists across a range of institutional types in an “emerging” HSI region shared their understandings of institutional whiteness, how they perceived whiteness interfering with their ability to adopt a race-conscious model for servingness, and the strategies they employed to disrupt it.

Findings of this study expand upon definitions of “servingness” at recently designated and emerging HSIs. Additionally, situating participants’ insights within an ecological framework, this research established that whiteness manifests in a variety of forms at these campuses, as HSI specialists were confronted with individual racialized understandings, interpersonal, spatial, and organizational instantiations of whiteness, and sociopolitical currents that worked against race-conscious efforts. Far from being passive participants in these systems of whiteness, however, HSI specialists shared ways that they engaged in authentic and strategic leadership and compassionate engagement with their colleagues to fight the institutional current.

This study highlights HSI specialists as powerful catalysts for change as well as underscores the collective responsibility of all campus stakeholders to engage in counterhegemonic practices. HSI specialists, campus leaders, and all who are interested in transforming historically white colleges into Hispanic-Serving Institutions may draw lessons from participants for how to navigate institutional whiteness and contribute to meaningful change on their own campuses. Finally, this study points to Communities of Practice as a potential tool for cultivating a shared servingness identity and a source of mutual support for HSI specialists.
DEDICATION

Jacqueline Black, B.A., M.A.

To the students and families whom I have had the privilege of accompanying on their educational journeys, it is my hope that this study contributes in some way to focusing college campuses’ efforts toward becoming spaces of affirmation, support, thriving, and joy.

And to my friends and colleagues across many campuses, who work tirelessly in the face of sometimes seemingly intractable obstacles to create pathways for those who have been marginalized, this dissertation is a tribute to your passion, dedication, and relentless belief in our students.
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Jacqueline Black, B.A., M.A.

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To my other dissertation committee members: Dr. Melissa Gibson, who saved me in the proposal defense phase. Thank you for helping me reframe my methodology and for providing me with essential readings to guide my path. And to Dr. Gina García, whose research has challenged and inspired me since long before I began this writing, thank you for believing in this project and helping me get across the finish line.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AANAPISI – Asian American, Native American, and Pacific-Islander Serving Institution
BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
CoP – Community of Practice
CWS – Critical Whiteness Studies
DOE – Department of Education
eHSI – Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution
HACU – Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
HBCU – Historically Black College or University
HHEC – Hispanic Higher Education Coalition
HSI – Hispanic-Serving Institution
HWC – Historically White College
IHE – Institution of Higher Education
MC – Midwestern City; pseudonym for the city around which the campuses in this study are clustered
MSI – Minority-Serving Institution
PoC – Person/People of Color
PWI – Predominantly White Institution
TCU – Tribal College or University
URM – Underrepresented racial/ethnic minority
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In fall of 2016, I started a new job on a college campus. The predominantly white university had announced that it was working toward becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) – a federal designation conferred upon institutions of higher education (IHEs) that enroll significant proportions of low-income Latinx students – and they created my position to help steward the initiative. Armed with a background in Latinx education but being new to the world of HSIs, I immediately set off on a quest to better understand the campus environment, the students and community we were seeking to serve better, and, importantly, models of successful HSI initiatives at other IHEs.

What I found surprised me. Most of the institutions that had grown into the HSI designation had done so largely by geographic and demographic happenstance rather than any intentional effort (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2012). While they had the enrollment numbers to be classified as HSIs, the vast majority of these institutions were also Historically White Colleges (HWCs) without specific missions for serving underrepresented students (Bridges et al., 2008; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2012; Laden, 2001). Moreover, they did not consistently serve Latinx and other underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (URM) students well (Nelson Laird et al., 2007). I began to question, beyond enrollment numbers, what does it mean to be an HSI? And how do I, as

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1 While the American Psychological Association style guidelines currently call for the capitalization of all racial identities, in this paper, I do not capitalize white or whiteness unless appearing in a title or citation or as the first word of a sentence. This is a deliberate grammatical choice that takes its cue from critical antiracist scholarship in an attempt to decenter white dominance (Mohajeri, 2022; Rogers et al., 2021).
a practitioner specializing in HSI work, help mobilize my campus to engage in the sort of transformational change required to become a truly Hispanic-Serving Institution?

In turning to the scholarship on HSIs, there were many research best practices for specific types of programs that would support Latinx and other URM students, but an overarching conceptual framework did not emerge until Gina García and her colleagues (2019) synthesized the literature and offered the notion of “servingness”.² According to the authors, institutions that embrace an ethos of servingness center Latinx voices and build organizational policies, practices, and programs that result in equitable outcomes and culturally-enhancing experiences. Rather than focusing on student characteristics from a deficit lens to explain disparate outcomes between Latinx students and their white peers, these scholars highlight the structural elements that can either facilitate or hinder students’ development and engagement (García et al., 2019).

As the initiative progressed at my own university, undergirded by this comprehensive framework, I found general support on campus for the idea of becoming an HSI, but not always a willingness on the part of institutional actors to take the bold steps necessary to transform our organizational culture. The number of Latinx students on our campus was growing, but retention and campus climate data continued to reveal racial/ethnic disparities in outcomes and experiences (Midwestern University, 2020). Conversations with my counterparts at other local institutions that had their own HSI initiatives revealed similar frustrations in creating and implementing an effective roadmap to becoming an HSI, and often yielded more questions than answers. Over time,

² The framework of servingness will be outlined in the “Key Words” section at the end of the introduction and discussed in greater detail in the Chapter II literature review.
it became clear that even with the theoretical and empirical groundwork that had been laid by HSI scholars, the institutional statements of commitment to this endeavor, and the vast wells of knowledge and experience of the practitioners who were at the heart of these efforts, progress remained slow and difficult. Some changes were made readily while other recommendations were met with institutional intransigence. I began to suspect that this phenomenon resulted from a tension between the desire to break away from the business-as-usual practices that marginalize URM students (Marin, 2019; Reguerín et al., 2020) and the tendency to cling, as with a bad habit, to organizational cultures that have been steeped in whiteness since the inception of our institutions (Ahmed, 2021). Yet, in scouring the research on HSIs, I found that while scholars have posited that commitment to whiteness in their structures and processes likely curbs progress toward equitable outcomes and culturally affirming environments for students of color (e.g., Alcantar et al., 2020; Doran & Medina, 2017; García, 2018a, 2019; García et al., 2019; Marin, 2019; Nelson-Laird et al., 2017; Velez, 2019), empirical evidence to corroborate this hypothesis had not yet emerged when I began this journey.³

Because HSIs educate a large percentage of racially minoritized students, and the number of HWCs that will become HSIs continues to grow (Contreras, 2019; García, 2020), the question of how these institutions work to create the conditions necessary for their students to thrive is of paramount importance. It is for those students that I chose to explore the perspectives of faculty, staff, and administrators at HWCs in transition who are pushing their institutions to become more responsive to URM students’ needs and to

³ When this project was envisioned, no empirical research explicitly linking the historical legacy of whiteness with barriers to servingness at HSIs had been published. Since then, there has been at least one case study delving into this topic (Scott et al., 2022).
center their racial and cultural identities. This critical qualitative study investigates how historically white institutions in an “emerging” HSI region grapple with a developing Latinx-serving identity, specifically as it is understood by HSI specialists\(^4\) – those who are most intimately involved in initiatives to transform their campuses, and whose experiences can expose the ways in which whiteness shows up within their organizational cultures and power dynamics. Through interviews and Community of Practice group discussions with HSI specialists across a range of institutional types in the Midwest, I explored their understandings of institutional whiteness, whether and how they perceived whiteness interfering with their ability to adopt a race-conscious model for servingness, and the strategies they employed when confronting challenges related to whiteness so that other HSI specialists may learn from their efforts and more effectively advance Latinx servingness on their own campuses.

In this chapter, I describe the problem I am seeking to address, explain the purpose of the study, and articulate the research questions that guided the project. Then I explain its significance, highlighting how the knowledge gleaned from the study may inform postsecondary practice. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of key terms related to whiteness, servingness, HSI specialists, and a pan-ethnic Latinx identity, which is of particular relevance for a project focusing on institutions that are classified by the ethnic makeup of their student bodies.

\(^4\) The defining characteristics of an “HSI specialist” will be described in the “Key Words” section at the end of the introduction.
Statement of the Problem

HSIs have a uniquely important role in educating URM students. Not only do they educate two-thirds of all Latinx undergraduates in the country, they also enroll disproportionately large percentages of Native American, African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Asian American students (HACU, 2023a). And yet, as the literature review in Chapter II reveals, there is wide variability in student outcomes and experiences at HSIs, and many HSIs depart little from their Predominantly White Institution (PWI) counterparts in terms of how well they serve URM students (Nelson Laird et al., 2007). In particular, recently designated or “emerging HSIs” (eHSIs), IHEs with between 15-24% Latinx student enrollment, may be in a state of flux or “striving to serve” their URM students as their campus diversity grows and they grapple with this emerging identity (García, 2019, p. 3, emphasis in original). HSI scholars have therefore pointed to the need for campuses to engage in “transformational change” to better serve their URM students, writing conceptual frameworks and engaging in advocacy scholarship highlighting examples of institutional structures that can enhance their capacity to serve (see, for example, García, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2021; Espino, 2015; Hurtado et al., 1998; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Reguerín et al., 2020). But while the blueprints for transformation exist, few empirical studies have actually shown whether or how institutions in transition achieve this paradigmatic shift, and more specifically the impediments that arise during the process (García, 2019; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015).

Scholarship on organizational change can shed light on why this transformation proves so challenging. Most change in higher education is “first-order,” meaning that it is
instrumental in nature – it utilizes incremental approaches that fit within the current, accepted business-as-usual framework of the organization, whereas “second-order,” or transformational, change involves questioning the underlying assumptions of the existing system and fundamentally altering the mission, structures, and behaviors of the institution (Boyce, 2003; Clark, 2000; Huff & Huff, 2000; Kezar, 2011). Oakes and colleagues (1998) further argue that transformational equity work in education requires “third-order changes,” or those that “seek to reform core normative beliefs about race, class, intelligence, and educability held by educators” (p. 298). That is, before organizational change can occur, the understandings and attitudes of individual organizational members need to change.

Kezar (2011) argues that organizational change in higher education can best be explained through political, social-cognitive, and cultural models of change, which offer strategies such as persuasion, negotiation, and coalition-building; constructing interactive learning opportunities to alter mental models; and transforming institutional symbols, traditions, and culture (p. vii). This work is nuanced, complex, time-intensive, and is most effective when pursued collectively between campus leaders and grassroots efforts led by practitioners, as well as across institutional units (Boyce, 2003; Potter & Devecchi, 2020). In a context of “organized anarchical decision-making” – a common feature of college campuses (Kezar, 2011, p. vi) – this sort of collaborative engagement can be a challenging proposition. And in the case of attempted third-order changes that seek to upend the status quo in educational institutions, the prevailing social norms, beliefs, and culture work to “shape, structure, and constrain” equity-minded efforts, ultimately chipping away at meaningful progress (Oakes et al., 1998, p. 290). Indeed,
organizational change research suggests that institutional inertia and risk-aversion
disguised as “stability” can become an obstacle to transformation (Huff & Huff, 2000).

As Historically White Colleges (HWCs), HSIs’ inertia is likely bound up with an
institutional commitment to the legacy of whiteness in the organization’s underlying
values, assumptions, and structures. Created by white people for white people, these
institutions have made decisions over time that have reified the centering of whiteness
(García, 2018a; Patton, 2016; Stewart, 2020; Wilder, 2013). The resulting “institutional
whiteness,” or the often-invisible processes that uphold white hegemonic power, becomes
a habit that is difficult to break (Ahmed, 2021). Whiteness permeates institutional
structures, but it often goes unnamed and un-scrutinized, making it challenging to root
out (Cabrera et al., 2017). Even when identified as an impediment to progress,
institutions have little incentive to change unless those changes advance the interests of
those in power: critical race scholars have argued for decades and have numerous
examples from legal studies, sociology, education, and other fields demonstrating that
racial progress is only made so long as it benefits the white ruling class (see, for example,
Bell, 1979). This phenomenon, known as “interest convergence,” explains why racial
progress continues to be incremental at best (Brown & Jackson, 2013).

While very little scholarship explicitly studies the role of institutional whiteness
in stymying campus transformation at HSIs/eHSIs (Scott et al., 2022), HSI scholars have
theorized that whiteness hinders progress toward becoming Latinx-serving (e.g., Alcantar
et al., 2020; Doran & Medina, 2017; García, 2018, 2019; García et al., 2019; Marin,
2019; Nelson-Laird et al., 2017; Velez, 2019). Without additional empirical research that
demonstrates how whiteness may interfere with eHSIs’ and HSIs’ transition toward
servingness, HSI campus leaders and other practitioners may continue to stumble over this barrier to true campus transformation. This issue becomes even more salient as Latinx and other URM students will make up ever increasing proportions of the college-going population (Bransberger et al., 2020) – particularly in “emerging” HSI regions where demographic diversity is comparatively low and where institutions have only begun transitioning from predominantly white to Latinx-serving.

Finally, very little HSI literature centers the voices and experiences of those who are on the front lines of institutional change and therefore best situated to discuss how campuses are responding to an HSI/eHSI identity – the HSI specialists themselves. The term “HSI specialist” here refers to faculty, staff, and administrators who are responsible for guiding their institutional HSI efforts in an official capacity, and can include HSI grant coordinators but also HSI committee members, advisors, and others engaged in strategic and operational HSI work. As HSI/eHSI campus leaders with intimate knowledge of the inner workings of their institutions, and the ones often pushing the boundaries as “institutional plumbers” who help unplug blockages to racial and gender progress (Ahmed, 2012), these HSI specialists are uniquely poised to provide insider information about whether and how their campuses are transforming and what challenges may hinder movement toward servingness, including the dynamics of whiteness. And yet, as higher education scholar Sara Ahmed (2012) points out, “little research into diversity has involved speaking to diversity and equal opportunities practitioners” (p. 15). In fact, so overlooked are their experiences and understandings that the concept of an “HSI

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5 One notable exception is García’s (2020) edited volume, *Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in Practice: Defining “Servingness” at HSIs*, in which the chapters have been written by HSI grant coordinators/implementers.
specialist” who specifically works on issues related to servingness has not been defined in any HSI literature to date.

In sum, HSI specialists at existing and emerging HSIs need guidance beyond theoretical best practice – they need to understand how they can mobilize their institutions to disrupt institutional whiteness so that their organizations’ underlying assumptions, mission, structures, and behaviors center URM students as a matter of course. Such structural change is necessarily a collective effort, and, as HSI specialists do not always occupy positions of authority within the institutional power structure, they need to understand how they can pioneer this transformation collaboratively, across campus units and at all levels of the institutional hierarchy. As HSIs have an increasingly important role in the education of Latinx and other URM students, this is a pressing problem in need of further study. But there is much that we can learn from each other. By centering the voices and experiences of HSI specialists themselves – a largely untapped fount of information – this project identifies common experiences and themes related to campuses in transition from predominantly white to Latinx-serving, and provides other practitioners with a clearer picture of how to navigate institutional resources and barriers and contribute to meaningful change on their own campuses.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study provides insight into how HSI specialists at recently designated HSIs and eHSIs in the Midwest understand their institutions’ responses to an HSI identity, whether they perceive their institutions transforming their structures and practices to inhabit a Latinx-serving ethos, and the ways in which institutional whiteness, as a conceptual framework, affects these efforts. Moreover, this study provided a forum where
HSI specialists could co-create a shared understanding of institutional whiteness, draw upon their knowledge to explore strategies for navigating it, and develop key takeaways that others may use in their own resistant practice within systems of institutional whiteness at HSIs/eHSIs. In centering the perspectives of HSI specialists, this study highlights, from their vantage point, whether and how their respective institutions were responding to the needs of their increasingly diverse student bodies, shedding light on the structural elements that both help and hinder this work and gleaning lessons for other institutions undergoing similar transitions. By better understanding the experiences of those on the front lines of campus transformation – who, in the case of this study were almost all Latinx themselves – this project also amplifies the voices of those who have been underrepresented in higher educational literature. In telling their own stories, they create a clearer picture of the challenges and triumphs of HSI specialists and, by extension, HSIs themselves.

**Research Questions**

My research questions focus on HSI specialists’ understandings of how whiteness shows up in their institutions’ power dynamics, structures, and practices, and their strategies as institutional agents for navigating these systems:

1) How do HSI specialists at recently designated and emerging HSIs understand and navigate the historical legacy of whiteness on their campuses?

   a. Sub-question #1: What barriers do HSI specialists encounter in working toward a race-conscious model of servingness, and how are these challenges connected to their understandings of institutional whiteness?
b. Sub-question #2: What strategies do they employ to disrupt institutional whiteness?

The insights gleaned from this study reveal, from the point of view of those closest to the work, whether, to what extent, and how institutional whiteness presents roadblocks to true transformation, and documents how HSI specialists engage in resistant practice within systems of whiteness.

**Significance of the Study**

This project forms part of the just emerging scholarship exploring HSI specialists’ understandings of whether and how institutional whiteness affects HSIs/eHSIs’ ability to serve their URM students. HSI scholarship documents a disconnect between equity-centered praxis and the practices that are actually employed on HSI/eHSI campuses (García, 2021), but to date, only one case study has explicitly connected these institutional practices to whiteness (Scott et al., 2022). This project bridges this gap by drawing attention to the experiences of those who are working to transform their campuses to embrace an ethos of servingness, and where they encounter resistance or barriers to affecting race-conscious structural changes.

While efforts to create equitable learning environments for URM students has long been an important issue, the question of how to go about that becomes all the more important as the demographics of our nation and our college campuses continue to shift toward greater diversity. It is critical for not only HSI specialists but all postsecondary practitioners to adapt to the changing face of their student bodies and to have the best information about what transformational change looks like in practice. Describing exactly where and how whiteness is embedded and practiced can help higher education
practitioners reflect upon the ways in which institutional structures might be upholding white hegemonic power. And documenting where HSI specialists report success in pushing against the status quo can help other practitioners identify and remove obstacles that impede their ability to serve URM students well.

My study adds to our understanding of HSIs/eHSIs and ultimately assists campus leaders interrupt business-as-usual to implement institutional structures that better serve their students. By centering the perspectives of HSI specialists, curating recurring themes across institutions, and providing thick descriptions of their experiences, this study equips readers with rich, nuanced and thematic understandings of what they believe their campuses are doing well and where they fall short of serving their URM students – and why. In particular, drawing from HSI specialists’ own experiences in navigating institutional whiteness as they strive to transform their campuses creates opportunities for practitioners at other campuses – such as my own – to learn from them as they engage in similar work. By exploring how HSI specialists navigate institutional waters related to servingness and contend with barriers presented by the historical legacy of whiteness, this study produces knowledge around HWCs in transition and paves the way to more equitable outcomes and more culturally affirming experiences for Latinx and other URM students on these campuses.

**Key Words**

*Hispanic vs. Latinx*

*Hispanic* broadly refers to people of Spanish-speaking descent, while *Latino/a* refers to those residents of the United States who trace their ancestry to Latin America (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987). While government documents, including those that
define HSIs, tend to more uniformly utilize the term Hispanic (with the notable exception of the U.S. Census, which, since 2000, has been using the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably; Haub, 2012), it has been argued that Latino/a is a more appropriate pan-ethnic term as it is based in the unique geopolitical relationship between the U.S. and Latin America rather than lumping together those of European and Central or South American descent (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987), especially given the violent history of Spain’s colonization of the Americas (Simón, 2018).

Latinx (or, in the plural, Latinxs) emerged in the 21st century as a gender-neutral iteration of Latino/a (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). While Hispanic is widely favored over Latino/a/x among those of Latin American descent in the U.S. (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020), many, and particularly younger and politically progressive populations, prefer the term Latinx (Mora et al., 2021). There is also controversy surrounding the term Latinx because while it is more inclusive of those who do not identify on a gender binary, it is difficult to pronounce in Spanish (Salinas, 2020). It can be thought of, then, as both the language of the oppressor, as it is derived from the United States, is associated with highly educated spaces, can be perceived as elitist, and can be difficult to pronounce in languages other than English; and of the oppressed, aimed at recognizing and empowering those whose experiences are erased by a gender binary (Salinas, 2020; Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). Latine has been used by Latin American activists as a gender-neutral, Spanish-pronounceable alternative, but has not yet gained widespread traction in the United States (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018).

Further, to some, pan-ethnic terms may feel disempowering, as they can homogenize and make invisible the varied experiences, histories, and identities of those
grouped under this umbrella, such as Afro-Latinos (Calderón, 1992). Some therefore more closely identify with their specific lineage (Chicano/a, for example, referring to Americans of Mexican descent) rather than a pan-ethnic identity (Calderón, 1992; Taylor et al., 2012). And yet, there may be situationally specific contexts in which people of Latin American descent find it politically expedient to form coalitions across national origin for collective action. Calderón (1992) notes, “Where Latinos were distinguished from other groups along lines of power or class, they responded panethnically” (p. 41) and argues that the term “Latino” has a greater potential for forging such a pan-ethnic identity than “Hispanic.” Recognizing this, along with the growing preference among college-going students for the term Latinx (Salinas & Lozano, 2019), for purposes of this paper, this will be the primary term used. Only when referring to federal definitions or criteria that use the term Hispanic will I do the same.

**Servingness**

Servingness is an emerging multidimensional framework that describes how both external influences and internal structures at HSIs can result in equitable academic and non-academic outcomes and a culturally affirming campus environment for Latinx and other URM students (García et al., 2019). As some scholars argue that HSIs have a “manufactured” identity based on a federal designation that is not defined by an institution’s actual ability to serve Latinx students well (Contreras et al., 2008), servingness refers to the intentional and active process of inhabiting a Latinx-serving ethos. Some such institutional structures for servingness include the development of race-conscious leadership strategies, decision-making practices, mission statements, and strategic plans; diversity within the student body and among faculty and staff; programs,
services, and curricula designed for URM students and incentivizing employees’ engagement with these activities; and building the capacity to serve through institutional development activities, external partnerships, and community engagement (García et al., 2019). The scholarship on servingness will be covered in more detail in the Chapter II literature review.

**Whiteness**

“Whiteness” here does not refer to individual skin color or racial/ethnic background, but rather reflects ideologies, actions, and processes that serve to maintain white skin privilege and the racial status quo (Ahmed, 2007; Cabrera et al., 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Gusa, 2010). “Institutional whiteness” refers to the often-invisible structures and practices that uphold white hegemonic power within institutions (Applebaum, 2016; Leonardo, 2009; Matias et al., 2014). As almost all HSIs are also Historically White Colleges (HWCs), these institutions may continue to be committed to whiteness, reproducing ideologies, institutional cultures, and pedagogies that result in the marginalization of students of color (Rudick & Golsan, 2018). On college campuses, whiteness may manifest, for example, in colorblind orientations toward research, classroom instruction, and programmatic support; the devaluation of scholarship and knowledge produced by people of color (PoC); an inequitable distribution of resources; and exclusionary physical and social spaces (Cabrera et al., 2017). As a conceptual framework for this study, institutional whiteness will be explored in greater depth in Chapter III.
**HSI Specialist**

The term “practitioner” is utilized in a broad sense to distinguish those who primarily occupy administrative and/or student-facing roles on college campuses from educational scholars (García, 2020, p. xiv). While most employees on HSI/eHSI campuses may be considered “HSI practitioners,” here I am focusing on a subset of these practitioners who have specifically been tasked with some aspect of HSI implementation on their campuses. For this purpose, I have chosen to use the term “HSI specialist,” which has not been defined in scholarship but here refers to faculty, staff, and administrators who are responsible for guiding their institutional HSI efforts in an official capacity, whether as a part of their regular duties-as-assigned, as an HSI grant seeker or coordinator, as an HSI advisor to senior-level administrators, or as a member of an HSI committee. HSI specialists may occupy diversity-related posts, but they can also be drawn from other faculty or staff positions. Their HSI-related activities may also differ based on institutional contexts, from HSI strategic planning to grant-writing to facilitating student-facing programs and beyond. As campus leaders, these HSI specialists are likely to be the most knowledgeable about how their institutions are responding to this designation, whether and how their campuses are transforming as a result, and what challenges may hinder progress toward servingness. I use the term “practitioner” in this document when referring more broadly to postsecondary faculty, staff, and administrators.

**Summary of Introduction and Organization of the Paper**

The rapidly changing demographic landscape of IHEs in the U.S. and the continued growth in the number of IHEs that will become HSIs shines a light on the need
for these historically white institutions to consider how well they are responding to their increasingly diverse student bodies. The purpose of this study is to achieve a greater understanding of the perspectives of HSI specialists regarding how HWCs become Latinx-serving. Revealing the ways that institutions either embrace servingness or present barriers related to a historical and ongoing commitment to whiteness will ultimately assist institutions in examining their own structures and practices and foster better outcomes and experiences for Latinxs and other students of color.

In Chapter II, I present a review of the literature on HSIs, including their history, institutional and compositional characteristics, organizational identities and cultures, outcomes, and climates. Chapter III describes the conceptual framework of institutional whiteness, which informed how I explored my research questions. I also outline the critical qualitative approach of my study design and detail the process for collecting and analyzing data through interviews and a Community of Practice. In Chapter IV, I report my findings, outlining HSI specialists’ understandings of servingness, where they report whiteness showing up on their campuses, and the strategies they employ to counteract it. In Chapter V, I connect these findings to the conceptual frameworks for this study, and present implications for theory, practice, and future research.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The term “Hispanic-Serving Institution” is mentioned in scholarly work as early as 1991 as an emerging concept – even before the creation of the federal designation (Anderson, 1991) – and since then, research on HSIs has proliferated. And yet, in a synthesis of the extant literature on HSIs, García, Núñez, and Sansone (2019) found that among 346 HSI publications, including journal articles, book chapters, education reports, policy briefs, and ERIC documents and dissertations, HSI status was referenced to provide institutional context, but HSIs were not themselves variables or the objects of study. In many instances, “the HSI context was not explicitly addressed throughout the study, from the purpose, research questions, and methods to the discussion and conclusions made” (García et al., 2019, p. 767). Moreover, because of their extreme heterogeneity in terms of size, location, institutional control, mission, selectivity, Carnegie classification, and other characteristics, studies that focus directly on HSIs have resulted in often inconclusive and sometimes contradictory findings (Núñez & Elizondo, 2015). Hurtado and Ruiz Alvarado (2015) note that there are “large gaps in our knowledge base about how HSIs operate and how they are advancing Hispanic higher education… We simply do not have enough information regarding their distinctiveness as organizations outside of student enrollments” (p. 41).

In this review, I focus on the literature that highlights the HSI context, covering such topics as their history, institutional and compositional characteristics, organizational identities and cultures, outcomes, and climates, and draw upon policy briefs, reports, book chapters, and journal articles. This review is primarily based on 89 empirical studies on HSIs, at least 39 of which focus on HSI-rich regions such as the Southwest, Texas,
and California. Despite the fact that almost half of all HSIs are two-year institutions (HACU, 2023b), of the studies that refer to institutional type, a disproportionately small number mention a community college context (20, compared to 53 that expressly include four-year institutions), and very little research has been conducted at private institutions: of those studies that include reference to institutional types, 11 mention a private context vs. 53 studies that are specific to or include public institutions.

The first part of the literature review describes what we know about the history, demographics, and resource limitations of HSIs – especially given the vast heterogeneity of these institutions. In Part II, I explore organizational attributes and measures of “success,” including academic and other outcomes, campus climate, and cultural congruity with students’ racial/ethnic backgrounds. In Part III, I present a summary of the emergent construct of servingness – a framework conceptualized by HSI scholars in which IHEs center Latinx voices and build structures that result in equitable outcomes and culturally-enhancing experiences. The idea of servingness frames a range of programs, policies, practices, and capacities that IHEs may need to consider as they transition from PWIs to HSIs. Finally, gaps in the literature are identified to highlight the ways in which this study expands our knowledge on how HSIs grapple with this racialized institutional identity and strive to inhabit an ethos of servingness.

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6 Some studies did not identify site locations or institutional contexts such as institutional control (public vs. private) or whether they were two-year or four-year degree-granting institutions; others included multiple sites that spanned region, control, and types of degrees conferred.
Part I: Defining Characteristics of HSIs

In the following sections, I describe the history and purpose of the federal HSI designation, outline what we know about the demographic make-up of the student and employee populations at HSIs, and paint a broad picture of the financial context at HSIs.

Historical Context for the Evolution of HSIs

From the earliest days of the American republic, Latinxs were systematically excluded from quality educational opportunities and were barred almost entirely from accessing college (MacDonald, 2004). After the G.I. Bill of 1944, Latinxs began entering college in small but meaningful numbers, a trend that was accelerated by the Civil Rights Movement, when college outreach efforts to “non-traditional” students increased and with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which appropriated funds to facilitate low-income students’ access to postsecondary education (Gladieux, 1995; Laden, 2001). Meanwhile, many colleges adopted affirmative action policies, which sought to increase enrollment of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups in higher education (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004). While the U.S. Supreme Court began establishing limits on how race could be used as a factor in admissions decisions with the 1978 Regents of the University of California v. Bakke case, and eliminated race-conscious admissions practices altogether with the 2023 Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina decisions, race-conscious affirmative action practices provided an opening for many minoritized students to access postsecondary educational opportunities over a period of decades (West, 1998).

It was also during the Civil Rights era that Latinx student activists began to change the higher education landscape by demanding that college campuses work harder
to recruit and support Latinx students. One of the first successful actions resulted in the creation of UC-Santa Barbara’s Chicano/a Studies Department in 1969 following the takeover of an administrative building and the publication of *El Plan de Santa Bárbara*, a document written by a group of Latinx students and professors calling for the centering of the Chicano experience in university structures (Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, 1969). *Chicanismo* and *Latinidad* became increasingly incorporated into university curricula and social science research agendas across the academy and, in the early 1970s, PhDs were awarded for the first time to Latinx scholars, many of whom entered academia and began mentoring the next generation of Latinx students (MacDonald, 2004). Even in geographic areas with relatively few Latinx, activism resulted in meaningful change on some college campuses, widening pathways to higher education for Latinx students. In one of the first such demonstrations in the Midwest, protestors at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee advocated for – and secured – Spanish-language programming that would provide greater educational access to the university for the city’s Latinx population. One participant noted that “for most [of the protestors] this was the first time they were inside a university building; and to think that to get inside we had to force our way in.” A visit with the Board of Regents and a hunger strike were what eventually turned the tides, resulting in the formation in 1970 of what is now known as the Roberto Hernández Center, an office dedicated to Latinx student engagement and success (Cuauhtémoc et al., 2005, p. 26-27).

By the mid-1970s, more than one-third of Latinx adults had completed high school (Pew Research Center, 2013) and between 5-10% of those between the ages of 25-29 had completed a four-year college degree (Wang & Parker, 2011). And yet, those
Latinx students who were entering college in the 1970s and 1980s were concentrated on a relatively small number of campuses (Salas, 2011). Many of these colleges were not sufficiently funded to respond to the needs of this population of students and, in particular, to adequately address barriers to educational attainment associated with being low-income, first-generation, and/or English-language learners. Moreover, conservative government policies and budget cuts in the 1980s rolled back student grants and other beneficial programs, which hurt the neediest students (MacDonald, 2004). The result was that many Latinx students who were motivated to attend college did not have the financial, academic, or programmatic support to make it through with a two- or four-year degree (MacDonald, 2004).

**Emergence of HSIs**

Latinx advocacy organizations identified a need for increased federal funding for colleges and universities serving large numbers of Latinx students, and in 1978, representatives from eight such groups came together to form the Hispanic Higher Education Coalition (HHEC), testifying to Congress multiple times between 1979-1985 and laying critical political groundwork to influence policymakers’ understandings of the issue (Valdez, 2015). In 1986, a convening of administrators working on college campuses in places such as Texas and New Mexico resulted in the establishment of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), the original mission of which was “to engage in activities that heightened the awareness among corporations, foundations, governmental agencies and individuals of the role that member colleges and universities play in educating the nation’s Hispanic youth” (Revilla-García, 2011, p. 3). HACU picked up where the HHEC left off, lobbying the federal government to formally
recognize and provide additional resources for campuses with large enrollments of Latinx students – what they termed “Hispanic-Serving Institutions” (HSIs) – to correct funding inequities (García, 2020; Laden, 2001; Revilla-García, 2011; Valdez, 2015). HACU was, indeed, successful and in 1992 Congress added the designation of “Hispanic-Serving Institution” to the Higher Education Act (Excelencia in Education, 2014).

In order to be considered an HSI by the federal government, two- and four-year accredited institutions of higher education must serve a significant percentage of low-income students and at least 25% of their full-time undergraduate population needs to identify as Hispanic. Once qualifying as an HSI, these institutions can begin applying for certain types of federal funding. The first of these to be developed specifically for HSIs was the Title V “Developing HSIs” grant, the purpose of which is to “enhance the academic offerings, program quality, and institutional stability of colleges and universities that are educating the majority of Hispanic college students and helping a large number of Hispanic students and other low-income individuals complete postsecondary degrees” (Higher Education Act, 2006 amended). The average Title V HSI grant is $510,000 per year awarded over multiple years and, by and large, HSIs tend to use this money for faculty and curriculum development and direct student support services (Santiago et al., 2016). More recently, funds have been appropriated for Title III “HSI STEM and Articulation Program” grants, which are designed to increase the number of Hispanic and low-income students completing four-year degrees in STEM fields (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2012). HSIs are also eligible to apply for grants available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Science
Foundation (NSF) aimed at increasing the diversity of agricultural scientists and other STEM graduates (García & Koren, 2020).

It should be noted, however, that even though the HSI designation was created to compensate for funding inequities that disproportionately affect Latinx students, these grants are not limited to Latinx-specific programs and initiatives. In a recent Title V application cycle, for example, the federal government conferred competitive preference to proposals that focused on “underserved students,” a term encompassing 13 categories, such as low-income students, students of color, first-generation college students, English language learners, and “disconnected youth” (Applications for New Awards; Developing HSIs Program, 2022). While there is certainly some overlap between these categories and students with Latin American ancestry, the broadness of these funding priorities does not constitute a targeted race-based approach to serving Latinx students.

With the growth in the number of Latinx college students over the past several decades, the number of institutions that are now eligible to apply for these federal grants has also grown tremendously. While the federal government had not published annual lists of HSIs for public use until 2016 (HACU, 2023c), organizations dedicated to accelerating Latinx student success such as HACU and Excelencia in Education have established methodologies for identifying HSI-eligible institutions based on the Higher Education Act definition. These organizations report that in 1995 when the first HSI grants were awarded, there were 172 HSI-eligible institutions (HACU, 2014); since then, the number has more than tripled to 572 in the 2021-22 academic year, comprising nearly 1 in 5 of non-profit colleges and universities (Excelencia in Education, 2023). In addition to federally designated HSIs, there are 400 “emerging HSIs” (eHSIs), which enroll
between 15% to 24.9% Latinx undergraduates (HACU, 2023b). As eHSI is not an official designation, there is little research specifically on eHSI contexts and studies comparing them to HSIs are predominantly focused on campus climates. Closer study of these institutions may yield insights into how Historically White Colleges (HWCs) respond to their changing student bodies.

Latinx college enrollment – and therefore the number of HSIs – is expected to continue to grow.7 In the spring of 2019, Latinxs made up 25% of graduating high school students and, while the number of projected high school graduates in the United States is expected to drop precipitously over the next decade, the proportion of those future high school graduates who are students of color is predicted to increase, particularly among Latinxs (Bransberger et al., 2020). Latinxs are also enrolling in college at higher rates than ever before. In 2014, 35% of Latinxs aged 18-24 were attending college – a 13-percentage point increase over enrollment numbers in 1993 (Krogstad, 2016).

**Who is Served by – and Who Serves at – HSIs?**

The key defining characteristic of HSIs is that at least 25% of their undergraduate student bodies identify as Hispanic, and at least half of those students are low-income. But beyond these very specific parameters, who attends HSIs? And who are the faculty, staff, and administrators who are educating them? The following sections describe what we know about the demographic make-up of the student and employee populations at HSIs.

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7 There was a slight drop in the number of HSIs in 2020-21 for the first time in decades, due in large part to the interruption in Latinx college enrollment and institutional closings early in the COVID-19 pandemic. As the number of both HSIs and eHSIs more than rebounded in 2021-22 (HACU, 2023a), it would appear that the pandemic downturn was an anomaly in the growth trajectory of HSIs.
**HSI Student Characteristics.** Based on 2006-07 IPEDS data, the most recent year that scholars have investigated this question, 53.4% of all students at HSIs are Latinx, compared to 7.1% nationwide (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). Mainland (excluding Puerto Rico) four-year HSIs on average consist of 43% Latinx students (Núñez & Elizondo, 2015). Latinxs at HSIs are more likely to have parents with less education and to be part-time and transfer students than their counterparts at non-HSIs; less likely to live on campus and be involved in co-curriculars (Bridges et al., 2008); and more likely to work full time (41% compared to 30% of non-Minority-Serving Institution\(^8\) students; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). While Latinxs at HSIs may have less academic, social, economic, and cultural capital than their non-HSI peers, they may also possess different forms of capital: familial and resistant capital, along with an ethnic pride and pride in attending an HSI, for example, may serve to bolster their persistence (Cuellar, 2015; Rendón et al., 2015). Some research also suggests that Latinx students who attend two-year HSIs transfer to four-year institutions at higher rates than Latinx students enrolled in non-HSI community colleges (Hagedorn et al., 2007).

HSIs enroll not only significant numbers of Latinx students but also other historically marginalized populations. HSIs educate large numbers of first-generation college students (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015) and the majority of students enrolled in HSIs are low-income (Cuellar, 2015; Núñez & Bowers, 2011) with over half of all HSI students receiving Pell Grants (Núñez & Elizondo, 2015). More than a quarter of students

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\(^8\) Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) include: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Asian American, Native American, and Pacific-Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs).
at HSIs are age 25 and older (26.9%; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015) and 75% are from racially/ethnically minoritized backgrounds (Espinosa et al., 2019). HSIs enroll not only two-thirds of all Latinx undergraduates in the U.S. but also 41% of all Asian American, 34% of all Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 24% of all African American, and 21% of all Native American students (HACU, 2023a). In fact, HSIs serve more Black students than Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and more Native students than Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), even though those institutions were created with the specific purpose of serving those populations (Núñez et al., 2015). Holding other demographic considerations constant, students of color, and particularly Latinx students, are more likely to attend HSIs than their white peers (Flores & Park, 2013; Núñez et al., 2011).

Racial/ethnic diversity on college campuses can enhance outcomes for URM students if campuses create effective educational environments that enrich educational possibilities (Chang, 1999; Maruyama et al., 2000). Further, in the context of HSIs, high racial/ethnic diversity may contribute to Latinx students’ sense of belonging (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Maestas et al., 2007), and higher percentages of Latinx student representation has been linked to better academic outcomes for Latinx students (Hagedorn et al., 2007).

**HSI Faculty, Staff, and Administrator Diversity.** Faculty and staff diversity at HSIs far outpaces that of non-MSIs. Using IPEDS data from 2006-2007, Hurtado and Ruiz Alvarado (2015) report that 31.3% of instructors at HSIs were Latinx compared to only 3.1% nationwide. Additionally, 36.9% of staff in managerial, administrative, or executive positions and 43.4% of all other staff professionals were Latinx, compared to 3.4% and 4.5% nationwide, respectively (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015), with Latinx
presidents leading approximately one-third of HSIs (de los Santos & Vega, 2008). While these numbers exceed national averages for faculty and staff in academia, compared to other Minority-Serving Institutions, HSIs lag behind: at HBCUs, for example, 57% of faculty are Black (Gasman & Conrad, 2013).

Faculty and staff diversity can have profound implications for minoritized students. While non-Latinx faculty, staff, and administrators are less likely to understand Latinx cultures and may be less competent in serving Latinx students at HSIs (Preuss et al., 2020), faculty and staff of color often serve as “empowering agents” who help URM students navigate institutional structures on HSI campuses (García & Ramirez, 2018; Mendez et al., 2015). Research beyond HSIs also demonstrates that URM faculty and staff can help students cultivate social capital (Museus & Neville, 2012) or act as “institutional plumbers” who help to unplug blockages to racial and gender progress (Ahmed, 2012). Faculty of color, and Latinx faculty in particular, have been a central focus of scholarship at HSIs. It has been shown that faculty at HSIs hailing from similar backgrounds as their students have the potential to validate them, increase their sense of belonging, and improve academic self-concept (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2020; M. López et al., 2020) and they may play a role in raising Latinx student college completion rates, along with improving other academic outcomes, such as GPA and course completion (Contreras, 2017; Hagedorn et al., 2007). Faculty of color are also more likely to mentor students of color (Laden, 2001; Turner, 2015), an important support as these students are less likely than their peers to possess the necessary social capital to effectively navigate academia and postbaccalaureate options (Contreras, 2017; Tran et al., 2016). And, because “mentoring
is a racially and culturally mediated experience,” having access to mentors who understand their racial and cultural background is vital (J. L. Figueroa & Rodríguez, 2015, p. 23). Faculty of color are also more likely to expose students to diverse pedagogies and perspectives (Hurtado, 2001; Turner, 2015) and limit assumptions about students in their classrooms (Núñez et al., 2010). Dayton and colleagues (2004) conducted a qualitative study at eight HSIs in which students and administrators alike underscored the importance of having staff who were racially and culturally representative of the student body. Similarly, college presidents point to the hiring of faculty of color as the most important strategy for scaffolding the success of students of color (Kezar & Eckel, 2005). Contreras and Contreras (2015) conclude that increasing the number of Latinx and other faculty of color may very well help HSIs in their capacity to effectively serve their Latinx students.

While less prominent in the literature, similar conclusions have been reached regarding HSI leaders. HSI scholars have demonstrated the importance of a racial and cultural match between executive-level administrators and the students they serve, as this cultural congruence often facilitates administrators’ ability to relate to students and to embrace a Latinx-serving ethos in their leadership priorities (Cortez, 2015; Doran, 2020; J. G. Vargas, 2011). Because staff, faculty, and administrators of color may be more adept at enhancing institutional responsiveness to increasingly diverse student populations, some scholars have concluded that “diversification at all ranks is the single most important long-term structural change in institutional transformation: it is the most effective way to diversify the curriculum, broaden research foci, and increase connections with minority communities” (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015, p. 36).
Resource Limitations

One of the few defining characteristics of HSIs beyond student demographics in the Higher Education Act is that, to be eligible for Developing HSI grants, an HSI’s average educational and general expenditures must be low compared to institutions that offer “similar instruction” as defined by institutional control (public/private) and type (two-year/four-year; Higher Education Act, 2006 amended). Per-pupil expenditure is significantly correlated with college completion rates for students of color (Flores & Park, 2013), which presents a troubling reality as HSIs, on average, have fewer institutional resources than their non-HSI peer institutions. In 2012, it was reported that HSIs received only 69 cents for every dollar that non-HSIs receive in federal funding (Calderon et al., 2012); a decade later, HSIs continued to receive one-third less funding per student than non-HSIs (HACU, 2022). Yet, they are 12% more reliant on government dollars than non-HSIs (Ortega et al., 2015). This means that, while a greater share of their operating budgets is fed by government sources, these institutions receive significantly less government funding than non-HSIs, resulting in a much more limited capacity to serve compared to their peer institutions. Over the past several decades as federal and state governments have significantly cut financial support to postsecondary education, these institutions have also had to pass along a greater share of the cost of education to their students and families (Ortega et al., 2015). But in many cases, they are unable to generate the necessary funds due to the high proportion of low-income students they serve, forcing them to redistribute resources away from student-centered activities, including instruction and support services (Ortega et al., 2015).
For some institutions, federal Title funding partially offsets losses, but appropriations for these grants have not kept pace with the rapid growth in the number of HSIs (Ortega et al., 2015; Villarreal & Santiago, 2012) and administrators describe the Title V grant process as increasingly competitive (Cortez, 2015). In fact, the proportion of HSIs receiving these grants peaked in 2004, and has steadily declined since then (Ortega et al., 2015). There is also some evidence that these grants are not awarded to institutions with the highest percentages of Latinx students; instead, whiter institutions – which often have more institutional resources already – are more likely to receive these funds (N. Vargas, 2018). Moreover, overreliance on grant funding can result in discontinuance of programs and services as soon as the grant funding runs out, unless HSI leaders find ways to shift institutional resources to continue programming (Hurtado et al., 2015). HSIs also apparently have limited capacity to raise funds through other routes, as the average revenue generated from voluntary support and private giving is about 2.5 times higher per student at four-year non-HSIs than HSIs (Ortega et al., 2015). The result is an environment in which HSI leaders grapple with balancing cost and quality of service to their students (Santiago, 2009), and even solvency, as the majority of HSIs enroll fewer than 5,000 students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2019).

Part II: Investigating HSIs

In the following sections I turn from defining characteristics of HSIs to what we know through investigation about the variability in their organizational identities and leadership, how they measure up on both traditional academic and non-academic outcomes for Latinx students, their campus climates, and whether and in what ways they exhibit cultural congruity with the racial/ethnic identities of the students they serve.
Organizational Attributes

Despite the specific parameters of the federal HSI definition, describing HSIs as a classification beyond their demographic make-ups is a nearly impossible feat. Of the 572 institutions identified as having at least 25% Latinx student enrollment in 2021-22, 39.5% were two-year public, 1.5% were two-year private, 29% were four-year public, and 30% were four-year private colleges and universities, located in 28 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico, and ranging from open-access community colleges to Research 1 doctoral-granting institutions (HACU, 2023b). Within the vast heterogeneity of these institutions, scholars have sought to describe key organizational features, with a large part of the extant research focusing on HSI organizational identities and HSI leadership.

HSI Organizational Identities. Understanding how HSIs define themselves and how institutional stakeholders make meaning out of their HSI designation can provide insight into how these institutions operate. A widely utilized definition of organizational identity is what is most central, enduring, and distinctive about an organization and answers the question, “who are we, as an organization?” (Albert & Whetten, 1985; emphasis added). But for many HSIs, the federal designation may or may not be an important feature of their institutional identity.

Even though the majority of students attending HSIs are racial/ethnic minorities (Espinosa et al., 2019), very few HSIs were created with the express purpose of educating traditionally underserved, underrepresented, or minoritized students (Bridges et al., 2008; García et al., 2018; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). At their most basic level, HSIs are defined exclusively by numbers; that is, demographic data and expenditures per student (Higher Education Act, 2006 amended). Moreover, the extreme diversity among HSIs makes it
nearly impossible to generalize what it “means” to be an HSI beyond the numbers (Nuñez et al., 2016) and research suggests that the organizational culture of each HSI is unique (García, 2015). The somewhat arbitrary nature of their defining numbers, the ability to gain or lose HSI eligibility based on enrollment, and the absence of a unifying or common mission among HSIs results in a lack of centrality, enduringness, and distinctiveness of an HSI organizational identity, leading some researchers to claim that they have a “manufactured identity” (Contreras et al., 2008). Contreras and colleagues (2008), for example, question the importance of an HSI identity due to the unplanned, unstable, and highly variable nature of HSIs (p. 74).

Empirical research bears out the variability of HSI organizational identities and what being an HSI “means” to institutional stakeholders. For example, one case study demonstrated that students often identified a disconnect between an HSI designation and their institutions’ ability to truly serve Latinxs and other URM students (García & Dwyer, 2018). Yet, additional case studies of HSIs show that a Latinx-serving identity that validates, sustains, and enhances the culture and education of Latinx students can be constructed by leaders (Cortez, 2015) and other internal stakeholders (Doran & Medina, 2017; García, 2016a) through the organizations’ values and processes rather than a tenuous connection to the federal designation. Further, even when the HSI designation is not readily apparent to students and other stakeholders, an institution can embrace a Latinx-serving ethos as a central aspect of their identity through various organizational dimensions, such as the institution’s compositional diversity, services, and programs designed for Latinx students (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010).
Taking into account the variety of ways that institutional stakeholders engage in sensemaking around and co-create HSI organizational identities, García (2017a, 2017b) mapped out a typology of HSI organizational identities (which has since been applied by other HSI scholars; e.g., García et al., 2018; Marin, 2019) that are defined by both outcomes and organizational culture: “Latinx-enrolling,” “Latinx-producing,” “Latinx-enhancing,” and “Latinx-serving.” In García’s framework, “Latinx-enrolling” institutions enroll large numbers of Latinx students but do little else to support these students specifically. In these cases, an HSI designation that is conferred upon the institution by the federal government may not be embraced by its members and may have little bearing on the organization’s day-to-day processes and practices. HSIs can also be “Latinx-producing,” producing positive academic outcomes for Latinx students, such as high graduation rates; “Latinx-enhancing,” providing strong support and culturally affirming practices; or “Latinx-serving,” referring to institutions that do both (García, 2017a, 2017b). García argues that identifying what a Latinx-serving identity looks like in practice has important practical and policy implications, particularly for institutions that strive to serve URM students well and support their success.

HSI or Latinx-serving identities, however, prove to be even more complex than this typology might suggest, as it has been argued that organizational identities in general are not, in fact, enduring but rather dynamic, fluid, and adaptive to internal or environmental changes (Gioia et al., 2000). Institutions that have recently become – or are working toward becoming – HSIs, for example, may be in a state of flux or “striving to serve” as they grapple with this emerging identity while continuing to operate in many ways as a white institution (García, 2019, p. 3, emphasis in original). One comparative
case study describing this phenomenon at dually designated HSIs and Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) found that these campus environments to varying degrees exhibited a tension between “striving to become” and “undermining progress towards becoming … [a] tension between simultaneously being minority-serving and historically white” (Alcantar et al, 2020, p. 110). This tension may be felt even more acutely within geographical and social contexts with low compositional diversity and historical and ongoing segregation: in a case study of three Midwestern HSIs, García and colleagues (2018) found evidence to suggest that stakeholders at these campuses often experience a disconnect between an “ideal” HSI identity and their “currently constructed” organizational identity.

Constructing a Latinx-serving identity can be further complicated by competing institutional priorities and multiple understandings of what an “ideal” HSI identity actually entails. For example, tensions sometimes exist between striving to embody an organizational identity rooted in student access and support versus one that is focused on institutional status (DeTurk & Briscoe, 2020; Doran, 2015). While these orientations can (and often do) co-exist in an ethos of inclusive excellence (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d.), efforts to enhance prestige and efforts to serve are often put into competition with each other as the most central aspect of institutional identity (DeTurk & Briscoe, 2020; Doran, 2020). Two studies of HSIs seeking R1 status as top tier research institutions found that, due to changes in processes, structures, and incentives, faculty time and attention shifted from teaching and student-centeredness toward a more competitive research orientation (DeTurk & Briscoe, 2020; Gonzales, 2013). When the answer to the question, “who are we, as an organization?” is not first
and foremost centered on students, it can have a cascading effect across the institution and impact students’ day-to-day lived experiences and opportunities for success.

**HSI Leadership.** Campus leaders are responsible for articulating the institutional mission, setting the tone, and guiding priorities (L. F. Rodríguez & Oseguera, 2015). In short, leadership at HSIs matters. For example, in a policy brief with 12 HSI presidents hand-picked for leading diverse, student-centered, and adaptable institutions, Santiago (2009) documented how these administrators were able to articulate a mission of serving URM and first-generation college students and overwhelmingly defined institutional quality in terms of service to their students. Santiago concludes that “these leaders set the tone for institutional commitment and accountability for student success” (p. 18).

Another study more explicitly connected HSI leaders’ attitudes and behaviors with student outcomes and experiences, demonstrating that culturally sensitive leadership and prioritizing student success resulted in positive campus experiences for Latinx students (Cortez, 2015). This finding was echoed in a study with 30 college presidents, including some at HSIs, which revealed that simply declaring a new mission was not enough; rather, creating a campus culture that served URM students required engagement with campus stakeholders; strategic planning; providing support, resources, and incentives for DEI-related work; and establishing mechanisms for accountability (Kezar & Eckel, 2005). There is also evidence to suggest that HSI leaders can learn from each other’s organizational practices through collaborative mentoring and communities of practice, and need to be open to experimentation to make substantive shifts in how they serve their students (Hurtado et al., 2015).
In some instances, however, leaders’ attitudes and orientations may actually hinder institutional progress toward inhabiting a Latinx-serving identity. In a case study of a “grassroots” HSI, Doran and Medina (2017) found that institutional leadership made changes to staffing, curricula, and community outreach only as a result of student activism, and even then only grudgingly or while simultaneously working to undermine student efforts. Another study with administrators at an eHSI found that, while some believed that strong leadership or collaborative efforts were necessary to create a pathway to becoming an HSI and improving campus conditions for URM students, others espoused a business-as-usual attitude, or the idea that an HSI identity dovetails with – and is in fact a result of – existing institutional context, history, and values, and therefore doing business-as-usual is enough to respond to this new facet of their identity (Marin, 2019). The author posits that a business-as-usual approach in a historically white institution may undermine the need for responsiveness to an increasingly diverse student body. Other scholars might describe these institutions as “evolutionary” or slow and reactive, rather than proactive (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). Indeed, empirical HSI research has shown the need to disrupt business-as-usual practices to close racial equity gaps (Reguerín et al., 2020). As Santiago (2012), the co-founder of Excelencia in Education, an organization dedicated to accelerating Latinx student success, notes, “Enrolling Hispanic students by default without explicit institutional effort to recruit, retain, and graduate these students undermines the public policy intent and spirit of the HSI designation” (p. 165).

It is also important to note that, while campus leaders are commonly conceptualized as administrators (e.g., presidents, chancellors, and provosts), governing
boards can also influence how HSIs and statewide campus systems that include HSIs/eHSIs articulate and implement student-centered missions. One study focusing on the case of Nevada’s elected Regents showed that this governing board dictated strategic priorities and set plans in motion to better serve the state’s growing Latinx population (M. Martinez, 2015). While as of this writing, this is the only study of its kind, this research suggests that leadership at the very highest levels of institutions and systems can play a central role in prioritizing the success of URM students.

**Measuring HSI Success**

The federal statute defining HSIs does not address how these institutions might measure their relative “success,” leaving scholars to determine parameters for how well HSIs serve their students. Much of the research on HSIs revolves around traditionally measured academic outcomes, including graduation rates, course completion, GPAs, STEM degree completion, post-baccalaureate enrollment, and labor market outcomes (García et al., 2019; García & Koren, 2020). But in addition to student outcomes, García, Núñez, and Sansone (2019) highlight literature pointing to another indicator for HSI success: student experiences, including racialized experiences of campus climate and organizational features that either affirm students’ cultural backgrounds or result in feelings of alienation.

**Outcomes.** Of all the indicators of success, an institution’s ability to support students to persist to degree completion is one of the most often studied. While HSIs produce more Latinx graduates overall than non-HSIs (Harmon, 2012), there is no clear consensus as to whether HSIs are better or worse than non-HSIs at graduating the Latinx students who enroll at their campuses. Contreras and Contreras (2015), for example, used
IPEDS data from 56 two- and four-year public HSIs in California to argue that HSIs are systemically failing Latinx students based on low persistence and graduation rates. But using large data sets without context may provide an unfair snapshot of these institutions. As the Higher Education Research Institute has noted,

portraying raw graduation rates as a measure of institutional quality and effectiveness without first taking into account the types of students that enroll at an institution strongly favors the most selective institutions and tends to penalize institutions that offer broad access or enroll large numbers of first-generation students. (DeAngelo et al., 2011, p. 4)

Indeed, four-year HSIs serve more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and with lower academic preparation than four-year non-HSIs (Flores & Park, 2013; Núñez & Elizondo, 2015) and Latinxs attending HSIs have more personal and environmental “pull factors” that put them at risk for dropping out of college than those attending non-HSIs (Núñez et al., 2011).

Contreras and Contreras (2015) – and others (e.g., Contreras, Malcolm, & Bensimon, 2008) – paint HSIs with a broad brush with consideration neither for student characteristics, nor institutional contexts, resources, or myriad other factors. Other researchers, however, have used institutional matching techniques to make apples-to-apples comparisons, controlling for such factors as institutional control, size, and selectivity, and have demonstrated that HSIs were no more or less likely than non-HSIs to graduate their Latinx students (Flores & Park, 2015; A. Rodríguez & Calderón Galdeano, 2015). These findings, coupled with the fact that HSIs on average have fewer
institutional resources than their peer institutions, have led some researchers to conclude that HSIs are “doing more with less” (Núñez & Elizondo, 2015; Ortega et al., 2015).

Recent research using a more nuanced understanding of graduation rates paints an even more complicated picture: utilizing data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), the American Council on Education’s Center for Policy and Research Strategy reported in 2017 that graduation rates at HSIs are much higher than previously thought. Recognizing that URM students often attend college through “non-traditional” pathways such as a mixture of part- and full-time course loads and by transferring from institution to institution, the report captures students who are not typically counted in the federal graduation rate. While IPEDS numbers provide a much bleaker picture of student persistence at HSIs, NSC data reveal that 50% of students at public four-year HSIs and 60.5% of students at private four-year HSIs complete their degree within six years. These numbers rise for exclusively full-time students to 74% and 78%, respectively (Espinosa et al., 2017). All told, scholars warn that HSIs should “employ caution in comparing their student outcomes to outcomes in non-HSIs” (Núñez & Elizondo, 2015, p. 77).

STEM outcomes also feature prominently in HSI research. To a certain extent, federal priorities drive programming at HSIs (García & Koren, 2020), and since guidelines for federal grant programs started prioritizing STEM-related services and outcomes for URM students at MSIs in 2007 (Salas, 2011), scholars have been interested in how well HSIs contribute to diversifying the STEM workforce. While HSIs produce large numbers of STEM graduates (Harmon, 2012; Palmer et al., 2013; Zamani-Gallaher

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9 IPEDS graduation rates only include students who complete a four-year degree within six years or a two-year degree within three years at the same institution where they first enrolled (Cook & Pullaro, 2010).
et al., 2019) and some researchers have concluded that HSIs are serving Latinx students in STEM majors well (Crisp, Nora, & Taggart, 2009; Madsen Camacho & Lord, 2011), others have found that attending an HSI does not have an impact on whether URM students complete STEM degrees (Figueroa et al., 2013). Scholars have also highlighted case studies on programming (often grant-funded) aimed at increasing Latinx student success in STEM fields at HSIs (e.g., Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Carpi et al., 2013; Cruz et al., 2019; Kato & Marinez, 2020; Meling et al., 2013). As with so many facets of HSI research, there is significant variation in programming and results due to the significant variation in HSIs themselves.

There is also some research suggesting that HSIs can be powerful vehicles for upward mobility compared to non-MSIs. According to a 2018 report from the American Council on Education (ACE), two-year HSIs propelled students from the lowest income quintile to the top income quintile at twice the rate of two-year non-MSIs. Four-year HSIs fared even better, with three times the mobility rate of non-MSIs, and at a rate that also outpaced other MSIs, including HBCUs, TCU, and AANAPISIs. Two-year and four-year HSIs also had higher “extended mobility” rates than their non-MSI counterparts, moving students from the bottom two quintiles to the top two income quintiles at roughly twice the rate (Espinosa et al., 2018). In fact, seven out of the top ten postsecondary institutions ranked by the Social Mobility Index in 2021-22 were HSIs (HACU, 2023b), despite the fact that, in general, HSIs have lower expenditures than non-MSIs and enroll a higher proportion of low-income students (Núñez & Elizondo, 2015). That is, they are educating students with some of the greatest barriers to persistence in higher education and are doing so successfully with limited resources. As the authors of
the ACE report point out, “policymakers, public and private industry, and other important stakeholders need to pay due attention to those colleges and universities with the greatest potential to educate a growing and changing American populace” (Espinosa et al., 2018, p. 1).

Less common in the literature is attention to non-academic outcomes. Cuellar (2015) argues that defining “student success” with overly simplistic measures such as graduation rates may not provide a full, rich understanding of how HSIs are serving their students and the quality of education they provide. For example, some scholars have found that HSIs afford Latinx students with greater opportunities for developing academic self-concept (Cuellar, 2014), leadership capacity (Onorato & Musoba, 2015), and racial identity (Guardia & Evans, 2008).

**Campus Climates.** While there is no consensus among researchers as to an exact definition of campus climate, based on Hart and Fellabaum’s (2008) synthesis of the literature on the topic, it can be broadly understood as the *perceptions* and *experiences* of campus stakeholders, which are shaped by the institution’s compositional diversity, institutional structures and practices, and interpersonal interactions. Campus climate also impacts students’ sense of belonging, or the feeling of cohesion or connectedness a student has with a particular institution, which is an important factor in students’ willingness to persist in college and their ability to thrive (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; M. López et al., 2020; Maestas et al., 2007). At HSIs, campus climate encompasses both culturally and linguistically validating experiences and support as well as negative racialized experiences such as discrimination, harassment, and microaggressions (García et al., 2019).
Unlike research focusing on PWIs which more uniformly describes racialized experiences that negatively affect URM students’ sense of belonging and opportunities for success (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; D. R. Johnson et al., 2014; Solórzano et al., 2002; Wei et al., 2011), research at HSIs/eHSIs reveals highly variable campus climates for Latinx students. Climate is deeply dependent upon complex and interrelated historical, organizational, compositional, psychological, and behavioral dimensions, as well as external sociohistorical, political, and local contexts (Hurtado et al., 2012), and particularly salient in research on climate at HSIs/eHSIs is the demographic composition of the campus. For example, one study comparing racial climates for Latinx students at three institutions – an eHSI, an HSI with 45% Latinx enrollment, and one with 80% Latinx enrollment – found that Latinx students experienced the fewest racial microaggressions and the highest sense of belonging at the most homogenous institution (80% Latinx; Sanchez, 2019). Two further studies of campuses where Latinxs were the minority (one eHSI and one HSI with less than 50% Latinx enrollment) demonstrated mixed experiences with both anti-Latinx bias and affirming experiences with faculty and staff who countered anti-Latinx deficit narratives (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016, 2020), while studies of Latinx students attending HSIs with majority-Latinx enrollment have revealed positive attitudes toward campus climate, describing environments that were supportive, free from discrimination (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016), and culturally and linguistically affirming (Guardia & Evans, 2008). In short, the extant research on campus climate suggests that HSIs with greater percentages of Latinx students tend to be more Latinx-friendly. As with the research on educational outcomes, however, research focusing on Latinx student experiences at HSIs/eHSIs must be
tempered by the understanding that these institutions are highly variable and complex, and that findings may not be generalizable.

While most HSI research focuses on Latinx students, scholars are increasingly exploring the experiences of other HSI campus stakeholders. Despite the high compositional diversity of HSIs on average, non-Latinx students of color can still encounter institutional (Desai & Abeita, 2017) and interpersonal microaggressions (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016; Serrano, 2020), suffer anti-Black racism (Abrica et al., 2020), experience cultural mismatches with peers from other racial/ethnic groups (Lu & Channel Inez Newton, 2019), and may disidentify with an HSI designation (García & Dwyer, 2018) or feel “othered” as non-Latinx students attending HSIs (Willis et al., 2019). It is important to note that racially minoritized students are not only passive victims of harmful climates at some HSIs but can also employ creative strategies for navigating and waging resistance against racialized dimensions of campus life (Comeaux et al., 2020).

A smaller number of studies focus on the experiences of HSI employees. Even though there are relatively higher percentages of Latinx faculty on HSI campuses compared to national averages (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015), isolation and a lack of belongingness can still occur for Latinx faculty and staff, who seek out peer networks to create community within hostile work environments (Ek et al., 2010; Gonzales et al., 2013; López et al., 2021). Very little empirical research has been conducted with other populations of faculty at HSIs, but some evidence suggests that non-Latinx faculty of color at HSIs also operate within unsupportive microclimates (Venegas et al., 2021), and some mixed heritage faculty members have a complicated relationship to HSIs: one study
found that, while they are attracted to a mission of serving Latinx students, they also feel the need to seek out other faculty of color in order to create networks of support (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010). In one of the few studies focusing on staff members’ experiences at HSIs, García (2016b) found that student affairs professionals’ experiences at HSIs were dependent upon their “microclimate.”

The idea of a validating “microclimate” is echoed in Serrano’s (2020) study with Black and Latino male HSI students which pointed to the positive effects of “academic homeplaces,” spaces of community where students could find “affirmation through relationships and social interactions, a representation of Black and Latinx faculty and students, spaces free of racial discrimination and bias, and a sense of unity and solidarity… finding validation and affirmation through their peers, professors, and curriculum” (p. 11). The concept of culturally affirming “spaces” is also a prominent topic in HSI literature and will be discussed in the next section.

**Cultural (Mis)matches.** Challenging previous scholarship asserting that students who create separation from their former lives and incorporate themselves fully into campus culture are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1975), scholars studying URM populations in higher education highlight the institution’s responsibility to forge campus spaces that reflect that of the students they serve (Museus, 2014; Rendón et al., 1994; Tierney, 1999). Rendón and colleagues (1994), for example, theorize the need for cultural mediators, cultural models, and other overlap between the dominant campus culture and that of minoritized students. Tierney (1999) and Museus (2014) have also generated frameworks asserting that institutions that meaningfully affirm students’ cultural identities can increase their motivation, sense of belonging, and academic self-efficacy,
thereby increasing their chances for academic success. Indeed, “cultural congruity” — or how well a student perceives their cultural values aligning with those of their university — has been positively correlated with cumulative GPAs for Latinx students (Cerezo & Chang, 2013) as well as fewer perceived educational barriers to their success (Gloria et al., 2005). But HSIs may not uniformly provide this cultural “match” for Latinx students. Based on research comparing students’ experiences at HSIs and PWIs, for example, Nelson Laird and colleagues (2007) conclude that “HSIs are in the midst of a shift from having White-oriented institutional cultures to cultures inclusive of Hispanic students and their educational needs” (p. 51).

The literature on HSIs is clustered around three “spaces” in particular where these culturally affirming practices take shape (or not): in the classroom, through programs and services for minoritized students, and in the built environment.

**Classroom Spaces.** Classrooms can become culturally affirming spaces through student-centered curricula and pedagogies. Through case studies, scholars who study URM student experiences (Hurtado et al., 1998; L. F. Rodríguez & Oseguera, 2015) and those studying HSIs specifically (Gonzales, 2015; García & Okhidoi, 2015) have demonstrated that courses that feature ethnocentric content, validate students’ lived experiences, connect to familial histories and cultures, and honor bilingualism result in better educational outcomes for Latinx students. Further case studies at HSIs provide evidence of student-centered pedagogical practices that enhance learning, agency, and belonging for students, including “high touch” faculty interactions (Cuellar, 2015), metacognitive and self-efficacy exercises (Beltran et al., 2020; Bhattacharya et al., 2020), strengths-based approaches (Bridges et al., 2008), and other innovative and research-
based classroom practices (Davila & Montelongo, 2020; Kato & Marinez, 2020; Kiasatpour & Lasley, 2008; E. Martinez & Gonzales, 2015). Importantly, Griffin-Fennell and Lerner (2020) demonstrate that professional development for HSI faculty to become more aware of minoritized students’ experiences and to engage in culturally responsive and equity-based teaching can result in positive outcomes for students. More than being beneficial for the students they serve, centering students’ voices, cultures, and ways of learning may fundamentally transform the types of knowledge that are valued and produced at HSIs: Gonzales (2015) argues, “Providing space for students to understand their life experiences as a form of valid knowledge is the first significant step toward reshaping the production and legitimization of knowledge within academia” (p. 128).

Culturally affirming content, however, is not ubiquitous at HSIs. In an analysis of ethnocentrism in the curricula at MSIs, Cole (2011) found that, on average, only 3.2% of all courses offered at HSIs were ethnocentric, with a significantly greater proportion of these courses being offered at “intentional” HSIs, or those that specified serving Latinx students in their mission or charter. The author also found that ethnocentric content was largely relegated to ethnic studies programs rather than integrated into the fabric of the institutions studied. While these often-siloed programs can still serve as an important pillar in constructing a Latinx-serving identity at HSIs (García & Okhidoi, 2015), HSI scholars have argued for a decolonized approach to diffusing such content across the academy (García, 2018a; Griffin-Fennell & Lerner, 2020).

Programs and Services. Cultural affirmation can also occur through programs and services that are specific to minoritized populations. Some such programs and services at HSIs – and their benefits – have been described through case studies, and
include mentoring programs (Hurtado et al., 1998; P. J. Rodríguez & Gonzales, 2020; P. Vargas & Ward, 2020), high-touch and other research best advising practices (Hurtado et al., 2015; Jimenez Hernandez, 2020; Ordaz et al., 2020; Bhattacharya et al., 2020), and institutionally supported multicultural centers and student racial/ethnic affinity groups (Hurtado et al., 1998).

Culturally affirming spaces are also those in which community and family feel welcomed and valued. Grounded in the idea of familismo, these programs recognize “the importance of the extended family as a reference group and as providers of social support” (Tatum, 1997, p. 137). Latinx cultures are more interdependent than what is typically recognized or valued on individual-oriented college campuses (Contreras, 2019; Covarrubias, 2021; Covarrubias et al., 2020), and “non-traditional” Latinx students attending HSIs name family as a source of strength to help them persist (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Rendón et al., 2015). Therefore, “Inclusion of families in the college experience, particularly at HSIs and emerging HSIs, may further bolster Latina/o student success” (Cuellar, 2015, p. 111). Because Latinx students at HSIs are more likely than their peers to attend college close to home (Cuellar, 2012; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015), a strategy for creating greater access and transitional support to Latinx students is to go physically into the community. Examples of successful family-centered, community-based, and linguistically-appropriate programs at HSIs include outreach efforts, pipeline initiatives, and bridge programs that provide information, build trust, enhance participation in educational programs and in college, and increase student persistence (Cortez, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2020; Laden, 2001; Ramirez & Rodríguez-Kiino, 2020). Moreover, some programs at HSIs seek to intentionally replicate the
interconnected ethos of *familismo* through family-like structures, relationship-building and near-peer mentoring (Martinez & Gonzales, 2015; Rodríguez & Gonzales, 2020).

**Physical Spaces.** Emerging research focused on the built environment at HSIs has shown variability in how URM students make meaning out of physical campus spaces. In studying two HSIs, for example, García & Zaragoza (2020) found that Latinx representation in art, sculptures, and other physical spaces communicated the value the institution placed on diversity and resulted in enhanced feelings of empowerment for Latinx students. In another study of dually designated HSIs and AANAPISIs, however, Alcantar and colleagues (2020) demonstrated that campus artifacts communicated conflicting messages – both explicitly and implicitly – about race-based belongingness and institutional values, such as the centrality (or marginalization) of diversity centers on a campus or university webpage, the existence (or removal) of offensive mascots, and the representation (or lack thereof) of PoC in campus artwork and building names. As (mostly) Historically White Colleges (HWCs), HSIs may be contending with historical legacies of whiteness embedded within their built environments through building names, institutional imagery (such as statues, artwork, and seals), and the marginalization of multicultural spaces (Gusa, 2010). These aspects of the environment often represent monocultural values and communicate messages about who belongs – and who doesn’t (Gusa, 2010).

**Part III: Embodying “Servingness”**

Despite the proliferation of research on HSIs that point to programs, policies, and practices that have been demonstrated to improve outcomes and experiences for Latinx and other URM students, many HSIs depart little from their PWI counterparts in terms of
how well they serve minoritized students. For example, one study comparing Latinx students’ experiences at 26 HSIs and 321 PWIs found little difference in students’ engagement, satisfaction levels, or experiences of support, leading the authors to conclude that “on average, HSIs and PWIs are about equal in serving (or not serving) the educational needs of Hispanic students” (Nelson Laird et al., 2007, p. 51). Recognizing the importance of HSIs in educating the majority of Latinx students and large populations of other URM students as well as the need for institutional structures that enhance their capacity to serve, some HSI scholars have taken up a position of advocacy and “scholar activism” to shape research and practice (García, n.d.). García and Okhidoi (2015) note that “We can no longer assume that the organizational structures of our current institutions will adequately meet the needs of underrepresented students. Instead, we must find ways to serve them through curricula and programs that place their needs at the center” (p. 355; emphasis added).

These and other scholar activists urge higher education practitioners to think about HSI as more than a designation – to integrate Latinx-servingness into the organization’s identity by examining how well students are being served (e.g., Contreras, 2019; Franco & Hernandez, 2018; García, 2020; García et al., 2019). Many researchers are focused on outcomes for Latinx students (Contreras et al., 2008; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Espinosa et al., 2017; Flores & Park, 2013) and campus climate and culture (Abrica et al., 2020; Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016, 2020; Desai & Abeita, 2017; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Sanchez, 2019; Serrano, 2020) as indicators of how well institutions are serving URM students. But a review of HSI literature by García, Núñez, and Sansone (2019) argues that servingness should be
conceptualized beyond individual outcomes and experiences to focus on the organization as a unit of analysis. In the review, the authors explore how scholars operationalize servingness and propose a Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness in HSIs, which considers structural dimensions that create the conditions for Latinx students to thrive. These “structures for serving,” which include programs, personnel, curricula, and institutional policies and practices, appear in a diagram created by the authors (p. 771), pictured below as Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness in HSIs*

While external influences such as legislation, stakeholder advocacy, and a larger social milieu of white supremacy can affect HSIs’ capacity for servingness, the authors argue
that institutional intentionality in creating structures for serving can impact outcomes and experiences for Latinx and other URM students.

The concept of servingness is further refined by García and Koren (2020) as the ability of HSIs:

- to enroll and educate Latinx students through a culturally enhancing approach that centers Latinx ways of knowing and being, with the goal of providing transformative experiences that lead to both academic (e.g., graduation, post-baccalaureate degree enrollment, job placement) and non-academic (e.g., community engagement, critical consciousness, racial identity development) outcomes. (p. 2)

Servingness, therefore, is conceptualized not as a state of being but rather an intentional and active process that is full of tension and complexity. Rather than a business-as-usual approach (Marin, 2019; Reguerín et al., 2020), HSI scholars have pointed to the need for campus leaders to engage in “transformational change” (Espino, 2015; García, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Reguerín et al., 2020). Such change is deep, pervasive, and intentional (Eckel & Kezar, 2003), as opposed to “adjustments” (not deep or pervasive), “isolated changes” (deep but siloed), or “far reaching change” (wide but not deep; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015, p. 31). Radd and Grosland (2019), for example, urge educational leaders to “reject initiatives that promise to solve complex, historic and systemic issues by way of technically oriented strategies that leave existing systems and structures intact and unexamined” (p. 671). To do so, they must be adaptive and responsive to demographic changes, build stakeholder support, and change the structures of their institutions (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Reguerín et al., 2020).
Due to the great variability in HSIs and the complexity of the realities they face (such as constantly evolving legislation, unique local contexts, and the pervasiveness of white supremacy), how servingness is operationalized will differ from campus to campus (García et al., 2019; García, 2020). In the following sections, I draw from the Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness in HSIs (García et al., 2019) and other advocacy scholarship to outline how scholars have conceptualized and studied strategies for servingness that may improve student experiences and outcomes.

Specifically, I cluster the “structures for serving” that appear within the oval in Figure 1 into four macro-themes: leading to serve, resource development and allocation, compositional diversity, and a culturally affirming infrastructure. These themes and their corresponding structures for serving are detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

**Structures for Serving**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Themes</th>
<th>Structures for Serving (based on García et al.’s 2019 framework)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading to Serve</td>
<td>- Mission and values statements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Diversity plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Leadership &amp; decision-making practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Development and Allocation</td>
<td>- HSI grants</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Institutional advancement activities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Incentive structures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- External boundary management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering Compositional Diversity</td>
<td>- Compositional diversity of faculty, staff, administration, and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building a Culturally Affirming Infrastructure</td>
<td>- Engagement with the Latinx community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Culturally relevant curriculum &amp; pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Programs and services for minoritized students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leading to Serve

As a Latinx-serving identity is conspicuously absent from many HSI mission statements (Contreras et al., 2008), some scholars have called for HSI leaders to incorporate Latinx-servingness (Espino, 2015; Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015; Murphy, 2013; Torres & Zerquera, 2012; Vargas & Ward, 2020) and center URM students’ experiences in their mission statements (García, 2018a). But as Contreras and colleagues (2008) point out, “What formalized statements say about a campus, however, are only meaningful if those sentiments are actualized in the campus culture” (p. 215). Importantly, HSI practitioners have been identified as the primary vehicles for operationalizing servingness, and their stories of success should inform campus-wide practices (García et al., 2020). Other key strategies that have been put forth by HSI scholars to align mission and practice include institutional assessments; strategic diversity and HSI plans that focus on equity in enrollment, experiences, and outcomes; building relationships with Latinx communities; and implementing systems of accountability (Franco & Hernandez, 2018; García, 2018a; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015; Reguerín et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Oseguera, 2015; Torres & Zerquera, 2012; Vargas & Ward, 2020). It has been argued that a focus on equitable outcomes needs to involve disaggregation of data by race and by discipline, ensuring that Latinx students have access to the support necessary to attain high GPAs, graduate within a timely manner (Reguerín et al., 2020), and persist in STEM fields (Lozano et al., 2018).

Some HSI scholars also contend that a decolonized leadership orientation requires a reevaluation of governance practices to be more intentionally inclusive, less hierarchical, more decentralized, and supportive of faculty participation (Doran &
Medina, 2017; García, 2018a, 2018b; Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015), and to recognize students’ voices and power in decision-making processes (Rodríguez & Oseguera, 2015). Finally, scholars point to the need for campus leaders to be transparent about their institutions’ past and ongoing failures to create educational equity as transformation can only occur when leaders make an honest appraisal of the root of inequities on their campuses (Cabrera et al., 2017; Franco & Hernandez, 2018; Hurtado et al., 1998).

**Resource Development and Allocation**

One important facet of leading for servingness that has been identified by scholars is setting student-centered priorities and incentivizing activities that support those priorities. For example, as faculty have historically been discouraged from “non-conventional” activities such as community engaged or action research, or scholarship that challenges hegemonic norms and privileged forms of knowledge (Gonzales, 2015), HSI scholars call for leaders to incentivize research, teaching, and service that center historically marginalized populations by incorporating equity-minded values into promotion and tenure processes and teaching evaluations (García, 2018a; García et al., 2019; Gonzales, 2015; Hurtado et al., 2012), and to reward employees who support URM students and engage with the community (García, 2018a). While de facto mentoring and student support services are often undertaken on a volunteer basis by higher ed personnel, Hurtado and colleagues (2015) describe programs at several HSIs wherein part-time faculty and student peer mentors are compensated for their work in supporting students—a practice that creates a more supportive culture and a more equitable working environment. HSI scholars also point to the need for greater resource investment in practices that have been shown to scaffold student persistence—especially those from
minoritized, first-generation, and/or low-income backgrounds – such as holistic advising (Jimenez Hernandez, 2020). As Franco and Hernandez (2018) note, “The alignment of financial resources with such goals [as increasing students with diverse backgrounds and creating a more positive campus climate] can also be an indicator of an institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion” (p. 62).

Finally, the context of limited resources at HSIs (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Calderon et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2015) has led HSI scholars to conclude that external boundary management is an important step toward building institutional capacity for servingness. This involves engaging with elected officials, government agencies, chambers of commerce, non-profit organizations, boards, foundations, national organizations such as HACU, other HSIs, local schools, and community stakeholders as collaborators in programming and fundraising efforts to garner the resources and partnerships necessary to serve students well (Contreras, 2019; García, 2018a; Griffin-Fennell & Lerner, 2020; Hurtado et al., 2015; Lara & Wood, 2015; Ramirez & Rodríguez-Kiino, 2020). Franco and colleagues (2020) propose a Latinx-informed framework for engaging with community partners that is purposeful, rooted in solidarity and reciprocity, asset-based, and mutually beneficial, resulting in meaningful outcomes for all parties.

**Fostering Compositional Diversity**

Compositional diversity has been identified as a “structure for serving” (García et al., 2019) and an important condition of positive racial climate on college campuses (Franco & Hernandez, 2018). As García (2018a) notes, “[HSI] members should be from various racial, ethnic, cultural, national, and religious backgrounds and united by their desire to disrupt dominant structures” (p. 137). The benefits of diversity in educational
environments (e.g., Chang, 1999; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Maruyama et al., 2000) have led scholar activists to advocate for holistic enrollment practices that move beyond standardized measures of potential such as GPAs and test scores, as well as increasing opportunities for financial aid, as low-income students are disproportionately students of color (García, 2018a; Hurtado et al., 1998).

Further, because of the well-documented benefits of diverse instructors and staff (e.g., Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Contreras, 2017; Figueroa & Rodríguez, 2015; García & Ramirez, 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Hurtado, 2001; López et al., 2020; Mendez et al., 2015; Museus & Neville, 2012; Núñez et al., 2010; Turner, 2015), HSI scholars call for the examination of hiring and retention practices to attract more faculty, staff, and administrators of color and to create the conditions under which they are encouraged to stay; specifically, they encourage intentional outreach to candidates of color (Hurtado et al., 1998; Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015; Mendez et al., 2015) as well as the recognition of candidates’ “desire to work toward liberation” (García, 2018a, p. 138) and their “ability to connect with students, on a racial, cultural, or personal level” (Jimenez Hernandez, 2020, p. 226) as important considerations in the hiring process. In a synthesis of the literature on faculty of color, Turner and colleagues (2008) also describe the need for breaking down barriers to promotion and tenure, addressing salary inequities, recognizing service that supports diverse students, and providing access to mentoring opportunities. Finally, scholars have indicated that HSIs are uniquely positioned to strengthen the pipeline into the professoriate for Latinx and other URM students, and can do so through programs that provide cultural validation,
connections to Latinx faculty, and demystification of the graduate school experience for students who aspire to continue their education (López et al., 2020).

**Building a Culturally Affirming Infrastructure**

In conceptualizing structures for servingness, scholar activists draw heavily on empirical research showing that culturally affirming practices result in better experiences and outcomes for Latinx and other URM students. Echoing the scholarship that calls for equity-minded approaches to leadership at HSIs (García, 2018b; Hurtado et al., 1998; Rodríguez & Oseguera, 2015), HSI scholars have argued that programmatic initiatives must address the needs of students who face barriers to persistence and thriving – not through a “fix the student” approach but rather through a lens that recognizes deficits in institutional structures (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Griffin-Fennell & Lerner, 2020; Hurtado et al., 2015) as well as the many assets and forms of capital students bring with them to their campuses (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Cuellar, 2015; García et al., 2019; Martinez & Gonzales, 2015; Rendón et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005). As described in the “Cultural (Mis)Matches” section above, the benefits of such an approach are well researched. Thus, many HSI scholars have called for co-curricular programs and services that honor students’ connections to their families, communities, and cultures (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Contreras, 2019; Covarrubias, 2021; Cuellar, 2015; Lara & Wood, 2015; Tatum, 1997) and curricula and pedagogical practices that value ethnocentric knowledges and ways of learning (Contreras, 2019; Espino, 2015; García, 2018a; Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015).

Similarly, HSI scholars have also highlighted the importance of considering whether campuses’ built environments affirm or devalue students’ cultural identities
(Alcantar et al., 2020; García & Zaragoza, 2020) or whether their infrastructure is aesthetically pleasing, engaging, functional, and supportive of student learning in ways that are similar to “wealthier and ‘Whiter’ campuses” (Davila & Montelongo, 2020, p. 130). Lipsitz (2007), a theorist on the racialization of space, notes that the main objective of those who are re-imagining the physical environment “should be to disassemble the fatal links that connect race, place, and power” and to break down barriers to creating inclusionary spaces (p. 14).

Given the range of campus climate experiences that URM students and employees have at HSIs (e.g., Abrica et al., 2020; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016; Desai & Abeita, 2017; Ek et al., 2010; López et al., 2021; Sanchez, 2019; Serrano, 2020; Venegas et al., 2021), scholars advocate for cultural shifts that will improve their experiences. Hurtado and colleagues (1998), for example, provide a useful framework for such a transformation, which requires that IHEs create comprehensive plans focusing on the institution’s historical context of racial inclusion or exclusion, dimensions of structural diversity, psychological and behavioral aspects of campus climate, and culturally relevant programming. One corresponding policy consideration is the implementation of professional development for faculty and staff to better understand URM student experiences and to mitigate the effects of microaggressions (García & Koren, 2020; Griffin-Fennell & Lerner, 2020; Ordaz et al., 2020). Further, scholar activists call upon these institutions to create structures that are responsive to racialized incidents when they do occur: clear, transparent protocols for dealing with discriminatory incidents, conflict-resolution processes, and educational programming for faculty regarding bias in the
classroom may improve the campus experience for students and employees of color (Hurtado et al., 1998).

**Limitations in the Literature**

Even as HSI research has proliferated in recent decades, there are still gaps in what we know about HSIs in whiter areas of the country, where and how whiteness may play a role in institutional efforts to become Latinx-serving, and how Historically White Colleges become HSIs. With the review of the literature on HSIs by García, Núñez, and Sansone (2019), a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of servingness is coming into clearer focus. And yet, with few exceptions (such as Vargas & Ward, 2020), little research has been done to document the *transition* from an institution that merely enrolls a high percentage of URM students to one that is focused on serving them well (García, 2019), and there is little empirical evidence as to whether and to what extent HSI/eHSI campuses have engaged in such intentional transformation of campus structures (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015).

Additionally, scholars have only recently begun to examine the perspectives of HSI specialists, the campus practitioners who are most intimately engaged in efforts to promote servingness. García (2020), for example, edited a volume in which chapters were written by HSI coordinators and grant implementers themselves. Even so, there is no scholarship to date that explores common understandings, challenges, and triumphs of HSI specialists across institutions, nor are there empirical projects that engage HSI specialists at different kinds of HSI/eHSI campuses in collective meaning-making. While HSI scholar activists point to a need for greater connection between research and practice (García, 2021), researchers have largely not explored how they can learn with and from
HSI specialists, and how these practitioners may be able to work together to create useful knowledge about navigating systems of whiteness and other institutional barriers to racial progress (García, 2021).

Moreover, most of the research on HSIs has been conducted in states with a high level of demographic diversity and the largest numbers of HSIs outside of Puerto Rico, including California (e.g., Bridges et al., 2008; Contreras, 2019; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Laden, 2000; Ramirez & Rodríguez-Kiino, 2020; Reguerín et al., 2020; Vargas & Ward, 2020) and Texas (e.g., Flores & Park, 2013, 2015; Kiasatpour & Lasley, 2008; Rodríguez & Gonzales, 2020), with relatively few studies having been conducted in “emerging” HSI areas (Espino, 2015), or regions that do not have large numbers or percentages of Latinxs but have seen rapid growth in recent years, such as the Midwest and Northeast (Krogstad, 2020). In fact, of the 89 empirical studies on or about HSIs identified for this literature review, only two expressly mentioned a Northeastern location (Carpi et al., 2013; Griffin-Fennell & Lerner, 2020) and only three, a Midwestern location – and all three were conducted in Chicago (García, 2017b, García et al., 2018; García & Zaragoza, 2020), which is located in a county that is home to more than 1.3 million Latinxs (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Finally, very few studies have focused specifically on the eHSI context (García, 2018b; Velez et al., 2023).

Furthermore, understandings of institutional whiteness in higher education are grounded in studies of PWIs (e.g., Ahmed, 2012; Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007) and historical excavations of how and why whiteness continues to be reproduced on
college campuses (e.g., Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Patton, 2016; Stewart, 2020). While this research points to the power and pervasiveness of whiteness as a force that stymies racial progress, little empirical work has focused on the interplay between whiteness and servingness: there is only one study explicitly studying the role of whiteness in developing structures for serving at HSIs (Scott et al., 2022), and none specifically within eHSI contexts, despite the fact that HSI scholars have theorized that whiteness hinders progress toward becoming Latinx-serving (e.g., Alcantar et al., 2020; Doran & Medina, 2017; García, 2018a, 2019; García et al., 2019; Marin, 2019; Nelson-Laird et al., 2017; Velez, 2019). Without research demonstrating how whiteness might affect servingness efforts at campuses in transition, these institutions may continue to stumble over this barrier to transformation. But exploring where whiteness shows up in practice may help higher ed practitioners remove obstacles that impede their ability to serve their URM students well.

The relative absence of research on eHSIs, institutions in emerging HSI regions, and other institutions that are transitioning from Latinx-enrolling to Latinx-serving has important implications: as the number of HSIs/eHSIs continues to grow, there is little understanding of if or how these historically white institutions transform their structures to better serve their URM students. Overlooking these institutions – and the HSI specialists who work there – makes it more difficult for higher education practitioners to adapt institutional structures and practices in response to their increasingly diverse student bodies. Because these institutions educate a large percentage of racially

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10 Understandings of and research on “institutional whiteness” are covered in greater detail in the conceptual framework for this study, found in Chapter III.
minoritized students, the question of how these institutions work to create the conditions necessary for their students to thrive remains of paramount importance.

**Summary of the Literature on HSIs**

The HSI federal designation came about as a result of a concerted effort by advocacy organizations to support Latinx students’ postsecondary education and HSIs are among the most diverse in the nation. But far from consistently serving Latinx and other URM students well, HSIs exhibit a broad range of campus cultures and outcomes for their students. In particular, resource limitations, organizational identities, leadership styles, and structural dimensions such as compositional diversity, curricula and pedagogy, programs and services, and the built environment can impact students’ experiences, development, and their ability or willingness to persist. HSI scholars argue that an orientation toward servingness will align mission and practice in student-centered and equity-minded ways, enhancing students’ outcomes and affirming their cultural identities. Yet, organizational structures and institutional practices that are steeped in historical whiteness may create challenges for HSIs/eHSIs working toward these goals. Better understanding whether and how HSIs/eHSIs inhabit an ethos of servingness and contend with barriers such as institutional whiteness can pave the way to more equitable outcomes and more culturally affirming experiences for Latinx and other URM students. As the demographics of our nation and our college campuses continue to shift toward greater diversity, it is critical for higher education practitioners to adapt and therefore to have the best information about what transformational change looks like in practice. Further research on how HSIs/eHSIs work to eradicate whiteness and transform their campuses to inhabit an ethos of servingness is warranted.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe how I conducted this study. I first reintroduce the research questions and then outline the conceptual framework used to analyze the data: institutional whiteness. Following, I lay out the study design and provide an overview of the participants. Lastly, I describe how I organized and analyzed the data.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight from HSI specialists as to how institutional whiteness shows up on their campuses, where it might interfere with their efforts to help their institutions embody a Latinx-serving ethos, and how they respond. Specifically, I sought to answer the following research question and sub-questions:

1) How do HSI specialists at recently designated and emerging HSIs understand and navigate the historical legacy of whiteness on their campuses?
   a. Sub-question #1: What barriers do HSI specialists encounter in working toward a race-conscious model of servingness, and how are these challenges connected to their understandings of institutional whiteness?
   b. Sub-question #2: What strategies do they employ to disrupt institutional whiteness?

This line of inquiry captured shared understandings of institutional whiteness among HSI specialists at institutions in transition and identified where institutional whiteness presented roadblocks to transformational change. It also documented counterhegemonic strategies for upending whiteness and key takeaways that others may use in their own transformative practices.
Part I: Conceptual Framework: Institutional Whiteness

One potential barrier for institutions of higher education in truly embracing an HSI organizational identity and adopting an ethos of servingness is their historical and ongoing commitment to whiteness. “Institutional whiteness” refers to the often-invisible structures and processes that uphold white hegemonic power (Applebaum, 2016; Leonardo, 2009; Matias et al., 2014). HSI scholars have theorized that whiteness hinders progress toward becoming Latinx-serving; specifically, efforts to foster an intentionally Latinx-serving mission and identity, actively build compositionally diverse campuses, enact race-conscious practices, and reallocate resources to programs that produce more equitable outcomes and culturally affirming experiences for URM students at HSIs may be undermined by an undercurrent of hegemonic institutional whiteness that always works to maintain the status quo (Alcantar et al., 2020; Doran & Medina, 2017; García, 2018a, 2019; García et al., 2019; Marin, 2019; Nelson-Laird et al., 2017; Velez, 2019).

In this project, institutional whiteness as a framework guided my inquiry and analysis as I explored how HSI specialists understood and navigated barriers to enacting a race-conscious model of servingness at HSIs/eHSIs. Specifically, this study’s framing of institutional whiteness draws upon two areas of scholarship. First, I turn to Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), a field of study that intentionally interrogates “whiteness.” As whiteness permeates institutional structures and serves to maintain the racial status quo, CWS seeks to name and scrutinize it in institutional and interpersonal spaces (Cabrera et al., 2017). Second, my framing of institutional whiteness draws upon Omi and Winant’s (2012, 2014) formulation of “racial projects” or the process by which a segment of the dominant (white) race actively reorganizes racial understandings and dynamics without
fundamentally changing the racial status quo. Below, I provide more information about how racial projects are often operationalized in higher education via race-based or diversity initiatives (Iftikar, 2017). By drawing on the experiences of HSI specialists, I explored how institutional whiteness, as a conceptual framework, manifested in HSI initiatives and whether and how it contributed to the entrenched nature of anti-servingness at HWCs transitioning to HSIs.

**Critical Whiteness Studies**

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) names and describes the often-invisible structures and processes that uphold white hegemonic power (Applebaum, 2016; Leonardo, 2009; Matias et al., 2014). “Whiteness studies” emerged in the late 1980s as a way to reverse the traditional focus of research on race relations, which up to that point had been fixated on the “problems” of minority communities. Instead of reinforcing deficit narratives about minoritized communities, scholarship on whiteness explicitly draws attention to the impact of white identity and practices on minority groups (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2013). While varying trajectories of inquiry fall under the broader umbrella of “whiteness studies” (Wiegman, 1999), CWS is considered a *critical* form of social inquiry in that it encompasses not only descriptions or categorizations of individual behaviors but also interrogates systems of power and oppression with the goal of social transformation; that is, CWS seeks to understand and problematize whiteness in order to more effectively pursue explicitly anti-racist agendas (Applebaum, 2016; Bohman, 2005; Chandler & Wiborg, 2020; Denzin, 2015).

CWS does not have a clearly defined and agreed upon set of principles, and the concerns and applications of CWS vary widely (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Rasmussen et al.,
2001). For example, early CWS studies focused on white normativity, white skin privilege, white identity and nation building, and colorblindness, while a “second wave” provided a more nuanced approach to understanding white bodies, white spaces, and intersectionalities across white identity, as well as the complexities of white relationships, white people’s psychological and affective experiences, and their ethical responsibilities (Jupp, 2020; see also: Rasmussen et al., 2001; Tanner, 2017). As it is applied to postsecondary education as a field generally and to the study of college campuses specifically, CWS is largely historical and conceptual in nature, pointing to race, racism, and white supremacy as foundational organizing principles within both the system of higher education and individual institutions (Cabrera et al., 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Patton, 2016; Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022; Stewart, 2020).

Because of the pervasiveness of whiteness across all institutional structures in our society, CWS holds that any institutional practice or policy that is not scrutinized or conscious of race in its formation will inevitably “be guided by the hidden assumptions of Whiteness” and are therefore harmful to PoC (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 95). CWS also recognizes white people’s complicity in the maintenance of the racial hierarchy through deflection, denial, and a lack of personal investment in deconstructing or dismantling racism (Applebaum, 2010; Matias et al., 2014). Beyond individual (in)action, institutions can also be complicit in the reproduction of white racial hegemony by engaging in displays of performative allyship while simultaneously resisting substantive changes: even when diversity and inclusion are heralded as institutionally valued, these strategically symbolic gestures do not in themselves make an institution any less committed to whiteness in practice (Ahmed, 2012). For example, the creation of diversity
statements or plans without concomitant resources or accountability mechanisms can give the appearance of progress while continuing to operate as white campuses (Ahmed, 2012).

While some may criticize using whiteness as a conceptual framework due to the belief that it centers white identity over other identities underrepresented in scholarship, whiteness studies actually “grew out of the ambition to purge racism and white privilege” from our society (Chen, 2017, p. 20; see also Rasmussen et al., 2001, p. 13). Focusing on whiteness shines an intentional spotlight on often invisible processes and practices that create an inequitable playing field for students of color and places the onus for changing these practices and processes squarely in the laps of those in positions of power and those who benefit the most from whiteness: white people (Leonardo, 2004; Patton & Haynes, 2020). As Gusa (2010) asserts, “to acknowledge whiteness is not to perpetuate it, but it is the first step in uprooting it” (p. 478).

The few empirical studies of institutional whiteness on college campuses largely focus on the influence of whiteness in institutional discourses (Ahmed, 2012), cultures (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), and practices (Gusa, 2010), which perpetuate racial inequities. And the only research on whiteness at an HSI to date is a case study suggesting that institutional actors uphold whiteness through rhetorical practices that de-center URM students, placing invisible labor on PoC, and focusing on good intentions and efforts rather than accountability for racial progress (Scott et al., 2022). My study expands upon the research of these and other CWS scholars by focusing on the perceptions of practitioners at recently designated and emerging HSIs around the ways that whiteness hinders servingness work, and the strategies they employ to disrupt it.
What is Whiteness? (And What It isn’t). “Whiteness” does not refer to white people as individuals, but rather is “an ideological, epistemological, and ontological force that functions to support individuals, actions, and appearances deemed ‘white’” (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021, p. 11). Whiteness reflects actions and processes rather than complexions (Ahmed, 2007; Cabrera et al., 2017; Gusa, 2010), and yet maintains environments in which those who identify as white enjoy privileges not afforded to others and where white supremacy can flourish (Cabrera et al., 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Gusa, 2010; Schooley et al., 2019).

The structures and ideologies that make whiteness possible are in a state of constant (re)creation. Omi and Winant (2012, 2014) posit that race as a social construct and the meaning-making around race is constantly being made and remade within historical and social contexts. In the 1960s with the advent of the Civil Rights movement, for example, the dominant racial discourse shifted from one of overt white supremacy to one in which whiteness was reconstructed into a hegemonic norm, becoming the default against which other racial/ethnic groups are judged (Cabrera, 2020; Cabrera et al., 2017; Chen, 2017; Omi & Winant, 2012; Winant, 1994). This “normality” of whiteness – the new white supremacy – largely hides itself from view for the white people who are immersed in it (Cabrera et al., 2017; Cabrera, 2018; Chen, 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2001).

Because of the invisible nature of whiteness, neoliberal narratives that the Civil Rights Movement has achieved its goals and that racism is a thing of the past have been able to proliferate (Omi & Winant, 2012). These widespread “post-racial” understandings are rooted in meritocratic, individualistic, ahistorical, and colorblind ideologies that ignore the historical and ongoing significance of race and its ability to shape conditions.
and experiences (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Omi & Winant, 2012). Hegemonic whiteness makes racial inequalities appear to be a part of the natural order by masking their true source (Cabrera, 2018).

**Why Explore Whiteness in Higher Education?** It is important to note that higher education, as an industry, has historically functioned within a framework of whiteness and has been a source of social reproduction, from its earliest days of serving wealthy, landed white men (García, 2018a; Patton, 2016; Stewart, 2020). Even after an influx of racially minoritized students into postsecondary institutions after WWII and through the ongoing demographic shifts in the following decades, colleges and universities continue to be loci of deep racial inequality (Clotfelter, 2017; Stewart, 2020). Through gatekeeping, credentialing, and its hierarchical nature, “academia works to reinforce class and racial disadvantages in society. This is not an accident, it is by design” (Andrews, 2018, p. 276).

While some HSIs and eHSIs are also PWIs, characterized by low compositional diversity, almost all HSIs are also Historically White Colleges (HWCs), having no institutional mission, history, or charter to serve underrepresented students (Bridges et al., 2008; Espino, 2015; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Laden, 2001). Using the term HWC acknowledges the historical legacy of whiteness within these institutions and serves as a call for transformation (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021) as these institutions reproduce ideologies, institutional cultures, and pedagogies rooted in whiteness (Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015; Rudick & Golsan, 2018).

HWCs by and large continue to be committed to whiteness, even if they are not explicitly racist (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Patton, 2016; Rudick & Golsan, 2018).
Steeped in institutional whiteness, HWCs’ organizational design and activities such as the language, practices, traditions, social norms, curricula, knowledge production, and leadership structures form a white racialized “space” (Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Patton, 2016), marginalizing students of color in the process. As Stewart (2020) notes, “Higher education leaders and policy makers have never fundamentally reconsidered who college is for” (p. 14) and what higher education practitioners should be asking themselves is, “What are we prioritizing, rewarding, and normalizing that consistently privileges those in certain groups?” (p. 16).

Even when there is a mandate to center racial equity, whiteness in higher education institutional structures is difficult to expunge. In a study of postsecondary institutions in the United Kingdom after racial equity legislation was passed in 2000, Pilkington (2018) found that many plans did not do enough to address inequities, even exemplary plans were never fully implemented, and, once accountability mechanisms waned, plans were often abandoned altogether. The author points to “the sheer weight of whiteness (if not institutional racism) which will remain intact unless significant pressure is placed on universities to change” (p. 40).

**Critical Whiteness Studies in Higher Education**

In the field of education, CWS has primarily been used to interrogate the role of whiteness and the efficacy of an anti-racist curriculum to develop critical consciousness in postsecondary students, most notably those in teacher preparation programs (e.g., Aronson & Ashlee, 2018; Aronson & Meyers, 2020; Aveling, 2004; Barnes, 2017; Crowley & Smith, 2015; Daniels & Varghese, 2020; Grayman-Simpson et al., 2019; Matias, 2016; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Matias et al., 2016) and to explore how white
teachers’ understandings of their racialized identities and orientations affect pedagogical practices once they are in K12 classrooms (e.g., Flintoff, 2018; Le & Matias, 2019; Matias et al., 2014; Thorsteinson, 2018; Utt, 2021). Here, however, I will move beyond CWS literature centered on individual attitudes and behaviors to focus on how HSI specialists conceptualize whiteness and where they perceive it showing up in their institutions’ structures and practices. Drawing primarily upon Cabrera and colleagues’ (2017) conceptual work and supplementing with additional scholarship on whiteness, below I delineate the CWS constructs pertaining to how whiteness permeates higher education: colorblindness and epistemologies of ignorance, whiteness as property, ontological expansiveness, and (white) racial comfort or “safety” (p. 20).

**Colorblindness and Epistemologies of Ignorance.** Colorblindness is an ideology that minimizes the role of racism in social inequality and blames minoritized people for their marginalization by explaining inequities through cultural, rather than racial, differences (Cabrera et al., 2017). Epistemologies of ignorance are “sincere fictions” and “willful aversions” that ignore the human suffering that racism causes and leave white supremacist structures uninterrogated (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2017). Demonstrating epistemologies of ignorance in action, Foste (2019) showed that white college students somehow justified their perceptions of racial harmony on their campus while writing off racially hostile incidents against their non-white peers as anomalies. Based in neoliberal and meritocratic ideals, colorblindness and epistemologies of ignorance are post-racial orientations that promote the fiction that as a society, we have evolved beyond the influence of race (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021). Whether
these ideologies are predominant or simmering under the surface, they serve to re-center whiteness and reinforce the status quo (Cabrera et al., 2017).

This blindness and willful ignorance manifests in higher educational structures in various ways. Colorblindness permeates privileged research methodologies, affecting the types of knowledge that are produced and, in particular, resulting in a dearth of scholarship on the role of racial power in shaping our social reality (Cabrera et al., 2017). Faculty who approach classroom instruction from a race-neutral perspective may not be critically examining the root causes of inequalities (Castagno, 2014; Hiraldo, 2010) and a colorblind orientation also results in blindness to deficit narratives of students of color with whom they work (Gusa, 2010). Race-neutral leadership (Evans, 2007) and student development work (Hiraldo, 2010) reinforce status quo outcomes. Practices or programs that are intentionally crafted with a race-conscious lens, on the other hand, including enrollment practices, hiring protocols, and student services, are inevitably met with cries of “reverse racism” or being oppressive to whites (Cabrera, 2020; Cabrera et al., 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Winant, 1994). And when URM members of campus communities shine a light on whiteness and racism within their campus environments and try to hold leaders accountable, they are often doubly harmed by those in positions of power who dismiss, gaslight, harass, or retaliate, simultaneously eschewing the role of race in their experiences while trying to protect the shiny veneer of “diversity and inclusion” (Ahmed, 2018; Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2020; Ritter and Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2020; Rollock, 2018).

**Whiteness as Property.** Cabrera and colleagues (2017) draw on the conceptualization of “whiteness as property” from Cheryl Harris (1993), a scholar of
whiteness and Critical Race Theory who posited that racial identity and property are closely intertwined and that whiteness itself is a form of property. Whiteness confers material advantages on those deemed “white” by our social, legal, and cultural institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Schooley et al., 2019), including the right to use and enjoy spaces, institutions, programs and services, as well as the right to exclude others from use and enjoyment (Cabrera et al., 2017). Due to whiteness’s historical position of domination, any perceived threat to these entitlements can result in hostility and backlash (Gusa, 2010).

In the context of higher education, knowledge itself remains exclusionary and the property of whiteness. Faculty own curricular content and the production of knowledge and, as they are overwhelmingly white, research agendas and teaching norms tend to center white voices and pedagogies (Gusa, 2010; Hiraldo, 2010; Peters, 2018). Faculty of color, on the other hand, have described “epistemic exclusion” as their scholarship is often devalued, especially if it falls outside the “mainstream” (white) norms of their discipline (Settles et al., 2019). Moreover, gatekeeping practices in higher education preclude equitable access to knowledge as enrollment requirements privilege those who already have had access to the benefits of whiteness (e.g. social capital, legacy admissions; Andrews, 2018; Reay, 2018). Affirmative action efforts that have sought to increase access to knowledge have resulted in “whitelash” and are only permitted so long as they do not substantially disrupt whiteness (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021).

Whiteness as property is also inextricably tied to resource allocation on college campuses. Because whiteness is bound up with entitlement to property, space, and power (Allen & Liou, 2019; Radd & Grosland, 2019), disrupting whiteness cannot be
accomplished simply by making space within existing organizational structures but rather requires reimagining and redefining those structures. For example, extricating the influence of whiteness would require a redistribution of material resources, a transformation of physical and social spaces, and the democratization of decision-making power (Blackmore, 2006).

**Ontological Expansiveness.** Closely linked to whiteness as property is the reality that whiteness confers ownership of physical spaces to white people, or the idea that “race takes place” (Lipsitz, 2011). While this can occur in a literal sense, where non-white communities have been limited in their ability to own property and accumulate intergenerational wealth due to white supremist practices (Lipsitz, 2007), it can also refer to a sense of ownership that white people assume over a space (Gusa, 2010). Also known as “ontological expansiveness,” this white entitlement can extend to both literal (physical or geographical) and figurative or socially constructed (linguistic, academic, cultural) spaces (Cabrera et al., 2017; García & Zaragoza, 2020; Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Sullivan, 2006).

This interplay between race and space is often ignored (Lipsitz, 2011) and yet is of paramount importance to one’s sense of comfort and belonging. As Ahmed (2007) notes, “White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape… In other words, whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape” (p. 158). For those who do not experience public spaces as an extension of their bodies, spatial dimensions of discrimination can leave them to feel that they must “know [their] place” (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 21).
The ontological expansiveness of white people in campus spaces becomes “occupying” to students of color (Ahmed, 2012) and renders them simultaneously invisible and hyper visible: invisible as they see little culturally-relevant representation in their surroundings and their experiences are often ignored or invalidated (Stewart, 2019); hyper visible in that their presence is not considered the norm and they are therefore subjected to heightened scrutiny (Arday, 2018; Mirza, 2018; Stewart, 2019; Williams, 2020). College campuses are sites where white cultural expectations result in the policing of bodies of color, along with their behaviors and cultures in public spaces (Rudick & Golsan, 2018), leaving students of color to feel as though they cannot show up in campus spaces as their full, authentic selves – that they have to leave parts of themselves behind and adopt white cultural norms to fit the space. They know that in “sticking out,” students of color will attract a white “gaze” (Ahmed, 2012). Extensive research on microaggressions on college campuses points to the idea that students of color are a “body out of place” in historically white spaces and that their white peers, instructors, and staff remind them of this fact through commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, resulting in negative racialized experiences and toxic campus climates (Cabrera et al., 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). Even as institutions of higher education publicly adopt diversity initiatives and engage in the rhetoric of inclusion, the hyper/in-visibility of students of color continues to alienate them, stripping them of the opportunity to cultivate a sense of belonging (Stewart, 2019). Because of this lack of belongingness, students of color often rely on counterspaces such as offices or centers that have been intentionally designed with them in mind (Patton, 2016).
**White Racial Safety.** White students often go to great lengths to self-segregate, avoid interracial contexts ("white estrangement"; Gusa, 2010), and voice their complicity with whiteness through their silence (Cabrera et al., 2017). Often, the language of "safe space" is used as a shield for white students to disengage from challenging racial conversations as the idea of "safety" is conflated with "comfort" (Arao & Clemens, 2018; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Stewart, 2019). While some scholars attribute white estrangement or avoidance to a racial ignorance that breeds awkwardness and discomfort with issues of race and non-white people (Gusa, 2010), Leonardo (2009) problematizes this understanding by claiming that it is precisely because white people understand race and racism that they avoid the topic. Affirming that white people understand the differential lived experiences of PoC and the structural aspects of racism creates greater accountability for their behaviors and decisions and ensures that they are understood as full participants in race relations rather than innocent bystanders (Leonardo, 2009).

White racial safety can result in toxic working and learning environments for PoC on college campuses. Rudick and Golsan (2018), for example, explore how race-evasiveness and social exclusion of PoC by white students stem from "whiteness-informed civility," in which white discourses and behaviors function to silence people who do not fit white cultural expectations and to shut down discussions on race. Meanwhile, the centering of white feelings and social norms creates decidedly unsafe spaces for students of color as their experiences are dismissed or avoided altogether (Stewart, 2019). The need for white racial safety also manifests through course evaluations, an institutional structure which is often used against instructors who expose students to painful racial realities that they would rather avoid (Cabrera et al., 2017).
Racial Projects in Higher Education

One important facet that is missing from Cabrera and colleagues’ (2017) framing of CWS in higher education is the ways in which campus leaders at HWCs make meaning out of diversity and inclusion initiatives, such as HSI efforts, and mold them to be beneficial to the institution without substantively changing conditions for URM stakeholders. Thus, in addition to the constructs of CWS outlined above (Cabrera et al., 2017), one aspect of institutional whiteness that is important to my conceptual framework is that of “racial projects.” Conceptualized by Omi and Winant (2014), racial projects are “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines” (p. 125). As such, racial projects institutionalize new racial meanings within social structures, but rather than disrupting the status quo of white racial domination, these renegotiated racial understandings serve to maintain it.

Racial projects occur within the context of shifting social conditions: just as the Civil Rights Movement triggered an evolution around the discourse on race from that of overt white supremacy to more colorblind forms of racism (Omi & Winant, 2012), the shifting demographics on college campuses may force the question of how to contend with the needs and demands of a growing number of URM students without a significant reallocation of material resources. These institutions, then, maintain hegemonic whiteness as a foundational organizing principle even as they reframe the way they understand, engage with, and talk about race and the way they operationalize racism (Iftikar, 2017). As scholars have not explicitly studied racial projects within the context of HSIs, this study undertakes the question of whether and how recently designated and emerging
HSIs re-create the meaning and uses of “HSI” for the benefit of the institution. In the following sections, I describe how campus diversity and inclusion efforts writ large and HSI initiatives in particular can become tools of white racial projects.

**Diversity and Inclusion Efforts as Vehicles of White Racial Projects.** In an environment of hegemonic whiteness, the primary tool used to counter opposition or racial difference is not outright repression but rather co-optation and medication of the language of diversity and inclusion to meet the needs of the white social order (Winant, 1994). This co-optation of the language of diversity is particularly evident in higher education. When whiteness is challenged on college campuses – that is, when stakeholders push back on institutional norms framed by whiteness that produce inequitable outcomes and experiences for PoC – higher education leaders often turn to diversity and inclusion efforts to make cosmetic changes but leave underlying practices uninterrogated and untouched in a form of “racial gesture politics” (Rollock, 2018). The rhetoric of diversity and inclusion asks different questions – and inevitably results in different answers – than equity and justice: the former emphasizes numbers, the latter focuses on institutional conditions (Stewart, 2017). The result is that educational leaders who espouse a “respect for diversity” often lead organizations that do not produce equitable outcomes because of a focus on diversity numbers rather than a serious look at the root cause of those inequities – hegemonic whiteness in structures and practices (Allen & Liou, 2019, p. 681). Radd and Grosland (2019) further problematize “inclusion” initiatives by pointing out that when [educational] leaders’ primary strategy for creating equity is to make the domain of Whiteness “available and accessible” to persons deemed as racial
Other, it further perpetuates the perceived superiority of that domain, as well as the people who inhabit it. (p. 658)

While not fundamentally changing conditions on the ground for URM students and employees, diversity and inclusion initiatives do tend to add value to the institution: as diversity discourses and programs are appropriated, institutions of higher education—and particularly more selective, four-year campuses—form a variant of cultural capital that is mostly accessible to white students (Anderson, 2005). Furthermore, marketing to URM students in an age of increasing demographic diversity not only raises its profile but also makes good business sense (Ahmed, 2012; Blackmore, 2006; Leong-Salobir, 2013; Wilkinson, 2008). Iftikar (2017), for example, framed these initiatives as “neoliberal racial subprojects” that rearticulate diversity in terms of its economic value, positioning diverse students as commodities that benefit the institution (p. 150). And it yields these positive results for the institution without forcing difficult decisions around resource allocation, or fraught conversations about toxic cultures and climates.

As a “diversity and inclusion” initiative, efforts to become or leverage HSI status can play a supporting role in upholding white racial power structures if they are not undertaken in the spirit of servingness (Reguerin et al., 2020). The phenomenon of “non-performative” statements—or those that are made by leaders to take the place of the actual “doing” of diversity and inclusion work—has become common on college campuses (Ahmed, 2012; Squire et al., 2019), and universities that proclaim that they are becoming HSIs or have achieved that goal may be doing so to show their commitment to diversity without actually committing anything. Official statements that point to increasingly diverse student enrollment, for example, celebrate diversity (which may or
may not have been achieved through intentional institutional efforts) while simultaneously abdicating their responsibility to respond to the needs of diverse learners in substantive ways (Mirza, 2018). Moreover, allyship is tempered by the conditions that are palatable to campus leadership, who signal concern often without action, leading to “minority absorption,” which contains and mediates difference and deflates activism (Squire et al., 2019). The intentional sanitizing and rebranding of anti-racism efforts serves to “preserve an institutional image as neutral, colourblind and progressive” while failing to challenge whiteness, as campus leaders are preoccupied with protecting the image or reputation of the institution over any meaningful action that will improve learning and working conditions for non-white students, faculty, and staff (Rollock, 2018, p. 322).

**HSI as a Tool for White Racial Projects.** Some HSI scholars have argued that there is a certain transactional nature to the project of HSIs. HSIs “often commodify Latinx students” in chasing federal grant dollars for institutional improvements, “with little attention to how such projects benefit Latinx students” (Aguilar-Smith, 2021, p. 2). These transactions are often one-sided as institutions expect those URM students to assimilate into the existing white milieu – painted as a “neutral space” – without making any accommodation to reflect or affirm their cultures or experiences (Mirza, 2018; Velez, 2019). Velez (2019) asserts that “The Hispanic-enrolling concept, then, can be viewed as a product of whiteness” (p. 3). This may be especially true now, as colleges and universities look to Latinx students to address enrollment challenges that are ever more keenly felt as the white, middle-class college-aged student population declines (see for example: Burke, 2021; Grawe, 2021; Seale, 2021).
Further, it has been suggested by scholars that HSIs, as historically white institutions, will not intentionally work toward educational equity for Latinx students unless those efforts converge with white interests (Espino, 2015). Interest convergence is a Critical Race Theory tenet that holds that racial progress for PoC occurs incrementally and only when white people perceive potential benefits, or at the very least if that progress does not threaten white power (Brown & Jackson, 2013). According to Espino (2015), reliance on interest convergence for racial progress at HSIs limits possibilities for transformation and makes HSIs little different from PWIs. The author calls on practitioners to *diverge* their interests from whiteness, otherwise they “become complicit in attending to the interests of Whites as they hold a Brown mask over a predominantly White structure that continues to center whiteness in institutional structure, policies, and leadership” (p. 128). Even the activities of HSI grants themselves are determined in part by white interest convergence: in studying HSI grant application abstracts, Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2019) found that in 85% of the cases in which grants were awarded, the proposed grant activities were not aimed at specifically supporting Latinx students but *all* students, leading the author to conclude that these HSIs employ “colorblind White logics” (p. 401).

As an effort to redistribute resources along racial lines to serve a historically underserved demographic, the HSI designation and the accompanying federal grant funding can be thought of as racial projects. However, taking into consideration the ways that many HSIs use these racialized funds in race-evasive ways, continue to center white normative standards and culture, and are not held accountable for demonstrating gains for Latinx students as a result of federal grant programs, HSIs can become vehicles of *white*
racial projects (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Vargas, 2018). When an HWC co-opts the language of HSI as a race-conscious effort while not fundamentally changing conditions to ensure that URM students are well-served, HSI can become a political tool to quell student activism, a social tool to raise the institution’s status, a capitalistic tool to fill their classrooms with (Brown) bodies and support their operating budget; in essence, HSI can “effectively function as the ‘master’s tools’…[where] saying you are for equality, becomes as good as doing equality” (Arday & Mirza, 2018, p. 17; italics in original).

Very little empirical research has been done to show how HSI leaders transform their campuses from white spaces to those that center historically marginalized students. It is telling that one of the few studies that found a positive impact of HSI leadership on institutional servingness was conducted at University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), an institution that was “serving Latinas/os long before the HSI designation was created” (Cortez, 2015, p. 149). This suggests that UTPA has a somewhat unique history among HSIs – not as an HWC, but as an institution that has largely historically served its local Latinx community and therefore was not steeped in whiteness in quite the same way that most colleges and universities are.

While some argue that institutions do not fundamentally change over time, that their processes and practices cling stubbornly to past ways of doing and being (Stewart, 2017), HSI scholar Gina García (2015) argues that “it is important to understand that HSIs are undergoing a temporal process of becoming institutions that serve Latina/o students rather than dismissing them as historically White institutions that are structurally racist and discriminatory in nature” (p. 84). One of the few examples in empirical research that demonstrates such a successful transition is the case of California Lutheran
University: HSI advocates generated the necessary buy-in among administrators to create an HSI Task Force, which was empowered to push the institution to embrace an authentic Latinx-serving identity. Through changes in enrollment and hiring practices, disaggregating student success data by race/ethnicity, targeted structural supports, and continued advocacy on the part of the HSI Task Force in spaces of power, Cal Lutheran has been working to “overcome the White-centric historical norms that constrained practices of equity and inclusion in the classroom and curriculum, and dominated policies, procedures, decision-making, and symbols across the university” (Vargas & Ward, 2020, p. 25). This tension between “becoming antiracist” and “reinforc[ing] white hegemonic values” often shows up in organizational structures (García, 2018a, p. 136; see also: Espino, 2015).

*Summary of Institutional Whiteness as a Conceptual Framework*

It has been posited that a commitment to institutional whiteness is a barrier for HWCs that strive to inhabit Latinx-servingness. Institutional whiteness, as articulated in Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) and explored through the concept of racial projects, can help inform how whiteness impedes progress to campus transformation. In particular, research that utilizes CWS as a framework to explore how colorblindness, epistemologies of ignorance, whiteness as property, ontological expansiveness, and white racial safety permeate organizational practices and structures can shed light on the specific ways in which recently designated and emerging HSIs may struggle to fully embrace a Latinx-supporting ethos. Further, Omi and Winant’s (1993, 2012, 2014) conception of racial projects can elucidate how HSI initiatives may, paradoxically, support efforts to preserve existing racial dynamics and resource distribution in ways that favor white people.
There are many different approaches to studying HSIs/eHSIs, but I argue that no approach would be complete without an exploration of how whiteness operates on their campuses. Almost all HSIs/eHSIs are also HWCs, and as such, have played a role in perpetuating a white dominant social order. While the HSI designation was born of race-conscious efforts to level the educational playing field for Latinx students, many HSIs continue to operate like their PWI peers – even if not explicitly racist spaces, these institutions often uphold race-evasive structural dimensions that nonetheless result in inequitable outcomes and experiences for Latinx and other URM students. As racialized institutions defined by the ethnic make-up of their student bodies, but also institutions that often commodify the very students that define them and co-opt the language of HSI to serve their own purposes, HSIs can contribute to white racial projects by reinforcing the status quo.

By utilizing institutional whiteness as a framework in the design and analysis of this project, this study recognizes the highly racialized dynamics of HSI/eHSI campuses at a structural level. In doing so, it contributes to the small but growing number of studies using CWS that reach beyond individual attitudes and behaviors to focus on the organization, expanding our understandings of how whiteness operates on college campuses, and extending the extant CWS research as one of the first of its kind to explicitly examine institutional whiteness at HSIs/eHSIs.

Importantly, too, this project excavates where and how disruptions to hegemonic whiteness take shape, an understudied phenomenon in the field. By exploring the tensions that exist on HWC campuses that are striving to become Latinx-serving, and centering the intersection of servingness efforts with institutional tendencies to preserve white
norms, this study illuminates where and how HSI specialists may have opportunities to interrupt business-as-usual practices and create more inclusive and equitable environments for their URM students.

**Part II: Research Design**

In this section I describe the design of the study. First, I describe my critical orientation and outline the reasons for utilizing a qualitative design with multiple data sources, including interviews and Community of Practice group discussions. I then describe the regional network and institutional contexts from which I drew my participants and detail the process for data collection, including recruiting participants and the protocols for one-on-one interviews and group discussions. Following, I describe how I analyzed the data, utilizing both inductive and deductive coding to examine where the data connected to and departed from the conceptual framework of institutional whiteness. The section concludes with a description of how I enhanced the validity of the study and the ways in which I monitored my positionality throughout the research design and data collection and analysis.

**A Critical Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative methods can contribute to the building of knowledge through insights into human stories and how people “make meaning,” how systems work and the importance of context, and discovering patterns and themes (Patton, 2015); they can provide rich nuance and deep understanding (Stake, 2010). As my research questions focus on a phenomenon that consists of individual and group construction or “meaning-making” (Lincoln & Guba, 2003), these questions are best examined by employing qualitative methods.
More specifically, *critical* qualitative inquiry seeks to not only describe and interpret the world, but also expose inequities and affect social change (Denzin, 2015). “Critical theory” rejects positivism, understanding that knowledge cannot be divorced from historical and social contexts, and marries theory and praxis, recognizing that knowledge is functional and necessary for the very transformation of reality (Corradetti, 2012). Critical forms of inquiry encompass a broad range of activities and methodologies aimed at critiquing social power structures and ideologies that rationalize injustice; producing local, applicable knowledge that can be utilized for social emancipation; and affecting public policy to promote a more egalitarian society (Corradetti, 2012; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). Rooted in critical inquiry, this project not only describes how institutional power is bound up in legacies of historical whiteness, interfering with their ability to effectively serve Latinx and other URM students, but also provides key learnings for disrupting those systems of power. As the study participants engaged with each other through a Community of Practice, they not only highlighted their own understandings and collaboratively explored strategies for pushing back against institutional whiteness, their individual and collective knowledge may also provide lessons for other HSI specialists who are seeking to do the same on their campuses. As an outcome of this study, I share their knowledge of resistant practices in order to help HSIs/eHSIs become more racially just organizations.

Another hallmark of critical qualitative studies is to center the sentiments and struggles of those most directly affected by the phenomenon being studied, shifting epistemic privilege to those who have been marginalized by unequal power structures and whose lived experiences have largely been ignored in structuring our understandings of
the social world (Denzin, 2015). In the case of this study, I share the interpretive work of co-creating meaning with those faculty, staff, and administrators who are at the epicenter of institutional efforts for change – dedicating their talents, passion, energy, and entire careers to this endeavor – and who, as a result of these efforts, often find themselves at odds with institutional inertia and the power structures that seek to maintain the status quo. Their experiences and understandings of HSI efforts are almost nonexistent in academic literature, and yet the knowledge they possess could greatly contribute to justice-oriented social change.

Utilizing interviews and then moving into a Community of Practice with a subgroup of the participants, I provided an authentic platform for these HSI specialists to engage in a dialogic process of sensemaking, while critically analyzing their perspectives on structural power as it relates to resource allocation, institutional intransigence, and organizational capacity for servingness, and ultimately co-creating key takeaways for resistant practice. Through publishing this study, a broad audience of HSI specialists and campus leaders may be able to draw lessons from the findings that they can apply to their campuses as they work to create more equitable and culturally affirming spaces for their URM students.

Regional and Institutional Contexts: The “HSI Coalition”

Participants were drawn from the HSI/eHSI institutions that make up the HSI Coalition,11 “a coalition of leaders from higher education institutions in [a Midwestern state] that have obtained or are working toward the federal designation of Hispanic-

11 *HSI Coalition* is a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the member institutions. References to the *HSI Coalition* website and other sources that identify the state have been masked to provide anonymity for the study participants.
Serving Institution (HSI) and are committed to attracting, supporting, retaining, and graduating underrepresented students” (HSI Coalition, “Our Mission”, n.d.). I specifically chose to work with these institutions because they were situated in an “emerging” HSI region in which the first institution to obtain the HSI designation did so only six years prior to beginning data collection. Moreover, this was an ideal group to work with for this study as members had made a public commitment “to embody the ‘serving’ ethos of HSIs” (HSI Coalition, “About”, n.d.), and specifically cited Garcia and colleagues’ (2019) framework of servingness as integral to what it means to be a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI Coalition, “Resources for Servingness”, n.d.). In spring 2023 when data collection began, this collective represented eight of the state’s eleven HSIs/eHSIs.\(^\text{12}\)

The study intentionally included HSI specialists from a broad range of colleges and universities to identify common themes that cut across institutional boundaries. Multiple-site designs can be used to explain how and why something occurs by integrating theory across a series of cases and ruling out competing explanations (Yin, 1981). Therefore, like diversity scholar Sara Ahmed (2012), who follows the stories and texts of diversity practitioners across a range of universities, my study drew from the experiences of HSI specialists across a wide variety of institutions. Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo (2016) devised a method for categorizing HSIs based on a variety of characteristics, such as public or private control, size, and urbanicity, and type of degree conferred, resulting in six “clusters” of HSIs with similar characteristics. Ranging in institutional characteristics from 2-year technical colleges to Research 1 doctoral

\(^\text{12}\) This is based on most recent data available as of the time of this writing, which is from the 2021-22 academic year.
institutions, public and private, urban and suburban, and small, mid-sized, and large, *HSI Coalition* member institutions were representative of three of those six clusters – Urban Enclave Community Colleges, Big System Four-Years, and Small Communities Four-Years – which make up 67% of all HSIs nationwide. While this approach limited how deeply I was able to develop an understanding of any single institution, it presented a unique opportunity to explore themes and connections of HSI specialists’ experiences across multiple organizations and also provided insight into where and why those experiences diverged.

Like most HSIs, which are located in urban centers and tend to serve their local metropolitan populations (Nuñez, Crisp, & Elizondo, 2016), all of the HSIs/eHSIs represented by the *HSI Coalition* were concentrated in or near the state’s biggest metropolitan area and largest concentration of Latinxs, which I here call Midwestern City (MC). MC is a mid-sized, majority-minority city that had seen the Latinx population more than triple since 1990, reaching 10% of the greater metro area (Levine, 2016) and about one-fifth of the population of the city proper (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). While thriving Latinx communities have existed in the city for more than 100 years (S. Gonzalez, 2017), the recent and rapid growth of these communities was propelling many of the area’s IHEs toward HSI status. As part of the latest wave of newly designated HSIs, the region was fertile ground for exploring how institutions in transition respond to the changing faces and needs of their student bodies. Focusing on this region offered important insights for the growing number of “emerging” HSI regions that, similar to this state, were experiencing tremendous demographic shifts but were almost nonexistent in HSI literature.
Study Recruitment

The people best situated to discuss how recently designated and emerging HSIs are contending with historical legacies of whiteness as they transition to minority-serving institutions are those most deeply engaged in the work, or HSI specialists. For purposes of this study, “HSI specialists” refer to those who are responsible for guiding institutional efforts to attain or maintain HSI eligibility and/or implement HSI-related efforts, such as those who coordinate HSI grants, act as an official HSI advisor to executive-level campus leaders, or serve on HSI committees. As such, these HSI specialists have deep insider knowledge about whether and how their respective institutions are enacting an HSI identity within the context of historical whiteness, and how to best navigate barriers in the transition to Latinx-servingness.

Participants were first identified via the membership list of the HSI Coalition which, in spring 2023 when data collection began, included 26 individuals from 13 institutions, eight of which were HSIs/eHSIs, and five of which had not yet reached eHSI status. Since the focus of this study was to speak with specialists at HSIs/eHSIs, members of the eight HSIs/eHSIs represented within the HSI Coalition were invited to participate, as well as members from one “striving” HSI campus within the coalition that had reached over 14% Latinx enrollment by the time of the study and had a robust HSI initiative. This resulted in outreach to 17 HSI specialists, along with three former members of the HSI Coalition who were integral to the launch of their respective institutions’ HSI efforts.13

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13 While these three HSI specialists no longer worked in higher education (one moved into K-12 educational work in 2020; one retired in December 2021; one transitioned to non-profit work in 2022), their deep knowledge of their former institutions’ goals, strategies, resources, and challenges were invaluable to the study, and their fairly recent departures from their roles meant that that knowledge was still fresh in their minds.
for a total of 20 initial contacts. Collectively, these 20 contacts represented eight of the eleven HSIs/eHSIs in the state in spring 2023 along with the additional “striving” institution that achieved eHSI status the following fall. Emails were sent to each of these potential participants with a brief description of the study purpose (see Appendix A for the text of the email). The outreach email included a link to an online consent form and demographic survey housed in Qualtrics, a platform that uses industry-best practices to keep data confidential. The survey also asked for recommendations for other HSI specialists on their respective campuses. Follow-up emails were sent to encourage participation.

Soliciting participants from the *HSI Coalition* and their campus networks provided a purposeful, “illuminative” sample. The heterogeneity of the sample allowed me to identify common patterns that reflect significant “core experiences” of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015, p. 283). Rather than a deep dive into a single institution such as a case study would provide, including participants from a relatively large number of institutions allowed me to identify common elements of HSI specialists’ understandings of institutional whiteness and their strategies of resistance, and to pull threads from across a variety of institutional contexts to create a more cohesive picture of the role that HSI specialists play as HWCs become HSIs. Interviewing and engaging in collective meaning-making with multiple HSI specialists from each institution allowed me to capture multiple perspectives or dimensions and also to triangulate and cross-validate responses.

I strove for representation from each of the institutional types of HSIs/eHSIs in the region: two-year public, four-year public, and four-year private colleges and
universities. I followed up with HSI specialists who were recommended by participants on a case-by-case basis to work toward proportional representation from each of these institutional types. For example, there were relatively few *HSI Coalition* members from four-year public institutions, so I solicited participation from additional HSI specialists on those campuses. In the end, only two HSI specialists from a single four-year public institution agreed to participate, along with seven participants from the 2 two-year public colleges in the *HSI Coalition*, and eleven participants from the 5 four-year private HSI/eHSIs represented in the coalition, for a total of 20 participants.

*Participants*

Participants represented a total of eight institutions,\(^{14}\) with 1-4 participants from each institution represented. Of the 20 HSI specialists interviewed, 15 were Hispanic/Latinx, four were white, and one was Black; 15 were female, four were male, and one was agender. At the time of the interviews, participants’ average length of experience within higher education was 13.7 years. The length of time each had spent working specifically on HSI initiatives ranged from 1-10 years, for a collective total of 103 years of HSI work. Positionality within their institutions’ hierarchies also varied, and included faculty (20%); mid-level staff positions, such as coordinators, managers, directors, and assistant deans (55%); and high level administrators, such as vice presidents or deans (25%). Of the 20 who were interviewed, eight also participated in the Community of Practice. Participant details are outlined in Table 2 below.

---

\(^{14}\) Two participants, Bella and Lucia, worked at a university that closed several months after their interviews due to budgetary challenges.
### Table 2

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th># years experience in higher education</th>
<th># years focused on HSI efforts</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Institutional Type / Size / Carnegie Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latina</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year private / small / Doctoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camila*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mexican American/Hispanic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year private / small / Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlota*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mexican/Hispanic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>2-year public/medium/Associate’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year private / small / Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>admin</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year private / large / Doctoral &amp; Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year private / large / Doctoral &amp; Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>admin</td>
<td></td>
<td>2-year public / large / Associate’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina/Mexican-American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td>2-year public / medium / Associate’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino/a/x</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year public / large / Doctoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felix*</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year public / large / Doctoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John*</td>
<td>Agender</td>
<td>White/European American</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>admin</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year private / small / Art, Music, &amp; Design School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year private / small / Master’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued).

Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Identity</th>
<th># years experience in higher education</th>
<th># years focused on HSI efforts</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Institutional Type/Size/Carnegie Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liliana*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td>2-year public / medium / Associate’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucia*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White / Latina</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>faculty</td>
<td>4-year private / small / Doctoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noemi*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latinx / Mexican</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td>4-year private / small / Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okoye</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black / African American</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>admin</td>
<td>2-year public / medium / Associate’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td>4-year private / small / Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silas</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>faculty</td>
<td>4-year private / small / Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susana*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>admin</td>
<td>2-year public / large / Associate’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yatzuri</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>staff</td>
<td>2-year public / large / Associate’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Participants identified with an asterisk (*) also participated in the Community of Practice.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of three primary steps: 1) a pre-interview survey to collect demographic data; 2) individual interviews with HSI specialists; and 3) a Community of Practice with a subgroup of participants, which entailed a series of conversations centered around institutional whiteness and strategies for disrupting it.

Pre-interview survey. Potential participants were sent emails with a link to a pre-interview Qualtrics survey, which provided information about the study purpose,
requested consent to participate, and asked demographic questions as well as questions related to their HSI work; for example, which institution they work for and for how long they had been involved in their institution’s HSI efforts. (See Appendix B for the full survey protocol.)

**Interview process.** Interviewing captures stories – lived experience and context – and these stories, when gathered intentionally and analyzed thoughtfully, form the foundation of what we know about the world (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2006). As a personalistic and interpretive approach (Stake, 2010), qualitative studies require getting close to people in a “process of discovery...to find out what is fundamental or central to the people or world under observations” (Lofland & Lofland, 1971, p. 4). To this end, I worked to capture “members’ meaning” – the knowledge and perspectives of those participating in the research – by paying close attention to how they used language, what they deemed significant, what “formulations” they made about their contexts, and, importantly, to explore different versions and interpretations across multiple participants (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 138). I also stayed close to interviewees’ meanings through “thick descriptions,” locating their words within the larger context of social meaning, paying close attention to subtleties and layers of complexity (Ahmed, 2012; Geertz, 2006).

Over the course of the spring 2023 semester, I conducted 60-90 minute in-depth, semi-structured interviews with HSI specialists to explore how they understood the role of institutional whiteness in their respective campuses’ HSI initiatives and how they responded. Interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams or in-person at a
location convenient to the interviewee, depending on their preference, to facilitate ease of participation. Interviews were recorded.

At the start of each interview, before “getting down to business,” I first spent a little time working to build connections by sharing pieces of ourselves that may not be especially relevant to the interview questions, recognizing the importance of relationships and fostering trust, warmth, and reciprocity (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). After this key rapport-building component, I confirmed permission to record and captured verbal consent to participate. I also emphasized anonymity in the interview process so there would be a greater likelihood that participants would provide a full and honest appraisal of their experiences – including any possible institutional barriers to achieving their HSI goals or bad practice by institutional actors (Ahmed, 2012).

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, wherein pre-determined questions and follow-up probes based on the conceptual framework of institutional whiteness were used to guide the interview, but these questions were designed to be open-ended, fomenting discussion and allowing for flexibility in how responses were elicited (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Participants were asked to describe their institution’s HSI initiative, goals, and strategies and their own role and experiences with these efforts. I then asked whether and how the context of a historically white campus might impact their work, and if/where they believed it presented challenges to enacting a race-conscious model of servingness. Importantly, they were asked to describe what whiteness meant to them and whether they could relate specific examples of what institutional whiteness looked like on their campus. They were also encouraged to talk about how they personally responded to instances of institutional whiteness, where they have – and have not – successfully
overcome those obstacles, and what they believed it would take for their campus to break free from status quo ways of conducting business. (See Appendix C for the full interview protocol.) The final interview question asked participants if they would like to be contacted as potential participants in a Community of Practice (CoP) with other HSI specialists, and in the spirit of reciprocity, I also asked interviewees if there were any questions they specifically would like to explore in our CoP with their peers and colleagues. I concluded each interview by circling back to our mutual connections and expressing sincere gratitude for their willingness to share their experiences and insights (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). Finally, findings from the interview analysis informed the shape of the CoP sessions.

**Community of Practice.** Following the interviews and initial analyses, interviewees were provided the option to participate in a Community of Practice. The term Community of Practice (CoP) was first coined as a broad term to draw attention to the social aspects of learning, which shifts the predominant model of learning from cognitive approaches in which the individual is the keeper of knowledge, to an understanding that learning and knowing are inherently situated, communal processes (Lave & Wegner, 1991). CoP has since been widely used in management studies and online communities, with which it is most closely associated (Gherardi, 2009), along with hundreds of contexts across a variety of fields, leading to ambiguity in its definition (Amin & Roberts, 2006). In its original conceptualization, however, CoPs are “relatively stable communities of face-to-face interaction between members working in close proximity to one another, in which identity formation through participation and the negotiation of meaning are central to learning and knowledge generation” (Amin &
In education, a CoP model is often utilized by teachers to learn with and from each other and hone their craft. Although these groups sometimes go by other names, such as “learning communities” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), they often bear the hallmarks of CoP, including engaging members in a joint enterprise with the goal of producing a repertoire of communal resources (Wenger, 1998).

I chose to employ the CoP model because it recognizes the importance of collective knowledge, in which dialogic meaning-making among participants can produce new insights and perspectives – information that would have been less accessible otherwise (Cress & Kimmerle, 2018; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Seixas, 1993). More than just a focus group, CoPs create space for sustained dialogue over multiple sessions, opening up opportunities for the group to grow in collective awareness, question and learn from each other, reflect upon their own practice, and develop shared understandings (Ofte, 2022). In similarly designed “learning communities” with educators, Ladson-Billings (1994), North (2015), and Meyer (1996) all found that the experience of struggling together to make meaning provided opportunities for participants to not only feel affirmed in their own experiences, but also challenge and transform their thinking and strategies in a process of self-discovery. This collective meaning-making process also entails developing a sense of shared purpose as participants see their own challenges reflected in others’ experiences, galvanizing them to take action to affect structures of inequality and bolstering their resilience in the face of obstacles (Wexler et al., 2009). In this way, CoPs have the potential to become “sites of collective struggle and social transformation, aimed at changing specific lived conditions” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 8). And collegial communities such as
these can also create an atmosphere of caring: as trust and camaraderie build, participants can come to see the group as a space where they can present their ideas openly and foment solidarity (Meyer, 1996).

CoPs are also similar to focus groups in that they provide an opportunity to member check interpretations and ensure fidelity to participants’ perspectives (Patton, 2015). In this way, participants play a collaborative role in the research process, engaging in a sort of “retrospective introspection” where initial analyses can be confirmed, altered, reorganized, and/or extended, resulting in a deeper and richer understanding of the topic (Bloor, 2001; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). Participants are engaged as “paraethnographers of their own conditions, and the intellectual partners of [the researcher]” (Marcus, 2016, p. 184).

For purposes of this study, I modeled the CoP sessions after Freirean pedagogical focus groups, providing participants with the opportunity to engage in a series of dialogues in which the researcher and the participants enjoyed co-equal roles in the construction of knowledge (Freire, 1970/2017). Freire argued that “we must acknowledge the ways in which we, as human beings, are fundamentally charged with producing and transforming reality together” (quoted in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 4). These CoP conversations, then, were aimed at “both critical consciousness and the development of appropriate skills and competencies related to liberatory praxis” (Heaney, 1995, p. 3). More precisely for this study, the primary purpose of the CoP was for participants to gain a deeper understanding of institutional whiteness with and from each other and build their own capacity for disrupting it. Moreover, by including their voices and insights in this step of the data collection and analysis, I recognized participants as not just “subjects”
but also “creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 573), and I avoided making interpretations “under the guise of authority” when the participants themselves were those who had the most authority to interpret their experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 155; Villenas, 1996, p. 713). By de-centering the role of the researcher, CoPs can democratize the research process (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Therefore, my role as the researcher was to facilitate the discussions, document their understandings and strategies for resistant practice, vet those key learnings with research participants, and disseminate the takeaways more broadly.

Of the 20 interviewees, 19 expressed interest in participating in the CoP sessions. I offered multiple session options to aim for 6-8 participants in each group for robust but manageable conversations (Bloor, 2001). However, once schedules were determined, only eight committed to the CoP, and therefore only one cohort was necessary. Prior to participation, CoP participants were asked to re-affirm their consent via an online form (see Appendix D). Reminder emails were sent several days in advance of each meeting time, along with a brief synopsis of the preliminary analysis to be discussed (Bloor, 2001).

The CoP data collection process was comprised of six 60-minute group sessions via Microsoft Teams, meeting weekly in summer 2023. The first five sessions were organized around the most salient themes that emerged from the initial interview analysis, each session corresponding to a different theme. Participants were asked to respond to these interpretations, offering additions, deletions, and other changes, and then to provide more specific information about the strategies they used to counteract the effects of institutional whiteness as it related to the theme of the session. The final session
included time for participants to reflect upon the learning process and discuss practical takeaways.

At the outset of each session of the CoP, participants were encouraged to engage in informal conversation to build connection and community (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994). I then emphasized the importance of confidentiality among participants and, bringing us to the business of the meeting, I reiterated the purpose of the conversation: to delve more deeply into each of the primary constructs of institutional whiteness, revisit the themes that emerged from the interviews and ask for their feedback on my initial interpretations, and discuss ways that they responded to that particular aspect of institutional whiteness. Importantly, I framed this as a professional development opportunity centered on collective meaning-making in which all participants – including myself as the researcher – had equal roles in the process (Ladson-Billings, 1994). To this end, I expressed that I was interested in all their voices, and differing viewpoints were welcome. After this, I started the recording, and then introduced the particular theme we were covering that session, with corresponding questions designed specifically to foment interaction (Bloor, 2001; See Appendix E: Community of Practice Protocols). My role as a moderator was to introduce the discussion topics, ask probing and/or follow-up questions, ensure all were able to share their thoughts, and keep track of time (Krueger, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ofte, 2022). The final session involved a metacognitive exercise in which the collective turned from analysis and interpretation to what they learned from each other throughout the process of this professional collaboration, how it informed their practice, and what strategies they would take with them and implement (Ladson-Billings, 1994; North, 2015).
**In-Process and Analytic Memos.** During each interview and CoP discussion, I wrote “asides and commentaries” that documented immediate hunches and ruminations, or reflections that clarified, interpreted, or raised questions about a particular moment, written within the moment (Emerson et al., 2011). I also wrote “in-process memos” which required a more sustained focus on analysis. These recorded salient quotes or insights from the participants, patterns in participant responses, connections and contradictions that I began to identify between the participants’ insights and the study’s conceptual framework, questions that I needed to follow up on, and emerging analyses. In-process memos capture “analytic leads” and “tentative analyses” that “provide insight, direction, and guidance” for the study. Importantly, these memos were written contemporaneously with data collection so as not to lose ideas and connections as they emerged (Emerson et al., 2011). Finally, following the interviews and CoP discussions, I wrote analytic “integrative memos” that elaborated on ideas, linked data together, and developed thematic or theoretical connections, particularly paying attention to underlying patterns and what participants emphasized as being significant (Emerson et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2014). Taken together, these memos served to inform the analysis.

**Data Analysis**

While much of the data were gleaned from one-on-one semi-structured interviews, the CoP conversations helped to confirm, expand, and refine initial analyses. Compiling data from multiple sources, multiple sites, and in multiple ways helped to triangulate findings and create a fuller picture of the HSI specialists’ understandings of the role of institutional whiteness in the transition to Latinx servingness. Analysis of
these data occurred through a multi-phase, iterative process involving both inductive and deductive approaches.

The first phase started with inductive coding of the interview transcripts. This open coding process helped me first identify the issues that were most salient to the participants and understand what underlying assumptions were present (Emerson et al., 2011). Inductive coding followed processes outlined by Saldaña (2021): I began by chunking the transcript data into “stanzas” with breaks in text when a topic or subtopic shift occurs, moved into “pre-coding,” which entailed highlighting words or phrases that struck me as particularly salient, and then followed with a first round of coding in which preliminary thematic codes were generated. I collected codes via NVivo software and included a brief description and an illustrative example. Once all interviews had undergone this preliminary analysis, I returned to the transcripts in a second cycle of coding, splitting “lumped” codes into more nuanced themes when necessary, collapsing fine-grained codes into larger themes to keep the analysis coherent, organizing analyses into “codes” and “subcodes,” and tweaking existing codes. Throughout this process, I had regular discussions with my advisor and also solicited feedback from my PhD candidate peers to check my emerging analyses, as well as wrote analytic memos that captured my thinking on the deeper meanings of the codes. To this end, I tapped into Saldaña’s (2021) useful list of prompts for analytic memoing, including reflecting upon emergent patterns, themes, and assertions, how the data answered my study’s research questions, and how the coding related to emerging or existing theory, for example.

The second phase of data analysis involved deductive strategies. In this phase, I used predetermined codes aligned with my conceptual framework to determine whether
and how the interview data fit within those codes and to refine and/or contradict the framework (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Drawing from Cabrera and colleagues’ (2017) conception of institutional whiteness and Omi and Winant’s (2012, 2014) formulation of racial projects, these a priori categories included: colorblindness, epistemologies of ignorance, whiteness as property, ontological expansiveness, white racial safety, and HSIs as racial projects. I also anticipated that I would uncover broad themes beyond the conceptual framework that were relevant to my inquiry, so I added the following categories as well: servingness, challenges not related to whiteness, resources, HSI specialist strategies, and HSI successes. Definitions for each of these codes can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3

A Priori Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Code drawn from:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colorblindness</td>
<td>Failure to recognize racially rooted inequities; Conflating equity with equality; Faulting students rather than structures for inequitable outcomes.</td>
<td>Cabrera et al., 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemologies of ignorance</td>
<td>Belief that we have evolved beyond the influence of race; Mistaken belief that one has a strong grasp on racial understandings while discounting the lived experiences of URM people.</td>
<td>Cabrera et al., 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiteness as property</td>
<td>Whiteness confers material advantages on campus, including in classrooms, co-curricular programs, research agendas, and resource allocation; Backlash occurs when whiteness is de-centered.</td>
<td>Cabrera et al., 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontological expansiveness</td>
<td>White entitlement to physical and socially constructed spaces; hypervisibility, invisibility, and alienation of PoC in those spaces; campus counterspaces relegated to the periphery.</td>
<td>Cabrera et al., 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (continued).

A Priori Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Code drawn from:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White racial safety</td>
<td>Self-segregation and racial avoidance protect white comfort; centering white feelings and white fragility at the expense of racial equity or progress.</td>
<td>Cabrera et al., 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSI s as racial projects</td>
<td>“HSI” is rearticulated as primarily benefiting the institution; Co-optation of HSI language as a political/marketing tool without fundamentally changing conditions for Latinx and other URM students</td>
<td>Omi &amp; Winant, 2012, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servingness</td>
<td>How institutions serve Latinx/URM students well; aspirational accounts of what it might look like if institutions were to serve these students well</td>
<td>García et al., 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges not related to whiteness</td>
<td>Any barrier to servingness not explicitly or implicitly linked to the framework of institutional whiteness</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Institutional or personal resources that HSI specialists draw upon to advance servingness</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSI specialist strategies</td>
<td>Tactics or actions that HSI specialists employ to counteract hegemonic whiteness and/or advance servingness</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSI successes</td>
<td>Progress toward servingness</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the creation of this second codebook of “macro-codes,” I then applied my inductively formulated codes to the a priori categories as “subcodes” (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Feredy & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Identifying recurring ideas within each of the broader a priori categories allowed me “to see where overlaps, contradictions, qualifications, and alignments [with the conceptual framework] are” (Miles et al., 2018, p. 25; see also Emerson et al., 2011; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). For example, “white-normed linguistic spaces” was an inductively formulated subcode that fit within the macro-code “ontological expansiveness,” providing a recurring example of how
whiteness took up space on participants’ campuses. Importantly, I did not oversimplify or force the data to fit the framework but rather paid close attention to where the data departed from these constructs, and provided a nuanced explication of the limitations of the framework’s usefulness or where it might be refined, or even expanded, in light of empirical evidence (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). In this way, institutional whiteness as a conceptual framework was the lens through which I was able to make meaning of my data, but my data was also used to extend existing understandings of whiteness. Using inductive and deductive analysis allowed for both a more granular and a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Blackstone, 2014).

Initial analyses of the interviews were then used to frame the CoP discussions, with sessions revolving around the six macro-codes. In advance of the session, a brief synopsis of the initial analysis of that session’s theme was shared with the CoP participants to inform the conversation. Transcripts for those discussions were then analyzed using a similar inductive process. Codes developed in the first stage of data analysis were utilized but several additional codes were generated during the indexing process of CoP transcripts.

Finally, during the interpretation phase of analysis, I employed “analytic induction,” which is a progressive process in which I compared my initial analysis to all available evidence. It entailed defining a phenomenon and deriving initial hypotheses, then using evidence from the CoP transcripts to either confirm or force revision of initial hypotheses, and finally tweaking hypotheses until they fit all available data (Bloor, 2001). The strength of this method lies in its prevention of the selective use of data to
support a hypothesis and premature closure of the analysis (p. 69). Where ambiguity in the transcript occurred (language unintelligible due to multiple people speaking at once, unfinished thoughts, etc.), these cases were excluded from analysis (p. 70). This final phase of analysis also involved revisiting my in-process and analytic memos through an inductive coding process, looking for patterns, connections, and leads. This not only helped me understand my findings in relationship to the conceptual framework and other existing literature on HSIs, but also helped me to develop “actionable, meaningful implications and recommendations” – in short, “what all of it meant and why anyone should care about it” (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021, p. 145). The final results are reported as descriptive summaries (McIntosh & Morse, 2015) in “Chapter IV: Findings” below.

Framework for Enhancing Validity

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to whether the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions are to be believed. In constructivist research, trustworthiness can be established through credibility, or an accurate representation of participants’ meanings; dependability, or a logical process; and confirmability, in which the data are linked explicitly to interpretations (Patton, 2015). This study provides a trustworthy account of participants’ experiences as HSI specialists first and foremost through building rapport, which has been accomplished through years of working alongside the participants as a founding member in the HSI Coalition, collaborating with them on various strategic initiatives, and, most importantly, by consistently valuing, connecting with, and being open, authentic and honest with participants (Glesne, 2011).
I also include rich description and triangulate the findings by using multiple sources (Glesne, 2011). Member-checking through the CoP forum built validity, as “A statement’s validity rests on a consensus within a community of researchers and respondents… The validation process takes place in the realm of interpretative interaction” (da Silva Lopes et al., 2016, p. 18). As I engaged in “practitioner inquiry” in which “the practitioner is the researcher, the professional context is the research site, and practice itself is the focus of study” (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 503), additional forms of validity are also appropriate. For example, particularly through the CoP sessions, I engaged in catalytic validity, in which participants’ understandings were deepened, and dialogic validity, which entailed critical discussion that provided feedback and guidance on analyses (p. 510). Engaging with multiple sources and a collective, dialogic process of meaning-making helped to triangulate the findings (Glesne, 2011).

Validity is also achieved through the quality of data analysis, in which the interpretation and writing stay “true” to the data. Maintaining fidelity to participants’ voices involves not only thick description but also recognizing and examining my own biases (Glesne, 2011). In particular, I engaged in intensive self-reflexivity as my own identities influenced the questions I raised, my interactions with research participants, and my conclusions (Patton, 2015) – a process which is described in greater detail in the section on positionality that follows. And finally, I relied on informal and frequent debriefings with my faculty advisor, as well as conversations with dissertation committee members and classmates throughout the data collection and analysis process to discuss my interpretations and receive critical, thoughtful feedback (Spall, 1998).
By seeking out participant input, listening intently, leaning on peers and advisors to provide feedback, rigorously interrogating my own biases and staying true to participants’ intended meanings in the data analysis process, this study honors their voices and achieves greater credibility.

**Positionality**

My personal and professional identities inevitably influence the research process. My gender, race, ethnicity, education, personal history, and myriad other factors form the “selves” that shape the research questions I ask, my interactions with participants, and the way I interpret the data, as well as the way that participants perceive and respond to me (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). In some instances, aspects of my identity may have provided opportunities for easier access to the experiences and understandings of the participants. For example, my gender identity as a woman may have softened the imbalance of power inherent in interactions between “researcher” and “respondent” as women are often more readily seen as a confidante and less likely to be perceived as intimidating (van den Boogaard, 2019).

But the aspect of my identity that I attended to most closely as a potentially limiting impact in this investigation was my race. In research, race matters (García & Ramirez, 2008). I am a white person who was seeking to understand the explicitly racialized experiences of HSI specialists – most of whom in this study are PoC – and their work, which has a direct impact on critical issues such as access, persistence, and thriving for students of color. All researchers, and especially those studying racialized phenomena, have a responsibility to challenge normative whiteness throughout the research process (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019) and to ask difficult questions that
help to shift the norms of educational research toward more critical frameworks (Bergerson, 2003). This is a responsibility that I take very seriously. Particularly, throughout the research design process, data collection, and analysis, I worked to undermine common deficit narratives that ignored systemic and institutional roots of racial inequality (Bergerson, 2003; Villenas, 1996). This required constant vigilance and keeping my own positionality and “embeddedness in whiteness” at the forefront of my consciousness (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019, p. 93; see also: Cabrera, 2012).

This vigilance may be understood as self-reflexivity, or “having an ongoing conversation with your whole self about what you are experiencing as you are experiencing it” (Nagata, 2004, p. 139). I engaged in self-reflexivity by interrogating the ways in which my own identities manifested in the discovery, analysis, and writing processes (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). For example, practicing mindfulness throughout the interviews and CoP sessions and constantly monitoring my interactions for any trace of racial power dynamics helped me identify when my white identity might be influencing the discussion and provided me with an opportunity to change course. Self-reflexivity during data analysis involved metacognitive exercises such as reflective memoing, which helped me to better understand and question the assumptions underlying my emerging interpretations. “Reflecting upon my reflections” such as prompting myself to write about why I made certain observations and not others, or what I expected to observe but did not, helped make the implicit, explicit (Cruz, 2015).

Yet, even with this level of intentionality, given my racial/ethnic “outsider” status, I anticipated possible complexities that could negatively affect the research process and outcome (Zarate & Conchas, 2009). For example, interviewing participants across racial
and cultural boundaries complicates power dynamics (Merriam et al., 2001) and has the potential to impact the direction that interviews take (Cabrera et al., 2017). But even as race/ethnicity may complicate the research process, it is important to note that there are many additional factors that influence interactions with participants. Positionality is not static; rather, it can be fluid and negotiated (Merriam et al., 2001). Researchers can be “insiders” and “outsiders” to a community of research participants in different ways and at different times (Villenas, 1996, p. 722). In my case, my professional positionality as an HSI specialist myself and my affiliation with the study participants through the HSI Coalition might have resulted in participants perceiving me as an ally in the work, bringing me closer to the “inside” and creating the potential for more open and authentic conversations (McCarty et al., 2013). It has also been argued that, because people are multidimensional, matching racial/ethnic, gender, or other backgrounds does not necessarily yield better rapport or results, and therefore qualitative researchers should not focus on “commonality” but rather “connectivity” with participants (Emerson et al., 2011).

To this end, beyond the professional relationship that had already been established through the HSI Coalition, I worked to create an atmosphere of authentic caring throughout the interviews and CoP (Meyer, 1996), starting each with conversation that situated our relationship within a deeper network and personal connection, and ending each by circling back to this interconnectedness and expressing sincere gratitude (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). By engaging in intentional allyship and forging authentic relationships with participants, I hoped to blunt the influence of whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2017) and have participants perceive me as a “worthy witness to [their] lived experiences” (Paris &
Indeed, the foundation of rapport I laid with participants both prior to and during the data collection process may have counteracted this potential threat to the integrity of the data, as all interviewees and CoP participants seemed open and at ease during our conversations, sharing vulnerable and honest insights. Also a testament to the comfort level of interviewees was the fact that 19 out of the 20 expressed interest in continuing the conversation through participating in the CoP sessions.

Finally, I recognize that my embeddedness as an HSI specialist myself may have been a double-edged sword: on the one hand, I have insider knowledge of the systems, challenges, and strategies that specialists in this area encounter and employ in their everyday work; on the other hand, this insider knowledge brings with it a very particular lens and likely biases borne out of personal experiences that may not be generalizable to the perspectives and experiences of the participants in the study. To address this, in addition to self-reflexive practices, I worked to capture “members’ meanings” by paying close attention to their understandings and what they emphasized as significant (Emerson et al., 2011) and utilized “thick descriptions,” capturing nuances, complexities, and contexts of participants’ experiences (Geertz, 2006). I also approached the CoP as a communal space of dialogue and learning in which participants took the lead on telling their own stories and co-creating key takeaways for disrupting whiteness. In addition to mitigating the impact of my personal lens on the issue, this also served to blunt the imbalance of power inherent in a researcher/participant relationship. By intentionally framing these sessions as a collective practice and assuming a listening rather than leading role, I was able to democratize to a certain extent the research process.
Summary of Methods

My study into the experiences and insights of HSI specialists in a Midwestern state explored how they understood institutional whiteness, where they believed institutional whiteness presented roadblocks for embodying a Latinx-serving identity, and how they navigated and responded to these systems in order to help transform their institutions. I began my study with understandings of institutional whiteness as foundational to framing the research design and analyzing the data. The primary sources of data were one-on-one semi-structured interviews with HSI specialists and a CoP in which a subgroup of the participants engaged in a dialogic process of sensemaking over a sustained period of time. Institutional contexts varied from two-year public open-access colleges to four-year private doctoral granting universities. Participant recruitment consisted primarily of personal outreach to members of the HSI Coalition via email, and “snowballed” as I solicited recommendations for outreach to other HSI specialists on their respective campuses. In total, 20 HSI specialists were interviewed, of which, eight participated in the CoP. Participants represented a wide cross-section of genders, races/ethnicities, experience, and positionality within their institutions.

Data were then analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive strategies, starting with open coding of the interviews and following with a deductive process utilizing a priori “macro-codes” associated with the conceptual framework of institutional whiteness. Initial analyses were shared with CoP participants, who were invited to participate in a series of discussions around these preliminary findings and the ways in which they responded to institutional whiteness in their work. Finally, CoP transcripts were analyzed using “analytic induction,” in which initial findings were either
confirmed or revised to fit all available evidence. In the following section I describe the findings that resulted from these analyses.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Through this dissertation project, I sought to gain a better understanding of the perspective of HSI specialists at historically white campuses as they transition to Latinx-serving. In this chapter, I describe the findings from interviews and a Community of Practice (CoP) with these practitioners as they pertain to my research questions:

2) How do HSI specialists at recently designated and emerging HSIs understand and navigate the historical legacy of whiteness on their campuses?
   a. Sub-question #1: What barriers do HSI specialists encounter in working toward a race-conscious model of servingness, and how are these challenges connected to their understandings of institutional whiteness?
   b. Sub-question #2: What strategies do they employ to disrupt institutional whiteness?

While there were a range of understandings and experiences that emerged from the interviews, strikingly, there were many commonalities. Even campuses that were already HSIs and about which participants spoke in generally favorable terms encountered challenges related to their historical legacy of whiteness. The common threads that emerged from the interviews individually were collated and then discussed and further developed through the CoP sessions. The findings in this chapter integrate data from both the interviews and CoP sessions. Direct quotes were drawn from individual interviews unless otherwise stated. When citing CoP participants, the session number is included in parentheses. Topics and subthemes explored in each of the sessions are listed in Appendix F.
This chapter is divided into three parts: in the first section, I summarize participants’ understandings of servingness as the ideal for which they were striving; in Part II, I describe their encounters with whiteness on their campuses and the ways they reported that whiteness impaired their ability to serve their students well; and in the last section, I detail the strategies that they employed to push back against or circumnavigate the barriers presented by whiteness.

Part I: Understandings of Servingness

To answer the question, “what barriers do HSI specialists encounter in working toward a race-conscious model of servingness?”, it is first important to describe participants’ understandings of servingness itself. Many of the participants had an academic understanding of servingness, citing Gina García and her colleagues’ work (2019, for example), but all had practical knowledge about and experience with it. As they articulated, servingness was both an ideal – something to strive for – and an active, ongoing process that required purposefulness in creating the conditions necessary for Latinx student access and success. Throughout the interviews and CoP sessions, servingness was described in race-conscious terms, as participants wove the specific needs, language, and cultures of Latinx students throughout their responses.

It is also important to note that while for the most part, HSI specialists unapologetically centered Latinx students in their work, they also expressed that servingness meant serving all historically marginalized students. For example, Camila recognized that Black students also struggled with retention, success, and thriving at higher rates than white students, leading her to state, “I don’t want [HSI work] to feel like that means that’s ‘instead of’ or at the cost of other groups of students.” Along the same
lines, Carlota asserted, “[When] we’re addressing our Hispanic students, we are also addressing all of our minority students, because they are struggling.” And Felix, in a CoP session (#1), described the ultimate goal of HSI was not just to foster an ethos of servingness around Latinx students but for all URM students:

I think if we create a blueprint of success for this [Latinx] community that we should be able to lift all… I’m very intentional when talking about this because I’m very passionate about raising all boats. But I just happen to be in a position where I can have the greatest impact on the Latino community.

Some aspects of servingness that HSI specialists engaged in were very Latinx-specific, such as Spanish bilingual services, but much of what they were working to accomplish, including changing institutional practices and culture, would benefit all minoritized students through better experiences and outcomes.

While many aspects of servingness were closely interconnected, several rounds of inductive analysis of the interview and CoP transcripts revealed seven broad themes that captured participants’ insights into this concept: centering the local Latinx community, bilingual outreach and other services, student support, building belonging, diverse employee representation, HSI infrastructure and organizational identity, and resource commitment.

**Centering the Local Latinx Community**

HSI specialists interviewed for this study emphasized the need to focus on their own local Latinx community. As the majority of their campuses were regional technical and small liberal arts colleges, this localized focus was a natural extension of their institutional missions, but centering the Latinx community also entailed steps taken
beyond typical admissions practices. Participants recognized the unique needs of Latinxs when it comes to navigating higher education: culturally speaking, Latinxs do not necessarily learn about college in the same ways as their white peers – they rely more on relationships, word of mouth, and direct communication, rather than passive or unidirectional communications such as billboards or other advertisements. In a CoP session (#4), Carlota described visiting laundromats in the middle of the day where she would distribute literature about her institution, have conversations with community members, answer questions, “dimantl[e] a lot of myths” and “bring awareness” to the possibility of a college degree. Others spoke about outreach programs that specifically targeted Latinx students and families, such as visits to feeder schools with high Latinx populations, informational sessions geared toward Latinxs and Spanish-speakers, having a presence at local Latinx-focused events, partnerships with local non-profit and community-based organizations, and pre-college programs aimed at Latinx and other URM students. These efforts were aimed at creating pathways – both informational and logistical – for students who might not otherwise enroll. As Chris noted, “through communication, through events, through relationship building… [we’re] making some of those pathways more clear for students who have historically… been excluded from our institution… or perhaps who have self-selected out of even considering this place.”

Even those HSI specialists whose institutions had a more national reach emphasized the need to build relationships with their local Latinx communities. Daniel, whose institution drew most of its students from out of state, discussed the idea of solidarity, accompanying, building trust, and creating stronger connections with Latinxs in his city: “I’m always drawn to Eduardo Galeano, the South American scholar, who
said that help vertical is charity, help horizontal is solidarity. So it’s this idea that we can do things together.” Similarly, Felix, an HSI specialist at a large R1 institution, articulated the need for more input from the community, which led to the creation of an HSI community advisory board. He also emphasized bidirectional and mutually beneficial relationships, and the importance of making campus resources and leaders available to the community. This community-engaged orientation was summed up by Laura with the idea of a “campus compact,” or that colleges have a responsibility to enhance community connections and contribute to local development. Liliana took this idea a step further by describing specific services offered by her institution beyond just those for undergraduates, such as GED and ESL classes for adult learners. Servingness, then, extended beyond the undergraduate enrollment requirements and included all who were part of the campus community – even those who did not "count" for purposes of the federal definition.

But more than simply being guided by moral obligation or community-centered values, participants made the case that focusing on local students of color would also be good for the institution. For example, John (pronouns are they/them), noted that their small design school had a lot of “success in bringing people from afar… But retention-wise, if we could pull in more local students who already have home nearby, that would make more sense… The talent that’s here in our backyard [among folks of color] is immense.” Accessibility, outreach, and clear pathways between the community and the institution, then, were described as both crucial aspects of servingness and also ways to strengthen the institution.
Bilingual Outreach and Other Services

One of the most often discussed components of servingness was centering the Spanish language across all aspects of institutional practices. Carlota provided this insight:

I would love to have more bilingual services. Whether that’s having a bilingual recruitment expert, having a bilingual student finance expert, having bilingual curriculum, having bilingual faculty. Bring more Spanish into what we are doing in our events that engage our families. Because then you’re really addressing our culture.

Importantly, participants described the use of Spanish as not only utilitarian – a necessary communication tool – but also an aspect of servingness rooted in culture, comfort, familiarity, and relationship-building. Spanish services described included: bilingual outreach, academic and co-curricular programs, and bilingual staff.

Bilingual Outreach. As HSI specialists focused on their local Latinx community, their outreach efforts necessarily included Spanish components. Spanish open house programs were touted as some of the most successful ways to engage students and families, but participants also discussed the positive impact of other Spanish-language programming such as campus tours, informational programs in local schools, and orientation programs for admitted students.

Also understanding that many Latinx students were the first in their families to attend college, and that Latinx students were more likely than their peers to commute from home, HSI specialists spoke to the need to include parents and other family members in these programs. Participants not only pointed to the practical importance of
empowering parents with knowledge about college pathways, but also repeatedly described the sense of belonging this engendered for students and families on their campuses. They described this aspect of servingness as providing a front door or “neighborly” experience (Noemi) or a “personal touch” (Susana) that communicated the value the institution placed on Spanish-speaking families.

Bilingual outreach also entailed marketing, web resources, and campus signage in Spanish. Making information about their institutions accessible to Spanish-speakers was crucial, not only for removing language barriers but also to project a sense of welcoming and support – to signal to prospective students and families that the institution saw them as an important and integral part of their campus community. As Liliana noted, “We need to make sure that our Hispanic, Latinx community feels accepted and feels empowered so they can connect with us. And I feel that the website is our first introduction to our community.” Importantly, however, participants emphasized the need for professional translation and multiple perspectives. Yatzuri, for example, pointed to mistakes in Spanish marketing materials that resulted in “disappointment” rather than empowerment. Having a translation committee made up of native Spanish speakers from a variety of national origins was a promising practice she offered to ensure both accuracy and that the translation would be universally understood.

**Bilingual Academic and Co-Curricular Programs.** While outreach and marketing were an important aspect of servingness, HSI specialists recognized that bilingual services should extend into students’ everyday experiences on campus. Particularly for those who worked at technical colleges, but also referenced by HSI specialists at a small liberal arts school, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes as
As the burgeoning need outpaced their ESL/bilingual course offerings, participants from the two technical college campuses also detailed Spanish services they offered such as a phone line that connected students to interpreters as well as bilingual “ed assistants” who would sit with students in class and help interpret and review content with them in their native language.

Beyond classrooms, participants spoke to the importance of bilingualism in student life. Yatzuri described a monthly discussion series in Spanish featuring various campus resources, and Lucia, who worked at a Catholic institution, described her experience in one of the CoP sessions (#5) with using Spanish to create community during campus masses:

The readings were done in Spanish. Whether there were Latinx students there or faculty who spoke Spanish, it didn’t matter… it became part of the mass every time. So it was normalizing in Spanish… I grew up speaking Spanish. That’s my first language. The moment you start speaking in Spanish to me, I just feel more like myself, more included.

This “normalization” of the Spanish language across campus helped to create a welcoming, inclusive environment not only for students, but for Latinx faculty and staff as well.

**Bilingual Staff.** HSI specialists pointed to the growing capacity of their institutions to provide all of these bilingual services because of the growth of their Spanish-speaking staff. Participants expressed a need to maintain – and often increase – bilingual staff in key roles such as admissions, financial aid, marketing, and faculty. They also underscored that being bilingual was not enough to foster trust and relationships, and
that staff needed to be bicultural as well, which was most easily accomplished by hiring Spanish-speakers from the community that they were serving. Several indicated that hiring had to be intentional and bilingualism had to be a required, rather than preferred, qualification on job descriptions in student- and family-facing offices to prioritize this key aspect of servingness. Hiring Spanish-speaking student workers was also celebrated as a win-win for both the institution and students seeking campus employment.

Finally, several participants talked about bilingual servingness in broader terms, accommodating all languages. Because while Spanish was the primary language spoken after English, they pointed to the sizable Hmong population in the area as well as Arabic-speakers whom they were working to serve equally as well as their Spanish-speakers.

**Supporting Student Success**

A large part of HSI specialists’ definition of servingness revolved around responding to students’ needs and providing the scaffolding they needed to have both positive experiences and good outcomes. In broad strokes, Carlota provided this explanation:

Servingness to me represents how we need to treat our students – what are gaps in their education and how can we reach those gaps? How can we help them be successful so that whatever need they have, we are able to support, if possible, to help them not only come to [the institution] but retain them and have them graduate?

A key to centering students’ needs was gathering student input into the educational process, understanding how they themselves define “success” (Camila) and “catering to them – not to us” (Bella). Participants also recognized that while there might be some
patterns to the types of challenges Latinx students face, such as often hailing from first-generation backgrounds, they understood that these students did not represent a monolith and that individual barriers to success were varied. Thus, they emphasized really getting to know and understand the students and then responding to both their academic needs as well as their cultural and social needs.

**Academic Programs and Pedagogical Practices.** Participants often referred to culturally and linguistically responsive academic programs as a cornerstone of servingness. As Lucia noted, “We have changed our curriculum to make sure that we’re recentering the experiences of students of color, including Hispanic students.” These programs, such as Spanish for heritage learners, interpretation and translation programs, and Latinx studies, catered to students’ assets and interests. Recognizing these assets in academic policies was also an important aspect of servingness. Silas, for example, described an effort he was a part of wherein bilingual students could earn retroactive language credits and thereby reduce their time to graduation. Academic programs were also tied to servingness as a tool for educating the broader student body about dimensions of diversity and centering BIPOC voices and experiences.

Another important aspect of servingness was the classroom experience and the pedagogical practices employed by instructors. Specifically, participants stressed the need to adapt teaching strategies to support student learning and success. Bella remarked,

> We’re not here to expect a certain type of student to come in and just adapt to how we teach… It’s the other way around – they’re coming in with all these struggles and barriers. And we have to really adapt to their learning and their needs so that we can serve them as best as we can.
This entailed not only flexibility and accommodations for students who needed extra support or whose life circumstances interfered with their academic work, but it also often required instructors to rethink their classroom practices as a whole and engage earnestly with professional development. For example, Okoye, an administrator at a technical college, facilitated faculty book clubs on topics such as inclusive instruction and equitable grading practices, shared information about courses with high DFW rates for students of color with the provost and academic deans, and encouraged them to work with instructors of those courses to think critically and creatively about their pedagogy to better scaffold student success.

**To Graduation and Beyond.** Removing barriers to Latinx student success went beyond classroom content and practices. Participants told stories of Latinx students at their campuses who were experiencing challenges to persistence and the ways in which they were working to improve retention through crisis intervention and other supports. One story in particular stood out: Liliana was working with a student at her technical college who was having difficulty understanding classroom lectures. Instead of simply sending her to the tutoring office, Liliana spent time forging a relationship with her, and eventually the student felt enough trust to share that she had suffered some hearing loss as the result of abuse by a former partner. The support they could offer her through disability services, such as a designated note-taker, helped this single working mom earn all A’s that semester, bolstering her confidence and ensuring that rather than dropping out, she had a clear pathway to completion.

Stories like this spoke to the power of people as “navigators.” These faculty and staff took the time to connect students with the resources they needed in ways that went
beyond their regular duties-as-assigned. This form of servingness required deep listening, offering guidance, demystifying the hidden curriculum of college, making a phone call or sending an email on their behalf, following up, and sometimes literally walking students to other offices that could provide them with support. But the general consensus among interviewees was that their actions were – and should be – a matter of course. Penelope captured this sentiment when she said, “What I did shouldn’t be above and beyond, that should be our standard… I’m not a fan of [the term] ‘handholding’… but [I was] honoring the fact that they might have needed more support to stand on their own.”

Interviewees expressed that ideally, all faculty and staff would serve students with this level of engagement and care, but they recognized that, in the absence of a campus-wide climate of care, the role of navigator was all the more important to students.

Other retention strategies mentioned included bilingual support (as described above), cohort programs to foster a sense of community and accountability among students, high-touch advising practices where “resources are really in their face” (Noemi), and a range of tutoring services. Removing barriers also meant understanding logistical barriers to success. For example, Susana, an administrator at a technical college, described offering classes in the evenings and on Saturday mornings because many of her students were adult learners with full-time jobs.

Finally, participants often emphasized the need to help their students with their post-graduation plans, such as transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution and career placement support. Setting students up with internships and other meaningful job readiness programs, offering transfer fairs, and helping them build social capital were part of the servingness package. John made the point that this focus on students’ ultimate
career goals was a matter of racial equity: they were working to develop an institution-wide mentorship program “so that all of our students and especially students of color have relevant mentors, networks, professional opportunities… If that social capital isn’t created or nurtured, those students are leaving here with inequitable outcomes.”

**Special Consideration for Dreamers.** One population that merited an additional layer of support was Dreamers. In the region where these campuses were situated, the vast majority of Dreamers were of Latin American descent and HSI specialists felt strongly that in order to serve the Latinx community, immigration status must be taken into account as an important aspect of many students’ experiences. Thus, Dreamer support was viewed as intertwined with HSI work.

Given these students’ unique set of challenges, participants stressed the importance of institutional policies and cultures that understood and responded to their needs. HSI specialists recognized that Dreamers encounter particular challenges in financing a college education as they are not eligible for federal financial aid and many scholarships. Moreover, campuses were seeing fewer and fewer Dreamers with access to DACA and related employment authorization since the Trump administration initiated a “wind down” of the program in 2017.\(^{15}\) Thus, setting up funding mechanisms specific to Dreamers was a goal that many HSI specialists were involved in or working toward.

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\(^{15}\) Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a program implemented in 2012 following an executive order by President Obama that conferred certain protections to young immigrants living in the United States without legal authorization, including temporary reprieve from deportation and a work authorization card. In 2017 under the Trump administration, the Department of Homeland Security announced a “wind down” of the program, and, while those who previously had DACA were allowed to submit renewal applications every two years, subsequent federal court rulings have halted the processing of new DACA requests. The future of the DACA program remains uncertain as an appeal is working its way to the Supreme Court, as of the time of this writing.
Supporting Dreamer student organizations and their programming, hosting professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, and creating forums for students to share their stories and raise awareness about their struggles were also strategies mentioned by HSI specialists as necessary for serving these students well. Lucia recalled the moment when her campus climate toward Dreamers began to shift: “We had several students talking about being undocumented and some of their professors just saying outrageous things about the immigrant community. [So] I helped some students start a new group on campus: ‘Dreamers welcome.’” Ultimately, the aspiration was to become more undocu-friendly campuses where vulnerable students felt a sense of safety in disclosing their immigration status and reaching out for help, and had access to the necessary resources – human, financial, or otherwise – to be successful.

**Building Belonging and Community**

In addition to supporting student success, HSI specialists described servingness in terms of an intentionality in creating a sense of belonging and connectedness for students. Bella summarized this idea by stating, “For me that’s a huge win if our students feel like they belong… [If] they feel comfortable with us, they feel safe and that is very important.” For many participants, belongingness began with cultural affirmation. Noemi stressed that “if we’re really looking to serve the Hispanic community, you need to know their culture… It opens up the conversation into almost like, we’re neighbors and we’re just having a conversation over the fence or something.” That neighborly feeling could be achieved by threading cultural affirmation throughout the campus environment. Elizabeth characterized it as “help[ing] [campus] feel more like that second home with programming, with staff, with initiatives, with the way that we frame things with our
marketing, just in general.” Participants specified ways that Latinx culture should permeate throughout campus, from offering authentic Latinx “comfort food” in dining services, to culturally responsive counseling practices, to the normalization of Spanish language on campus (as previously mentioned), to incorporating Latinx traditions into classroom spaces in ways that appreciated, rather than tokenized or appropriated them.

Latinx student-centered programming outside the classroom was also identified as being important to build a sense of belonging. According to participants, some of this programming, such as social events, retreats, and intercultural learning opportunities, should be directed by cultural centers or diversity offices. But more often cited was the importance of supporting student-led efforts. Student organizations were instrumental in fostering a sense of community, sharing resources and navigational knowledge, advocating for their needs, and – especially at PWIs where it was more difficult for Latinx students to find each other – student organizations had the power to make their presence known. While the leadership burden fell to students to run their programs, HSI specialists described their role as supporters via responsive advising, helping them access funding, assisting with logistics, showing support by showing up to their events, and making sure student organization leaders had a seat at important discussions.

Having affirming and inviting physical spaces, such as multicultural offices, Latinx student centers, and student lounges, was also deemed integral to building a sense of belonging. The design, location, amenities, and staffing of these spaces were important considerations in making them comfortable, welcoming, and useful to Latinx students. Even at majority-minority campuses, spaces that centered students’ cultures and needs was deemed important. For example, Catalina, who worked at a recently designated HSI,
noted that “having that space where they can comfortably set their things down, warm food up and just relax between classes, and then some of the imagery, just cultural artwork… Having those inviting spaces… is really positive.”

Some participants emphasized the importance of building community across racial/ethnic boundaries. On several campuses, it was noted that this happened more or less organically, but as Lucia pointed out, it was up to the institution to provide opportunities for students from different racial/ethnic heritages to engage in meaningful dialogue and connection: “We can be diverse all you want, but is this really working?… Are we creating community?… We have to know that that requires some action, work, and responsibility on our part.”

Finally, the most often cited strategy for building community came down to the intentionality of the faculty and staff. This was also the common denominator across all previously mentioned strategies, as cultural affirmation and programming did not exist in the absence of personnel, and even physical spaces, it was noted, felt more welcoming with culturally responsive staff. These were the front-line people who ultimately created community. To this point, Noemi observed:

[Students] want that human connection, that safe adult person, that they can go up to and ask things and rely on, ask for guidance or mentorship… It’s gonna be a certain coach from a program, a certain counselor from their sessions. It’s gonna be the people that keep them going.

Participants stressed the power of relationship-building – listening, guiding, relating, and finding joy in each other – in fostering a sense of belonging for students.
Diverse Representation Among Faculty and Staff

The previous point about the importance of human connection also speaks to the power of diverse representation among faculty and staff. Repeatedly, participants stressed the importance of a professoriate and professional staff that reflected the racial/ethnic diversity of the students whom they served. They pointed out that when students saw accomplished professionals who shared their life experiences, they more readily opened up about themselves, felt more connected, and were often more engaged in the lifeblood of the campus. Bella emphasized that “when a student of color sees a professor of color that comes from a similar background to them, they feel like they belong. And I cannot stress that enough – the fact that representation matters so much.” It was important to note that “similar background” meant a wide range of identities, including Afro Latinos and others who are often left out of traditional definitions of Latinidad. Thus, servingness entailed making a concerted effort to increase faculty and staff diversity through intentional hiring practices: active recruitment, diverse search committees, fellowship programs, cluster hiring, and even incentivizing retirement to create room for new energy and move the diversity needle.

Diverse representation at every level of the institution – but most importantly, within leadership – was also affirmed as an important aspect of servingness because, according to participants, PoC, those who were first-generation students themselves, and others who had experienced barriers to success were more in tune with students’ challenges, and therefore these campus leaders were more likely to prioritize the needs of students of color in their decision-making. Okoye and Silas, for example, both referenced
the growing diversity among their administrations as contributing to a change in institutional culture.

Interestingly, participants also discussed the benefits of diversity for themselves and other colleagues. HSI specialists who themselves identified as Latinx experienced a sense of belonging and connectedness through increased diversity among their colleagues. Susana, for example, described (CoP, #5) this feeling after participating in a student event with other Latinx colleagues: “We were doing Spanish/English from the program, but just amongst ourselves, saying, ‘Ay, esto fue un éxito, grandísimo’… And then today, when we had a follow up [to the event], the room was packed. There was so much energy.” Susana here was describing a feeling of solidarity and a sense that there was strength in Latinx numbers. Carlota also described in the same CoP session (#5) the “night and day change” she felt when she moved from a whiter campus space into a diverse office – in the level of respect she was afforded, the relatability with her colleagues, and the shared sense of purpose in their work to support students of color.

**HSI Infrastructure and Organizational Identity**

Participants indicated that an HSI organizational infrastructure and identity were also integral to servingness on campuses in transition from historically white to Latinx-serving. For emerging and recently designated HSIs, this involved both a focus on increasing Latinx enrollment as well as readying the campus to receive those students and serve them well. Often cited by participants was a purposefulness to the process: Camila noted that they needed to “lean on what academics do best, which is… to develop frameworks and to grapple and to question… to work backwards by setting the outcomes that you want and then developing things to help you meet those outcomes.” Key words
that came up repeatedly in interviews and the CoP sessions were “intentionality” and “strategic” – in the goal-setting and operationalization of HSI work.

Participants also specified that there needed to be institutional stewards of HSI; that committees, task forces, and/or HSI-specific positions were essential to guide the direction of and help implement HSI priorities. Committees took on various structures – small and nimble advisory bodies, large task forces that crossed campus siloes, umbrella structures with subcommittees – but a common thread was that, in order to be effective, these groups had to have been sanctioned by leadership and have institutional buy-in. Many HSI specialists revealed that committee members were volunteers who engaged because they were passionate about the work, but to build capacity for servingness, ideal conditions would entail freeing them from other responsibilities to provide adequate time to devote to HSI endeavors. Human capital, then, was at the heart of servingness. This point often led interviewees to elaborate that institutional support for HSI efforts should include designated positions for HSI work and/or HSI responsibilities written into practitioners’ job descriptions in order to maintain momentum.

Participants also repeatedly referred to codifying HSI efforts in DEI statements and plans, institutional strategic plans, websites, metrics for progress, and other documents. As Felix noted, “An idea without a plan, it just goes down the drain.” Embedding HSI into institutional documents, according to interviewees, would help to create a “sort of a lens that’s consistently being applied across the board” (Camila) and provide “meaningful direction” and “assurances for the work of HSI” (Chris). These goals and plans included a broad range of efforts from recruitment to retention to student
experience, and HSI specialists noted that they would need to be frequently revisited and refreshed in order to ensure sustained institutional commitment.

Finally, participants emphasized that institutional commitment to servingness was contingent upon a shared understanding among leaders and across campus as to what servingness actually entailed. As HSI was a fairly new concept for the region – the first HSI designation in the state came about in 2017 – campuses were still grappling with the meaning of HSI. Penelope, for example, pointed to the fact that the federal definition only focused on enrollment numbers and did not include any requirements or accountability to “meet the ‘serving’ piece.” This led her to conclude, “How do institutions go from being PWIs to HSIs? Nobody has figured that out yet. That leap has not happened yet, at least here in [our state].” Others noted that some campus actors were focused on achieving HSI for the potential Title funding, and that there were a lot of questions and confusion about what an HSI designation would mean for their campuses. Thus, for many HSI specialists, helping to dismantle myths across the campus community and building a Latinx-serving organizational identity that moved beyond enrollment goals was of paramount importance to ensuring an ethos of servingness.

**Resource Commitment**

One of the most often cited indicators of servingness was the organization’s willingness to invest material resources into HSI efforts. While some initiatives were of the “low hanging fruit” variety, only needing a slight shift in institutional energy to accomplish, participants pointed out that many aspects of servingness required an influx of funding. Dr. B summed it up: “[Servingness means] not only to talk about things, but really mean what you say, and put the resources… and have a real commitment [to do]
what you said that you’re gonna do.” Similarly, Okoye expressed that servingness to her would include being “financially sound where this work doesn’t have to be getting the scraps… [It] would involve strong financial, sustainable support for building a culture that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.” These funding needs could be grouped into two general categories: financial resources directed toward students and funding for operational and programmatic needs.

**Making College Affordable.** Of paramount concern to interviewees was affordability for students. Chris, an administrator at a private university, stressed that one of his main goals since he had arrived on his campus would be “to persuade, convince, actually change policy within the power that I have to prioritize meeting students’ full demonstrated financial need as an institutional commitment.” Similarly, John, an administrator at a small art and design school, in a CoP session (#2) pointed to the discrepancy between the matriculation rate of BIPOC students – who tended to be lower income – and white students, emphasizing, “our whole solution needs to be focused around access and financial affordability.” This sentiment was echoed again and again: that servingness meant breaking down financial barriers to college access. Participants reported that campuses strove to accomplish this to varying degrees through FAFSA workshops, community partnerships for Latinx and low-income student scholarships, institutional scholarships devoted to Dreamers, programs funded by federal grants and private foundations that helped cover tuition expenses for low-income, first-generation, and/or URM students, emergency funds, and “restart” scholarships that provided financial assistance to students who had outstanding balances so that they could get back in the classroom.
Operational and Programmatic Funding Needs. In addition to increasing access through affordability, a variety of HSI efforts were described as needing financial support in order to be effective: budgets for Latinx student organizations to host social and cultural programs, institutional programs geared toward outreach, retention, and support of Latinx students, translation services, an HSI-specific budget for discretionary spending, and – very importantly – adequate funding to fill staffing needs. As previously noted, participants repeatedly emphasized the power of faculty and staff to not only support student success but also foster a sense of belonging. Servingness, then, entailed an institutional investment in both hiring the “right” people but also “more people” (Lucia) in positions such as educational assistants, bilingual counselors and faculty, and practitioners specializing in diversity, inclusion, and multicultural programming and support.

Additionally, participants accentuated the need for monetary investment in learning opportunities for existing faculty and staff. Bella captured this idea when she stated, “We need funding to prepare faculty and our staff better in order for them to know how to serve the students” including professional development, multicultural education, or “any kind of support that is gonna prepare the university as a whole to serve these students.” Costs involved in training for faculty and staff included fees for guest speakers, sending employees to conferences and off-campus trainings, and hosting on-campus programs.

Sources of Funding. A key question that almost all interviewees broached was, where does the money come from? The most frequently cited source of existing funding for HSI efforts was grant funding. Particularly, those institutions that had already
achieved HSI status and were awarded federal Title grants put it to good use in direct support of student learning and employee training. Notably, however, participants stressed that an institutional commitment to servingness would mean that they would not have to constantly be relying on grant funding, writing internal proposals to cover expenses that were central to serving Latinx students, scaling back programs instead of scaling them up, cobbling together funding in a piecemeal way by appealing to various campus offices to contribute, and seeking out external sponsors to fund programs; rather, servingness meant that institutions would prioritize Latinx-serving programs and create operational budgets that reflected these priorities. And if operational budgets were inadequate, participants highlighted the need for intentional advancement efforts geared specifically toward HSI. As Chris noted, “one of the best places to look to see what an institution’s strategic priorities are is how it’s directing its fundraising staff to raise money.”

**Summary of Part I: Understandings of Servingness**

To HSI specialists, institutions engaged in servingness when they centered Latinx students but also sought to “raise all boats” for other historically marginalized groups. Servingness also entailed being purposeful about their outreach to and connection with their local Latinx community, having robust capacity for Spanish-language communication, and supporting students’ academic journeys as well as their need to feel a sense of belongingness. And HSIs/eHSIs that focused on the “s” part of their titles would also have diversity among their employee populations from the top down, an institutionally supported HSI infrastructure and identity, and the resources to back up their commitment to Latinx and other URM students. While no institution was reported to
have it all, many participants indicated that their institutions were works in progress and described varying degrees of fulfilling the promise of servingness. In the following section, I detail the challenges that HSI specialists encountered in moving their institutions farther along on the servingness spectrum.

**Part II: Barriers Related to Whiteness**

Having laid out the ways in which these practitioners defined servingness, in this section, I turn to the challenges they faced in working toward Latinx-serving campuses. Here I answer my research subquestion #1: *What barriers do HSI specialists encounter in working toward a race-conscious model of servingness, and how are these challenges connected to their understandings of institutional whiteness?* Through the interviews and CoP sessions, HSI specialists both explicitly defined “whiteness” and also revealed layers of understanding around whiteness through relevant examples of where it manifested on their campuses. The prevailing sentiment was that whiteness was deeply pervasive and profoundly counterproductive to a race-conscious model of servingness. As Okoye noted, “I couldn’t think of anywhere, Jacki, that [whiteness] doesn’t show up, to be perfectly honest.”

As outlined in the “Data Analysis” section in Chapter III, transcripts from the interviews and CoP sessions were analyzed through a multiphase, iterative process, starting with multiple rounds of inductive coding. This was followed by deductive analysis in which I determined where the data fit into a number of predetermined codes based on my conceptual framework, and where it departed. Through this process, participants’ insights were grouped into nine broad, interconnected categories: *biases, colorblindness, epistemologies of ignorance, demographic whiteness, ontological*
expansiveness, white racial safety, white racial projects, whiteness as property, and the personal toll of whiteness.

**Biases**

Many participants in this study discussed biases harbored by colleagues that negatively impacted the way they perceived, served, and interacted with Latinx and other URM students. Sometimes these seemed to be conscious biases; for example, Carlota described how some of her colleagues espoused right-leaning political views that explicitly painted Latinxs and immigrants in a negative light. More often, however, participants cited “unconscious” processes that led colleagues to ascribe stereotypes to URM students and engage in discriminatory practices.

There were many references to double standards for students of color, as colleagues tended to be more understanding or accommodating of white students. In a CoP session (#4), Carlota asserted that “you could be asking the same question but depending on your [skin tone], you’re going to get a more positive result than another person because of their looks.” Another case in point was John’s campus, where a single administrator handled all bias incident reports and “a disproportionate number of students of color were being sent for disciplinary hearings and dismissed from the university.”

Other implicit biases were revealed when colleagues bought into the offensive stereotype that Latinxs do not have high educational or career aspirations. This created deficit narratives and lower expectations for Latinx students and their outcomes. Lucia pointed out that “when you’re racialized, people have expectations like you’re going to be the one not showing up to class, you’re going to be the one failing.” Similarly, in a
CoP session, (#2) Susana talked about a conversation with a fellow administrator about increasing Latinx enrollment, who responded,

‘We’re really trying to get more [Latinx students] into the culinary and music programs.’… And I said, ‘No, well, what about graphic design? What about e-sports? What about technology?’… Yes, we are great kickass musicians and chefs. But there’s more to us than that… It feels like we are constantly breaking down those stereotypes.

Catalina ran into similar issues on her campus, particularly when instructors engaged in “subtle digs” about Latinx students’ ability to perform in STEM fields. She explained, “actively telling a student that they shouldn’t consider being a nurse, or they shouldn’t consider med school, that’s extremely damaging to students that are trying to pursue that.” And these deficit biases against Latinx and other URM students also fed a streak of white saviorism. Penelope observed that,

Everything that my kids of color needed was an afterthought for [white administrators]. And then you would expect to be applauded because you put out a fire that you could have prevented or that you helped start with your behavior, with your policies and your messed up practices.

This sense of paternalism toward Latinx and other URM students resulted in white faculty and staff both underestimating them and undermining their agency.

**Intersectional and Hierarchical Biases.** The biases against people who inhabited various marginalized social identities were as complicated and nuanced as the identities themselves. Some practitioners pointed out that students and colleagues with intersectionally oppressed identities experienced different or heightened forms of
discrimination. In a CoP session (#4) on the topic of white understandings and attitudes about race, Noemi indicated that Latinx students who were also dark-skinned, LGBTQ, and/or women often had to deal with bias both at home and at school: “The Hispanic community also incredibly has colorism, homophobia, misogynistic, you know, all of these things” and some of the students who were already “battling… in their own community, now they have to battle over here.” The intersection between racial and gender biases came up in other interviews as well. Both John and Erica noted that male-dominated leadership spaces resulted in overlooking, overshadowing, ignoring and/or dismissing not only non-white people but also women. And when the person was both non-white and a woman, white male-dominant campus cultures could exacerbate the discrimination.

Another interesting aspect of this phenomenon was a sort of “hierarchy” of biases. While participants often talked about discriminatory attitudes affecting Latinxs, some also indicated that anti-Blackness was even more insidious on their campuses. Okoye reported that the Black History Month committee, which planned out amazing events, received pushback because it “looks like, to white people, that everything is organized around Blackness.” While this felt “threatening,” Okoye noted that the Hispanic Heritage Month organizers did not receive similar opposition. Thus, Latinxs were sometimes perceived as the “more palatable” URM. Penelope provided another salient example: she was invited to a meeting about serving Black students,

And the first thing out of my mouth was, ‘Maybe we should invite someone Black at this meeting.’ I was invited as a multicultural programmer because they didn’t like the Black multicultural programmer because she was too honest with
things… [I was] the ‘safer bet’ [using air quotations] to talk to because they’re checking off their diversity box… But [I am] not an ‘angry Black woman’.”

These hierarchical biases would sometimes sow divisiveness between Latinx and Black students, faculty, and staff, which was counterproductive to building interracial collaboration and solidarity in service to URM students.

Finally, it is important to mention that biases were not only harbored by white people, but cultural racism could also be internalized by URM colleagues as well. As Camila pointed out, “it’s what we’ve grown up in… It doesn’t mean that only white people put that into place. It just means that the way that our society has been built… dominates the way that we operate.” In short, the failure to interrogate one’s own biases – no matter what their background – could result in complicity in the marginalization of students of color.

**Colorblindness**

While biases presented hurdles to enacting a race-conscious model of serving Latinx students, participants in this study much more often cited the colorblind attitudes of some of their colleagues and campus leaders as being problematic. This inability – or sometimes willful refusal – to “see” race and subsequent failure to recognize racially rooted inequities exacerbated deficit narratives of students of color rather and prevented understandings of how structural barriers contributed to disproportionately negative outcomes for them. Lucia described this phenomenon as coming from a place of “privilege” in which:

You just expect people to show up and everybody’s the same… Like, ‘you better do the work and you better show up and leave your culture at home. Leave your
problems at home’… To me, that’s what being white is, you know, you’re just erasing those challenges that they have and not taking into consideration other experiences.

Oftentimes, this erasure of race did not arise from any intentional malice but rather, according to participants, a conflation of the ideas of “equity” and “equality.” It was noted that well-intentioned colleagues supported racial “equality” in the abstract but opposed race-conscious policies and programs that had the potential to produce equitable outcomes because they smacked of unfairness. John, for example, described an interaction with a fellow administrator who said they “care about ‘all the students’ [using air quotations]… I understand equity and we have to be fair… We have to treat everyone the same.” But John understood that “those aren’t the same things.” This sentiment was echoed in Erica’s description of working at a “whiteness-centered” campus where some of her colleagues “think equity is equalness and it’s not… So how can we really hone in and put that focus on students, especially Latinx students?”

The idea of “honing in” and providing Latinx-centered support was a challenge described by many participants due to an insistence on an “all students matter” approach that seemed to be rooted in fear of upsetting established racial power hierarchies. For example, Catalina indicated, “There was actually a big resistance to certain things that were Latinx-serving… Senior leaders didn’t want to alienate white students and white donors. You know, to shine too much attention on Latinx or HSI and even just language around diversity.” Similarly, Camila, a practitioner at a recently designated HSI, noted:

We really struggle on this campus to have programming or things that are named like ‘Black student this’ or ‘Latinx student that’ because we want everyone to
know that it’s for ‘all students’… People are so afraid of saying we’re an HSI… because they’re like, ‘But really we have all kinds of students here and… this isn’t just for the Hispanic students.’ I’m like, no, it’s not, but we can also say that we serve Hispanic students.

These tendencies contributed to a campus culture that was not conducive to a race-conscious model of servingness.

Sometimes this race-neutral, “all students matter” approach had material consequences. Noemi shared that her institution was not willing to create a scholarship fund specifically for Dreamers because, while there was support “in general” of students who needed extra financial aid, not everyone could get on board with the idea of a fund that was only available to Dreamers. She was told, “We’re doing our best that we can, but we can’t convince everyone that this is the best way to take care of this specific demographic of students.” While Noemi – and many other HSI practitioners interviewed for this study – understood Dreamer support as an essential aspect of servingness, the institution shied away from that approach because helping these students specifically would seem “unfair” to others.

**Colorblind Institutional Processes.** More than just attitudes and understandings, colorblindness permeated institutional policies. Participants recounted how their campuses engaged in historically white-normed practices without taking into account the changing demographics of their student populations, and that these seemingly race-neutral processes oftentimes resulted in disproportionately negative impacts for students of color. Camila reported that, even though her majority-minority school was doing some great work,
There are still processes… that are inherently racist… It’s not an on-purpose kind of thing… [There is a] lens of whiteness that prevails over the way that we do things… Some people say white dominant [or] white supremist culture… Those things are deeply embedded in our institutions because our institutions were created by white people. So those cultural norms are the basis for how our institutions are built.

Similarly, Okoye detailed how her campus is still “grounded in whiteness” – including their structures and processes, which “operat[e] from a lens of how white people will move through a particular system… and leaves absent the consideration of people who are not white.”

Sometimes this failure to see structural inequities through a racialized lens shut down conversations entirely. In a CoP session (#3), John described, for example, colleagues who downplayed the relevance of race in their discussions about campus policies, telling John, “Oh well, you’re making this into a thing… a ‘racial thing’…” That’s not what this is.” In minimizing the role of racism in the campus environment, these colleagues made it difficult for John to even begin a conversation about focusing on the challenges experienced by URM students.

Following are examples from both the interviews and CoP sessions of how whiteness showed up in institutional practices – both administrative and academic – and had disproportionately negative outcomes for Latinxs and other minoritized students.

**Administrative Policies and Practices.** Often, colorblindness was codified within formal policies, from the point of recruitment to beyond graduation. Camila’s campus, for example, employed an admissions practice that made it easier to admit and enroll
students, but then put the onus on the student to follow up with additional paperwork six months after matriculating. Failure to comply derailed students’ forward academic progress and, Camila pointed out, the students most impacted by this policy were students from public schools and students of color. She asserted: “It’s a process that has worked for [the implementers]… for a long time. It did work for some students, but not these students. And so [they figure] the problem must be this group of students, not the process.” Similarly, Yatzuri, a practitioner at a technical college, described how her Latinx students, and particularly her English language learners, had difficulties with her institution’s application process:

   It’s very difficult for the Hispanic population to navigate. If you’re an adult and you maybe came to this country later in your life, if you were a high school student, your parent… has no clue how to do any of this… So the processes are white still.

Not considering the challenges and experiences of non-white, non-traditional applicants resulted in greater difficulties for minoritized students. And yet, despite HSI specialists’ efforts to nudge administrators in the right direction, many of these policies remained intact.

   On the other end of a student’s journey, when they were transitioning away from campus to other educational institutions or careers, seemingly race-neutral practices had racially disparate effects. One poignant example was that of “transcript ransom,” or withholding students’ transcripts if they had a balance due. John described frustrating conversations with other campus leaders who had a hard time letting go of this policy,
even after John had shared institutional data that this practice was “disproportionately harm[ing] folks of color.”

And at every step along a student’s educational journey, colorblind administrative policies interfered with a race-conscious ethos of servingness. Chris noted that the history of being a PWI manifested itself in the ways that mission statements and handbooks were written, without consideration for how populations of color might be affected. Daniel, a faculty member at the same institution, even implied an intentionality in the way that supposedly colorblind policies were created and enforced, such as with the new demonstration policy on their campus:

So they create this mechanism, this tool by which they can eliminate dissent…

And then that same tool is used against students who are protesting for questions of equity and students of color on campus, right? So that’s there. They’re intimately connected. And we can’t separate questions of race, class, gender, all these things.

Sometimes, however, colorblindness resulted in administrative inaction that had adverse effects on URM students. John, for example, indicated that their institution’s bias incident policy was never formalized, and the current response process was not based in accountability for harm done or restorative practices that helped the offender understand the impact of their transgression, but rather set up as a voluntary “supportive coaching conversation” which limited how these situations could be handled. To John, it “felt like functions of whiteness… [that] everything has to be written down for it to be real and you won’t write it down. What an interesting gray space to live in, right? How advantageous
to [the administrators]” that they did not have to take responsibility for managing bias incidents effectively.

Colorblind inaction took other forms, as well. Okoye, an administrator at a public technical college, talked about how their board of trustees was very white, and even though she had nudged her campus leaders to promote the applications to diverse applicants, they refused. Instead, they continued to only post the applications in local newspapers – the bare minimum as was required by law – causing Okoye to lament, “Who’s reading [the newspapers] by race?... Where else are we advertising such an important role?... [We’re] not sending it anywhere else – to any cultural groups, women’s groups, young people... And to me, that is another construct of whiteness.”

Whiteness, then, could be described as a racial inertia in which colorblindness was the default modus operandi. Even when presented with evidence that race-neutral policies did not have race-neutral outcomes, there was little administrative will to deviate from the status quo.

**Academic Practices.** Similar to administrative policies, academic practices that centered whiteness and defied race-consciousness resulted in poorer outcomes for students of color than white students. Carlota noted, for example, that sometimes when academic departments scheduled classes, these “efforts are centered on what a Caucasian student or a Caucasian faculty would need. And those needs are not the same for our BIPOC community” – particularly in considering the time of day they offered classes and the format (in person or virtual), which affected student access and engagement. Other academic policies much more explicitly disadvantaged Latinx students. Elizabeth, a practitioner at a technical college, described the state-mandated test that all adult learners
in their high school equivalency program had to take. The institution made all students take the test in English – even those who were enrolled in the college’s Spanish-language program. Elizabeth asserted that it was within the institution’s power to modify this practice and yet, “They’ve made it more difficult for Hispanic students… [who] are so anxious to do a great job… So they get very stressed out about it,” leading Elizabeth to conclude that this was “deeply ingrained and a discriminatory practice in our system.”

This is a clear example of when colorblind policy resulted in direct harm to Latinx students.

Other seemingly race-neutral practices created roadblocks to academic progress. When it came to earning credits, for example, “race neutral” policies often disproportionately delayed time to completion for Latinx students. In Erica’s case, the various colleges at her large, four-year public university had different general education requirements, so students who changed majors would often need to backtrack and take more general courses. While challenging for all students, Erica noted that students of color and those who came from first-gen backgrounds were more likely to start their college journeys as “undecided” majors, so these populations were affected by this policy more often than their counterparts. A second example came from Silas, a faculty member at a recently designated HSI: his institution did not offer native/heritage speakers of non-English languages credit for their bilingual skills, even when their non-native/heritage counterparts who took an AP course in the same language had that benefit. This, however, was a rare instance in which the HSI specialist was able to advocate for a race-conscious policy that explicitly served Latinx students, and the institution responded by offering retroactive credit to those who could demonstrate their language competency.
After the change, Silas noted that his Spanish-speaking students were able to double-major more easily, had more flexibility in their academic schedules, and even graduated early, reducing the total cost of their college degree.

This example highlights HSI specialists’ recognition that colorblind policies needed to be interrogated to make progress toward servingness. As Camila pointed out, “We need to start looking at our processes from A-Z and we need to ask ourselves, at what point in this do we often trip up and why? And is the process set up to be fair and equitable for our students?”

*Epistemologies of Ignorance*

While colorblindness was a willful refusal to “see” race, epistemologies of ignorance was the sincerely held belief that we as a society have evolved beyond the influence of race, that our society is purely meritocratic, and therefore race should not be considered. This belief system was rooted in “not knowing,” but also firmly and naively believing in one’s own grasp of racial dynamics while simultaneously discounting the lived experiences of those most affected by racism and white supremacy. As Okoye noted, whiteness here operated as “a construct and a system that people can’t grab on to and see. So it’s hard for people who are white and in the majority to understand that concept, that everything is really grounded in whiteness.” This resulted in the tendency to misrepresent or downplay the power of race and racism to impact experiences and opportunities and the failure to interrogate systems that had racist outcomes.

*Lack of Exposure to Non-White Cultures.* When asked to define what “whiteness” meant to them, HSI specialists very often associated that term with a racial ignorance born from lack of exposure. Repeatedly, practitioners referred to it as an
ignorance, lack of information, and a symptom of privilege in which people did not grow up around multicultural or low-income communities, and therefore issues related to race or multiculturalism were simply “not on the radar” of colleagues (Laura). They were often “out of touch with changing demographics and needs” (Catalina) and therefore “not prepared to serve the students” (Bella).

HSI specialists pointed to a number of ways this general lack of understanding manifested, but one of the most common threads was the inability of their colleagues to grasp the importance of familismo in Latinx culture. This became problematic when practitioners tried to advocate for Spanish-language and family-oriented recruitment programs. For example, in a CoP session (#3), Felix lamented that he had been in many campus meetings where colleagues have questioned, “‘Why are we doing this for families? We’re supposed to be increasing enrollment’… but in Latino communities the conversation has to start with mom and dad. It has to be a family affair.” Lucia also pointed to the importance of translating materials for families, and yet there was sometimes pushback against these efforts from unaware colleagues.

Characterized by Erica as a “lack of cultural competence,” this also permeated faculty expectations for students. Carlota highlighted how many of her colleagues were not aware of the ways in which Latinx students were responsible to their families – to interpret, to work and contribute to household finances, to chauffeer family members who could not drive – all of which could affect their academic engagement and performance. Similarly, Noemi mentioned that some faculty – simply due to lack of exposure – did not understand that sometimes Latinx students’ biggest concern was not their GPA, but rather financial worries or attentiveness to their families. Bella summed it up: if faculty were
not aware of their struggles, “when the student communicates with that professor, the professor might be very uncompassionate.”

Liliana told a story about this very phenomenon: a Latina student who was an adult English language learner, mother of three, and third shift worker, came to Liliana crying in her first semester of classes because:

She was in the classroom and… the instructor was making comments about, ‘I’m not going to be here to babysit you’… The instructor did not feel that this was the class for her because she started asking questions about, ‘Do you have any office hours after class? If I have any question, can I come to you?’… And the instructor took it like ‘I’m not gonna be here for you 24/7.’ And so it’s all about servingness. So are we really here to serve our student, or are we here to judge or to close the door?

When there was a mismatch of understandings, experiences, and expectations between white faculty members and Latinx students, this could affect the students’ opportunities for success.

Importantly, participants underscored that “whiteness” did not mean “all white people.” They were quick to point to white colleagues who were very knowledgeable about diverse groups. Thus, the fundamental question was, as Elizabeth put it,

How aware are they of what they know and what they don’t know and what they need to learn? So some people… have a much better awareness of being able to say, look, I don’t know a lot about this, but… I’m just gonna listen…And so you have to understand when your lived experiences are not what others are. Like, they don’t even come close.
This sentiment was repeated over and over by participants: if campus colleagues did not have a willingness to better understand not only their Latinx students’ cultures but also the challenges they faced due to structural racism, immigration status issues, language barriers, family responsibilities, and financial hardship, they could not engage in servingness effectively.

**They Think They Know but They Don’t.** More than just a lack of knowledge, epistemologies of ignorance was characterized by participants as also having an overabundance of confidence in what one knew and a lack of cultural humility. Penelope articulated this well: “How would I define whiteness in a PWI would be… like you’re in the twilight zone. When you are surrounded by so much education with an even greater lack of awareness… but with this incredible sense of superiority.” She described it as a “feeling of consistent gaslighting” because of her white colleagues’ insistence that they knew what was best for students without actually understanding students’ experiences.

A number of specific examples were highlighted by participants. In a CoP session (#4), John, an administrator, described having to have a difficult conversation with a faculty member who was trying to connect with students’ cultures. But, because the instructor did not have basic foundational cultural knowledge, they made mistakes that were offensive to students, including confusing the symbolism of the Day of the Dead, a Mexican tradition, with a generic skeleton image. When confronted, John reported that the faculty member responded: “I would never say anything offensive to my students.” John provided another story of a faculty member who ran an ill-conceived participatory workshop for students around the concept of decolonization – with disastrous results. As John was debriefing with the faculty member and trying to get her to understand where
she went wrong, she dug in: “she was saying… ‘This is how we do the work.’ And they were like really high on their horse and excited about being an ally.” Catalina talked about a similar situation at her former institution, describing a white campus leader who “thought that she knew [DEI issues] and unfortunately didn’t have the tools and the language and would sometimes say and do really cringeworthy things that just really alienated people.” And a particularly cringeworthy experience was described by Lucia in a CoP session (#3): she recounted having a conversation with colleagues in which she revealed how she felt self-conscious and judged because of her accent. One of them interrupted her and said, “Well, I mean, we’re from [a Midwest state]. Many of us have an accent, right?” – equating the linguistic discrimination she experienced as a Latina immigrant with that of a native-born Midwesterner and sincerely believing he understood her struggle.

This “not knowing but believing that they do” could foster complacency. As Lucia noted later in the chat function of the same CoP session, this ignorance could make colleagues believe that “we have done so much (we have evolved so much) that we are doing a great job, when in fact we are just getting started... The staff of color can tell you there is a lot more to do.”

**Questioning the Need for Change.** HSI specialists reported that this lack of awareness not only resulted in awkward moments and alienating experiences for Latinx students and other PoC on campus, but also in passive and active resistance to change. Chris characterized this as “unintentionally or intentionally slowing down the [HSI] effort or impeding the effort” as a result of their own “personal or professional background and experiences.” Participants detailed white colleagues’ intransigence,
doubling down on practices that were not responsive to Latinx students’ needs – again, stemming from a lack of awareness. Noemi, for example, recalled colleagues saying, “We’ve done it this way for so long. Why would you change it?”

In addition to refusing to change individual practices, some campus colleagues pushed back against institutional race-based programs, policies, and practices because of a lack of understanding around the needs of communities of color. Carlota described a situation in which she asked her institution’s communication team to add a Spanish translation button to their website and a colleague resisted: “Tell me why we would have it?” To me, the answer is obvious. But to her, it’s not… and no matter if I explain it, she still is like, no, she thinks it’s not something that’s really valid.” This point about having to explain and justify and cajole to move forward an agenda of servingness was repeated by other HSI specialists. Dr. B, for example, provided one poignant example of the ways in which “mainly white people are the major obstacles because they don’t understand.” She recounted trying to work with the legal counsel to put out a statement in support of Dreamers, but this white colleague threw up roadblocks: “We were back and forth, back and forth. Oh, our emails were so spicy. [laughs] I mean the level of ignorance… I appreciate her because it challenged me to look at the intellectual discourse about it to educate her.” Despite Dr. B’s best efforts, her campus did not put out a statement until after the person occupying the role of legal counsel left the institution. Thus, sometimes the only way forward was to wait out the gatekeepers. In a separate interview, Okoye echoed this sentiment: “Some people are still gonna dig their heels in… And I support them as a human being. But maybe, you know, it might be time for you to take your talents on to somewhere else.”
**Reverse Racism and Our White National Climate.** A number of participants pointed out that the epistemologies of ignorance they encountered on their campuses were both reflections of and responses to the larger national climate around race and racism. Top of mind for many was the impending SCOTUS decision in the cases against Harvard and the University of North Carolina relating to their affirmative action admissions practices. At the time of the interviews in spring 2023, the decision had not yet been rendered but even the specter of the ruling had a chilling effect on race-consciousness. In a CoP session (#2), John, an administrator at an eHSI, described a meeting with their board of directors prior to the SCOTUS decision in which some were questioning whether or not they should even pursue HSI status anymore.

Pushback against race-consciousness leading up to and after the SCOTUS decision occurred not only in the realm of enrollment management but affected other areas of institutional practice as well. In a CoP session (#2) after the decision was made, Liliana talked about how this compounded their challenges in supporting Dreamers, as their board of directors doubled down on blocking the creation of a Dreamer-specific scholarship: they started saying, “‘See, this is why we were not supporting [it].’ So now they are reaffirming themselves that… the lack of support should keep going because this is coming from the head [of our country].” Felix, a practitioner at a large public institution, reported that ethnic-based scholarship programs were “on the chopping block because [the state’s higher educational] system right now is coming down on that. You know, they’re trying to get away with, move away from ethnic-based scholarships.” Felix’s verbal slip, that “they’re trying to get away with” slashing race-based programs, belied an existing tension between the state’s conservative legislative body that
controlled funding for the public system and the Latinx-serving efforts his campus was engaged in. As Felix understood it, the legislators who already embraced race-neutrality were using the SCOTUS case as an excuse to root out programs that they believed to be unfair to white students.

The idea of “reverse racism” reverberated in other interviews as well. Okoye, an administrator at a public college, understood this sort of attitude to be a pervasive and enduring challenge of DEI work: “You’re always going to have a certain population and segment that is going to say, ‘Well, what about us? I’m being left behind, or now there’s no focus on our white students.’” Okoye related stories about people in her local community she described as her “white supremacist friends” who “just live for wanting to bring up whatever about DEI or… anything related to Black and Brownness. They want to just put out there the opposite: that it is harming white people in the same equal level way.” This resulted in onerous and expensive audits in response to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for communications and programs dedicated to DEI efforts, which interfered with the actual work of DEI. While it should be noted that the bulk of commentary around the impact of political and juridical decisions came from practitioners at public institutions, there was a sense even from HSI specialists at private institutions that the general national climate only served to embolden naysayers.

White Racial Safety

Even as HSI specialists worked to help their white colleagues “see” and “understand,” they often could not get past the way their white colleagues “felt” in order to have important racial conversations. Thus, another major hurdle to enacting a race-conscious model of serving Latinx students identified by HSI specialists was white racial
safety, or the avoidance of racial issues due to personal discomfort and sensitivity. It could result in disengagement, shutting down conversations, and constructing roadblocks to racial progress, all to avoid racial stress.

Because racial issues tended to be so fraught, especially on college campuses, participants reported that their white colleagues and students felt “like they’re walking on eggshells” (Lucia). This led to a lack of comfort creating or participating in difficult conversations or brave spaces. Noemi recalled conversations with white colleagues who asked how they could “have sensitive conversations about race and gender in this safe place?”, to which she responded: “You can’t do that unless you’re uncomfortable… You have to be OK with being corrected… You’re always going to have to unpack all of these things. But nobody can guarantee a safe place to talk about those sensitive topics.” Without this sense of safety, however, white colleagues often avoided racial issues altogether. In another CoP session (#3), for example, John commented, “We see this where students of color, especially if they put any part of their identity forward, white students freeze… and they tell us, ‘Well, I don’t wanna get cancelled. I don’t wanna say the wrong thing.’” Worse, John reported that the professors followed the white students’ lead: “So literally everyone just freezes.”

White racial safety also affected the way white people reacted when it was suggested that they said or did something racially offensive. Participants characterized these responses as white “fragility” or “defensiveness,” pushing back against any suggestion that they had committed a racial misstep and responding with defensive postures such as “Are you trying to cancel me?” (John) or tearful responses – particularly from white women (Camila, John) – which redirected the focus of the conversation rather
than allowing them to address the issue head on. As John noted in a CoP session (#2),
“The minute I point out to someone anything [related to racism], they take it very
personally… They wanna shut the conversation down… They don’t like being exposed.”

Even creating the opportunity to have open dialogues and start the racial learning process
was sometimes met with resistance. Camila, in a CoP session (#4), talked about faculty
and staff who “threw a fit” in response to a mandatory racial consciousness workshop,
even “the people who think they’re woke.” Camila chalked this up to being able to use
their white privilege to “throw a temper tantrum” and “make a stink” about being forced
to participate in uncomfortable conversations. In this way, white discomfort often set the
limits of engagement. And, unfortunately, participants also reported that it “show[ed] up
all the time” (Camila).

The last way that white racial safety showed up was in self-doubt, which also
resulted in disengagement. Participants reported that many would-be white allies
questioned their own role in HSI efforts. Sometimes, as Carlota noted, there were “allies
that are white and they want to support you, right? But they don’t know how. And
sometimes they might be afraid that if they ask a question, it’s gonna be offensive.” A
frequent question that participants reported hearing was, “Am I the right person to do
this?” Even one of the HSI specialists – herself a white person – asked that very question
in the interview: Laura admitted that she was “try[ing] to sort of reckon with” that
question while simultaneously admitting that if white allies did not do their share of the
work, racial progress would be delayed. Indeed, a common refrain – and common
frustration – expressed by HSI specialists was that it was always the “same people”
showing up for the work, when “it needs to be all of us” (Camila).
The fact that white disengagement placed the burden of HSI labor on the backs of PoC resulting in slower progress, was a source of frustration for a number of participants. For example, Camila, in a CoP session (#4), asserted that white racial avoidance “is a cop-out.” Similarly, John, in a separate CoP session (#3) chafed at the “Am I the right person?” question:

And who is the right person? I think that’s such a frustrating question… Who’s the wrong person to want equality? If you’re working at a university, you can do this work. It’s just that you have privilege that allows you not to… Those types of questions are so deflecting. And all that says to me is, [they’re] not gonna do this work.

Thus, protecting white comfort, centering white feelings and white fragility came at the expense of racial equity or progress.

**Demographic Whiteness**

Another structural barrier to race-conscious servingness identified by participants was the literal whiteness of their institutions. It is important to start this section by noting that many participants talked about white allyship and its power; they wanted to make clear that not all white people presented roadblocks to racial progress and some, in fact, even leveraged their whiteness to support the ideals of servingness. However, given the difficulties presented by well-intentioned but unconsciously biased, colorblind, or race-neutral colleagues outlined in the previous sections, many HSI specialists stressed the importance of diverse representation. In their estimation, there simply was no substitute for shared lived experiences when it came to understanding Latinx students’ needs and setting and implementing policies that affected them. And yet, the historical legacy of
whiteness both on college campuses and more systemically across educational systems had resulted in predominantly white employee populations, the diversity of which had not kept pace with the shifting demographics of the student body. Participants repeatedly underscored that, despite institutional talk about diversifying, their campuses remained stubbornly white. Daniel, a faculty member at an emerging HSI, summed it up: “Part of the commitment of becoming an HSI was… the general diversity of our faculty and staff on campus. Which was abysmal and is [now] a little less abysmal, but still abysmal.” Campuses such as Daniel’s remained largely white in the areas of administration, faculty, and staff, and were related to whiteness embedded in hiring practices and retention challenges.

**White Leadership.** A number of participants indicated that, despite being HSIs or emerging HSIs, their campus leadership team – from their boards, presidents, and chancellors to their provosts, VPs, and deans – was either entirely or predominantly white. This was highlighted by many as a particularly sticky challenge. Reiterating the themes explored in the “Epistemologies of Ignorance” section above, Catalina contended that white administrators “can be well intentioned” but totally “disconnected” from the experiences of the students and the people who were engaging in equity work day-to-day. This became problematic on her former campus, where little Latinx representation on the board presented a “missed opportunity” for decision-making. In a CoP session (#1), John, a white administrator themself, described joining a completely all-white leadership team in which dealing with “awkward white folk shit” and leaders who “feel like they’re super up-to-speed [but] often aren’t” slowed down the work of servingness. Particularly
frustrating to many participants was the fact that they did not seem to think that their administrators understood the importance of hiring PoC into leadership positions.

**White Professoriate and Staff.** Similar to their sentiments about campus leadership, participants bemoaned the enduring whiteness of their faculty and staff populations. John, who worked at a small eHSI, reported that their campus did not have *any* full time Latinx instructors. Camila also described her professoriate as “super white,” indicating that most of the diversity existed among the adjunct faculty – those least valued in terms of power and compensation.

Again, it is important here to point out that many participants stressed that not all white faculty were problematic. Camila, for example, contended, “I think it’s wrong to say that white faculty cannot properly serve or educate Brown and Black students,” but in the next breath she indicated that a lack of representation detracted from a positive campus experience for URM students in that it was “harder for some faculty to incorporate different voices… into their classes.” Thus, addressing the representation issue was of the utmost importance. As Yatzuri noted, “we’re not ready for [all the Latinx] students that [we’ll need] to become an HSI because our instructors don’t look like the students. And that’s the biggest problem.”

This problem manifested unevenly across their campuses, as specific programs or departments were whiter than others and diversity only existed in “pockets,” such as in cultural centers. With less representation in academic spaces, for example, there was also a diminished ability to influence teaching and learning, leading Erica to conclude, “It’s important for people that look like me to be in spaces where we’re not normally at.” Erica also brought to the fore questions of intersectionality: not only were many spaces “very
white” on her campus, but leadership structures within those areas were “very male dominated.” This was characterized as a challenge, as making decisions for diverse students should be informed by diverse perspectives.

**Hiring and Retention Woes.** In discussing the roots of this problem, some participants lamented the difficulty in moving PoC into key positions because they remained occupied by institutional gatekeepers, making it hard to bring diverse voices and talents to important campus spaces and conversations. They talked about white faculty who “refused to retire,” leaving bilingual instructors floundering in part-time positions (Yatzuri), and “nepotism” in which “job descriptions or responsibilities [would be tailored] to the person and not what the school would need” (John). Silas, too, referred to changes in institutional culture being hindered by individual directors of various departments, noting that “when we can break down that barrier in personnel change, then so many more opportunities can come up.”

When positions did open up, some participants bristled at the excuses presented by hiring managers about the lack of diversity in their candidate pools. Elizabeth expressed that it was a “cop-out to say that there aren’t qualified [PoC or bilingual people]” and characterized the unwillingness to engage in intentional recruitment efforts and failure to nurture up-and-coming talent as “systemic laziness.” Similarly, Catalina reported a lack of imagination among hiring managers, who were “not thinking outside of the box” in their recruitment strategies. Even when candidate pools were diverse, HSI specialists reported that the outcomes rarely came out in favor of URM. Catalina, for example, described a situation in which she passed along the names of qualified Latinx candidates for open senior leadership positions, some of whom were never contacted, or
if they were, they were ultimately not selected for the job. To Catalina, having “whiteness at the top” created an unintentional “comfort level… of staying in the status quo.”

In addition to issues related to hiring, participants indicated that retention of PoC was also a challenge. One of the reasons HSI specialists gave for turnover was the competitive nature of the labor market during that time period, and practitioners at private schools especially felt the resource squeeze that made it difficult to compete with faculty offers from other, better-resourced institutions. But interestingly, the labor market was not the primary reason cited for turnover. Participants more commonly indicated that their colleagues left their institutions due to campus climates that were hostile to PoC, reporting not only a culture of burnout (which will be explored in greater depth under the section below entitled “The Personal Toll of Whiteness”), but also alienation (Catalina), isolation (Noemi), toxicity and “traumatic” working conditions (Carlota). Daniel framed these retention problems as both symptomatic of a negative institutional culture for PoC and symbolic in terms of “the type of message [it sends] to students”: “losing representation matters more” than not having representation in the first place.

There were also three Latina participants who left higher education altogether prior to their interviews for this project, citing feelings of disillusionment. Catalina described disengaging and protecting her energy as she was “just not really seeing change.” Similarly, Penelope said she left “because I didn’t feel like what I was doing was honest anymore.” And Dr. B described how she was “so invested” in her HSI and

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16 The period known as the “Great Resignation” or sometimes referred to as the “Great Reshuffle” began in early 2021 following the pandemic-related shutdown. Employees voluntarily left their places of employment in great numbers, sometimes leaving the labor market entirely but also in search of opportunities for better pay and/or working conditions.
DEI efforts, but eventually felt compelled to retire early because she was constantly pushing against the institutional current and came to a point when she could “not give anymore.” It was their deep frustration at their institutions’ resistance to servingness-oriented transformational change that prompted them to move on. As Dr. B said, “Enough is enough.”

**Ontological Expansiveness**

Ontological expansiveness refers to white entitlement to both physically and socially constructed spaces. It is the ways in which white bodies feel a sense of comfort and white minds a sense of ownership in spaces that were created by white people, for white people. Although HSI specialists did not use this academic term, they identified where ontological expansiveness was occurring on their campuses: in physical, academic, linguistic, and social spaces.

**White Physical Spaces.** When it came to physical spaces, participants did not talk much about diverse representation in their built environments (or lack thereof), but rather focused more on use of space and comfort within spaces. Because URM students often did not easily feel a sense of comfort across the campus environment, microclimates or counterspaces specifically designed for them were very important to their sense of belonging. Unfortunately, however, sometimes these counterspaces were not centrally located and were often under-resourced or inadequate for their use. This was the case on Noemi’s campus, which was creating a multicultural center that was actually “a small room in between a bunch of offices.” Lucia also related a story that illustrated white entitlement to physical space and contestation to counterspaces: her Latinx student
advisees were using an area within her department office to prep for cultural events, and a colleague wanted to take it over to create a lounge. He asked her,

‘When are you going to get rid of all the garbage that you have there?’ And that hurt… I turned around and I said, ‘That space is about identity. That’s my students’ identity. That’s my identity. The students created those posters’… We don’t have a lot of spaces, so it was just the fact that we were taking space, the space that he wanted.

When she retold this story in the first CoP session, she added that she believed it bothered her colleague so much “because it was students of color… the Latino students using that space.”

Because whiteness was the norm in physical spaces – especially at eHSI campuses that were still predominantly white – Black and Brown bodies were hyper visible. Participants told stories of URM students feeling conspicuous, like “the brownest person in the room” (John) and “intimidat[ed]” by the specter of a staff person “call[ing] the security office” on them (Liliana). There was also a double standard for their behavior, being “considered uncivil while other students aren’t” (John), which made them hypervigilant about how they were perceived as they traversed physical campus spaces and worried about displaying “appropriate behavior” within various campus spaces (Camila). Daniel in a very real way described the “policing” of Black and Brown bodies on his campus: when some students of color engaged in an act of civil disobedience, he asserted that the consequences were “a reminder to all students of color on campus that their voice had to be constricted. Their opinions had to live in a certain space, which was not in the public space.” All of these experiences were incredibly
alienating and served as reminders that students of color were “bodies out of place” on these campuses.

**White Academic Spaces.** White entitlement to space also encompassed academic spheres, as the curriculum continued to center white and European content and devalue content related to communities of color. Daniel, for example, discussed the relative lack of curricular offerings on his campus devoted to racial or ethnic studies, and noted that any plan for expansion in this area would “be on the backs of contingent labor.” Thus, the lack of investment in Latinx-centered curriculum meant it would always be “second-class” – relegated to the periphery.

Even when resource investment was not explicitly at issue, white faculty and administrators sometimes actively resisted infiltration of content, pedagogical practices, and values of URM groups in classroom spaces. John, an administrator at a small art and design school, detailed how some students wanted to challenge Western design concepts, as well as the idea that art is necessarily rooted in capitalism, but there were faculty who “felt like the students shouldn’t be challenging them.” Moreover, John had asked their campus leadership if they could require a course as part of their program of study to help students develop foundational knowledge around diversity and inclusion concepts. The response was, “We’re not amending the program of study. We would never.” Thus, the institution held stubbornly to curricular spaces rooted in whiteness that had existed long before the diversification of their student body.

**White Linguistic Spaces.** As outlined in the section on “Understandings of Servingness” above, bilingual outreach and services were identified by participants as centrally important to HSI work. Yet, many of their institutions privileged the English
language over Spanish or other minoritized languages – both in social spaces but also in campus practices and policies.

Many described an “English-only” culture in which colleagues did not understand the importance of Spanish as a central aspect of students’ identities. For example, Silas mentioned that someone “in a very prominent administrative position [said], ‘We just have to have [students] learn English.’… And that kind of ‘otherness’ was part of the everyday parlance at the institution.” John also related a story of a faculty member who refused to allow a student to use Spanish words for a design project, even though the design criteria were met. For monolingual speakers of English, allowing other languages to flourish on campus felt threatening. As Lucia aptly noted in a CoP session (#3), “One of the challenges is that people see the use of Spanish language as exclusionary” rather than a tool for inclusion.

These English-only attitudes seeped into the types of services the institution was willing to provide. Repeatedly, participants described colleagues who did not see the value of providing Spanish outreach materials, bilingual courses, or more bilingual staff. Dr. B understood this to be a contradiction for an institution that was “talking about becoming an HSI” but then actively “refused” to advertise job postings that specified bilingualism as a required skill or put Spanish information on the website. The refusal to value and invest in Spanish-speaking people and programs created functional barriers for students. Liliana, for example, described students being turned away at a helpdesk because the staff there had “no interest in even trying to understand what they were trying to say.” Yatzuri had a similar story about a student who was trying to drop off transcripts and take an ESL test but instead found that “no one could help… [So she said,] ‘I
couldn’t do anything… I cried. It was horrible. I’m never going back there.” Yatzuri commented that she had been “begging for an in-house translator or interpreter… But they don’t believe in that.” Even when the students themselves could speak English, the lack of Spanish-language infrastructure became counterproductive to creating a sense of belonging. John commented that it affected bilingual students as early as orientation because “no one could speak to their families… So they would just move further and further to the back of the room, wait for the day to be over… How do you belong if you’re being… isolated on day one?” John here illustrated how ontological expansiveness could make Latinx students quite literally feel like they were a “body out of place” in a room that catered only to English.

This sort of linguistic entitlement not only presented barriers for students and made them feel like the proverbial “other,” but it also affected Latinx colleagues as well. In a CoP session (#5), Liliana described a situation in which a supervisor admonished one of her coworkers for speaking Spanish in the presence of monolingual English-speakers because it made them uncomfortable. Carlota responded, “I can’t imagine… the feelings they had when they were being shamed for speaking another language that wasn’t English. And it comes down to, everybody thinks all spaces are white spaces.” Fortunately, in this situation, Liliana’s notification of her compliance office resulted in them sending out a campus-wide video about employees’ rights to be able to speak languages other than English on campus.

**White Social Spaces.** Ontological expansiveness also entailed a white sense of comfort in social spaces: white minds did not have to think outside of whiteness, acknowledge non-white perspectives, or consider how their words or actions might affect
non-white people in their social interactions. Thus, while HSI specialists were constantly attending to how their students of color were faring – “Do they feel valued? Is their dignity affirmed? Do they want to come back into this space?” (John) – many of their colleagues were not. Participants reported campus climates that were “hostile” (John) and “intimidating” (Liliana) to students of color, despite shifting student demographics. Noemi provided a salient example: in a CoP session (#4), she shared that most of the committees she served on were white, and “if there’s a bunch of older white people talking over [Latinx students], they’re not gonna try and defend themselves or insert back into the conversation.” When white people took up space, it left no room for Latinx voices.

**Microaggressions.** White entitlement to social spaces also resulted in often subtle verbal and behavioral indignities for students of color, commonly referred to as microaggressions. This theme came up a number of times as HSI specialists described their campuses as white spaces that tolerated microaggressions and allowed them to proliferate. Instructors not being “queued in on” and therefore “not addressing comments that had to do with race” (Noemi, CoP #4; Lucia) created discomfort for students of color in classroom spaces. And sometimes, faculty and staff themselves were the ones saying “outrageous things” (Lucia) that alienated both URM students and HSI specialists alike, as well-intentioned colleagues stereotyped and denigrated them. The effect of all of this on students, HSI specialists, and other practitioners of color was having to navigate situations where they felt they could not react emotionally and they could not show up as their full authentic selves. As Lucia noted in a CoP session (#5), “The students who step
into the space, being who they are, they have to wear a mask and just be somebody else” – which was counterproductive to building a sense of belonging.

**White Racial Projects**

As campus leaders were confronted with the reality of shifting student demographics, they were forced to grapple with what this “meant” for their institutions and how a new or emerging HSI organizational identity might integrate with their existing historically white modus operandi. By and large, HSI specialists in this study reported that, instead of transforming their campuses to focus on the *serving* aspect of HSI, campus leaders engaged in a process of reinterpreting HSI so as not to have to reorganize or redistribute resources. In rearticulating HSI as primarily a benefit to the institution, there was no urgency to fundamentally change conditions for Latinx students. In this way, HSI became a mechanism to preserve the racial status quo.

While not explicitly articulated by HSI specialists as “white racial projects,” their perceptions of how the meaning of HSI was renegotiated to meet the needs of the white social order aligned with this concept. They understood this as an active process in which campus leaders co-opted and sanitized the language of HSI to market to Latinx students while simultaneously stonewalling substantive racial progress. In a CoP session (#4), John described this phenomenon as “white folks setting the entire framework… within the context of appeasement.” Most changes made in the name of HSI, according to participants, were cosmetic or of the “low hanging fruit” variety, and any structural changes were incremental and highly managed. Thus, proclaiming that they were, or were striving to become, an HSI showed “commitment” to an underserved population, but ultimately, they did not actually have to do anything different to serve students. The
recreation of HSI meanings was characterized as a function of “whiteness as a process… It’s something we do, not something that is” (Daniel).

**Co-optation of HSI Language.** HSI specialists often contended that there was a disconnect between the *language* of HSI and the *actions* of campus leaders to provide the necessary tools and resources to successfully serve Latinx students. A number of the participants believed that their institutions were only paying lip service to HSI efforts in order to enhance their image. Daniel, for example, noted that,

> There are the stated [HSI] goals and then there are the realities... The stated goals [at the beginning of the initiative], was within a decade to become an HSI… Now it seems like the goal for the institution is to continue to be able to *tell* people that we are becoming an HSI… We get tapped into a very specific space on the agenda, which is at the bottom.

He added that students of color who demanded a higher place on the institutional agenda were told that “you have enough” while the campus simultaneously “puts out a flyer that says ‘we’re [an emerging HSI] – shouldn’t we be applauded for that?’” Similarly, John, in a CoP session (#4), characterized their campus’s HSI efforts as “just doing the least, but still being celebrated.” This sentiment was echoed again and again by HSI specialists: that their institutions parade their HSI – or even emerging HSI – status as a mark of racial progress but then engage in business-as-usual practices: “the message was not consistent with the actions” (Dr. B), there was “verbal support” but not “at a deeper level” (Catalina), they made “surface level” changes “to keep appearances” (Penelope), and touted “progressive” practices without acknowledging “all the red tape and barriers” they were placing in front of Latinx students (Elizabeth).
Institutions also employed a certain language of appeasement in an attempt to inoculate themselves from accusations of racial inequity on their campuses. This was especially apparent to several HSI specialists in the months that followed the murder of George Floyd.\(^\text{17}\) Daniel talked about an instance of interest convergence during this time period when campus leaders seized an opportunity to self-promote by accommodating Black student protesters with “just peanuts” while “continu[ing] to do exactly what it’s doing.” Catalina also recalled times during this era when “really sensitive racial topics” would come up and a top administrator would engage in “performative” behaviors while not “being a true advocate.” While not always explicitly related to HSI endeavors, participants drew clear lines of connection between the ways in which their institutions handled HSI and its responses to any racial progress effort. Daniel noted that “I think [some people] assume they’re separate, but I don’t think that… They’re intimately connected… I just wish we’d follow through on the promises we made” – whether these promises were made to Black student activists or to those engaged in HSI work.

Thus, “performing” anti-racism came to replace enacting race-conscious practice and policies. The inauthenticity behind these gestures was very transparent to the participants in this study but also – as reported by HSI specialists – to other students, faculty, and staff, as well. This led Chris to conclude that until “HSI [becomes] a priority, we will experience a disconnect and a challenge with retaining staff, students and faculty.

\(^\text{17}\) In May of 2020, the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, set into motion a wave of demonstrations across the country that awakened our nation’s collective consciousness to systemic forms of racism. As public opinion shifted in support of Black Lives, corporations, national sports franchises, and institutions of higher education (among others) rebranded images and put out statements to prove their “commitment” to anti-racism. For a timeline of some of these efforts, see: https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/12/us/america-racism-2020/.
who get frustrated by coming to these institutions with the goal of authentic and sustained change, but not realizing it.”

**Commodification of Students and Faculty/Staff of Color.** White racial projects also showed up when many of these recently designated and emerging HSIs articulated diversity in terms of its economic value. Very commonly, HSI specialists reported that, based on the way their administrators were articulating HSI efforts, their institutions were positioning students of color as commodities that could address their enrollment issues and possibly open the door to federal HSI grant funding. This “warm bodies” approach made good business sense given the shifting demographics of the region, but it was also seen as “tokenizing” to HSI specialists. As Carlota explained, “Some people are very money driven versus servingness and that’s one of the barriers that we’re overcoming.” Thus, campus leaders molded the meaning of HSI to their benefit, simply tacking an HSI or eHSI label onto existing institutional structures rather than restructuring the institution to accommodate a new HSI identity. In this way, they did not have to redistribute resources to programs and personnel that would help Latinx students thrive, but rather viewed an influx of Latinx students as a financial boon. Of course, this rankled HSI specialists, who, like Penelope, found it “very disheartening” when her colleagues gave her the sense that hitting the 25% Latinx-enrolling threshold to attain HSI status meant that their job was done – that “we don’t need to meet [the ‘serving’ piece].”

Similar to Latinx students, faculty and staff of color fit into this rearticulated HSI puzzle only insofar as they enhanced the institution’s image or were financially useful. There were reports, for example, of token representation on committees to create the appearance that diversity was valued without the white power structure ever
fundamentally giving up any control. In a CoP session (#3), Susana broached this topic, which seemed to resonate with the other participants: “You have your token representatives… one Asian, one Black, one Latina, and that’s it. So I see a lot of head nodding. So it’s just this practice of the one token person in the department and the [leadership] cabinet” – a practice that created the shiny veneer of diversity without upsetting existing racial power dynamics.

Commodification of URM employees came in other forms as well. In a CoP session (#5), Lucia asserted that sometimes Latinx professionals were hired because there was a recognition that Latinx students responded well to them, and yet their identities, language, and culture were “not welcome.” Thus, her institution valued her and other Latinx professionals for their work in retaining Latinx student bodies on campus, which translated to tuition dollars, but there was no meaningful shift in institutional climate to one that more readily embraced her culture.

**Low Hanging Fruit and Other Forms of Incrementalism.** Another aspect of the recreation of HSI as a white racial project was the highly managed nature of change. According to participants, the cost-benefit equation of HSI was clear to campus leaders: there was potential benefit to being able to increase Latinx enrollment, promote an HSI/eHSI status, and possibly obtain federal funding. But the cost of truly embodying an ethos of servingness – with all the associated material resources necessary to do it well – made administrators balk. Thus, they doled out crumbs and encouraged HSI specialists to pursue “low-hanging fruit,” or goals that were easily attainable without fundamentally changing resource allocations. In this way, the institution could tout “wins” – albeit small
ones – toward HSI progress, while HSI specialists constantly had to push for what they perceived as necessary components of servingness.

The result was incremental change. HSI specialists provided example after example of this phenomenon. They reported their efforts “go[ing] in circles and circles” (Elizabeth), “delays” and refrains of “I’m working on it” (Liliana), and colleagues making “excuses” (Lucia; CoP #2) or “taking quite their time” (John). It would sometimes take five or six years for their colleagues to do what participants thought of as bare minimum servingness tasks, such as putting together a Spanish open house or Spanish webpages (Penelope; Carlota, CoP #1). Dr. B summed up her frustrations with her own former campus: “Everything that had to do with diversity, equity, and inclusion, when it’s not in the fabric and the DNA [of the institution], it takes time.”

Now, it is important to note that some of the participants described higher education as a slow-moving behemoth in general – that the gears of change turned slowly for any sort of initiative, not just DEI or HSI efforts. But many also pushed back against this narrative. Chris, for example, asserted that, “One of the things I’ve learned about American higher education is that when an institution of any means sets a priority… [they] are very successful at achieving goals they set out for.” He went on to provide examples of highly ambitious goals his institution set – from fundraising to new infrastructure – that were achieved because “we said it was a priority” and then directed institutional efforts to accomplishing them, but regarding their HSI efforts, he noted, “We are an historically white institution who has said out loud… ‘Well, we want to be an HSI – but not next year.’” Other participants echoed this idea, describing campus leaders and other colleagues who pumped the proverbial brakes on HSI efforts despite HSI being a
stated goal. They reported “pushback” and “active resistance” (Penelope, Elizabeth, Laura) and being told to “take your time” (Susana, John). Felix, in a CoP session (#2), noted that historically white institutions “aren’t prepared for this level of organized strategic way of doing things for one particular community of [racially minoritized] students.” In a nutshell, their push for racial equity seemed to be moving faster than some campus leaders were comfortable with. He provided this specific example:

[The HSI committee] went from being very, very, a well-oiled machine. We had a community advisory group and then we were told one day… ‘I don’t think there’s a reason why we should bring that group of folks’… The community advisory board was asking questions and pushing some buttons that the campus could not deliver on – and again, it’s my opinion – I felt like, [they were] like, ‘Oh, we better sort of scale back.’

Some campuses engaged in HSI incrementalism not through active deceleration, but rather through a passive, institutional apathy. Thus, while “scaling back” might have been the response to racial progress on Felix’s campus, some campuses never ramped up in the first place. Participants offered many examples evidencing the mismatch between administrators’ verbal commitment to HSI and their willingness to build even the most basic organizational structures, such as HSI positions (Catalina, Erica, Camila) or HSI committees (Lucia), often leaving servingness efforts rudderless. Lucia, for example, lamented, “So whose responsibility is [HSI]?… We do have the goals, but we need to figure out who should be assessing what we’re doing, who should be leading those actions.” Another common refrain related to passive institutional resistance was that HSI efforts were largely being operationalized by volunteers who already had full time job
responsibilities. Even at campuses that had committed to HSI more sincerely by creating an HSI position, the people occupying these roles often were not able to devote all their time and energy to HSI efforts: Penelope, for example, reported that when her institution “accidentally fell into” HSI, she took on a new HSI position but for months also had to fulfill the duties of her previous full-time job. Similarly, on Daniel’s campus, the full-time HSI director was “doing yeoman’s work, like 1000 positions in one. Which of course demonstrates that institutional lack of commitment to this.” Without an intentionality behind creating sustainable HSI infrastructure that could set the strategic direction and build momentum for servingness, HSI goals were difficult to even get off the ground.

The result was small wins and slow change. Participants talked about picking all the “low hanging fruit” early in their initiatives, leaving them stalled years out (Camila) and “wins here and there” (Bella), but all the while, fundamental conditions for Latinx students remained the same. In a CoP session (#3), both Susana and Lucia – who worked at different institutions – discussed looking back at original HSI plans, acknowledging that some progress had been made, but ultimately, they contended that a lot of the key areas of challenge remained the same five years later. Noemi also recognized this failure to substantively change her campus environment, citing the lack of “tools… [to] move the needle.” With the lack of institutional will or interest in building strategic structures to guide HSI work, and sometimes the intentional deceleration of organized HSI efforts, the effect was reproduction of the racial status quo.

**Institutional Gatekeepers.** It is important here to point out that HSI specialists were often very specific about who was engaging in practices that delayed or derailed
race-conscious efforts. In Dr. B’s case, the legal counsel of her former institution “was a major obstacle because everything that had to do with policies had to go through her.” But once that lawyer left the institution, many of Dr. B’s HSI recommendations were implemented. Okoye had similar experiences with a few colleagues who had been “barriers or blocking things” but once they “took their talents on to retirement, that helped with having [DEI] conversations more openly.”

Often, however, the institutional actors with whom HSI specialists were most concerned were their campus leaders. As Chris noted, “Who the institution is, is its leadership at any given point in time” which, in his case, was mostly “white male individuals who set the strategic direction of the institution.” These administrators held the keys to resources, spaces, processes, and policies, and often created roadblocks to racial progress. Sometimes this happened in passive ways, when HSI work did not rise to the level of a top priority in decision-making (Camila, Lucia, Bella), leaving HSI specialists with the need to “convince” campus leaders “to make it happen” (Yatzuri, Felix). Sometimes it seemed to be a more active process. Catalina, for example, noted that her former president would “just keep saying no” to HSI recommendations, so “some things would just kind of die or never move forward.” And in a CoP session (#2), Liliana talked about starting all the way at the top of the hierarchy with board members, who set institutional priorities, but currently, “HSI is not included in any of those high priorities.”

Over and over again, this idea of “getting leadership on the right page” came up because, according to Noemi (CoP #4), they were the only ones who could coordinate all the “moving parts” – from the VPs down to program coordinators – to row in the same direction: toward servingness.
But instead of campus leaders making a coordinated and strategic effort to move HSI goals forward, many HSI specialists felt as though they were swimming against the institutional current. For example, Noemi commented in a CoP session (#2), when an institution declares that it wants to become an HSI, the administrators who made that decision are “not signing up to a low hanging fruit. You’re signing up to a lot bigger than that.” And yet, there was little, if any, accountability of campus leaders to follow through on what they signed up for. Erica pointed out that “they’re not held accountable for certain metrics or goals” and Chris noted that they were very good at “obfuscating through bureaucracy.” In sum, when the leadership of HWCs co-opted the language of HSI as a race-conscious effort while not fundamentally changing conditions or creating infrastructure to ensure that URM students were well-served, “HSI” became little more than a tool to enhance the institution’s image and support their operating budget.

**Whiteness as Property and the Right to Exclude**

The concept of “white racial projects” is also intimately tied to the connection between whiteness and property – that whiteness confers on those within the white racial power structure the right use and enjoy material resources, as well as the right to exclude others from use and enjoyment. Felix, for example, referred to whiteness as “ownership of processes, of places, of conditions.” Along the same veins, John described “whiteness” as “a set of cultural norms, expectations, and privileges conferred upon lighter skinned people for their own benefit… It has always been about the preservation of wealth for people who fall into whiteness.”

One of the most resounding themes discussed by HSI specialists when it came to barriers to their work was the failure of their institutions to shift resources toward race-
conscious student support efforts – even as their demographics shifted. Participants articulated that a whiteness-centered mentality and the fear of losing power or control were at the root of this issue, and status quo practices ensured that institutional budget allocations largely skewed in favor of historically white ways of conducting business. They also indicated that white leadership structures would close ranks around white-centered resources and engage in backlash when there were attempts at de-centering whiteness. In the following sections, I outline HSI specialists’ understandings of how whiteness-as-property manifested: through protecting white privilege, protecting demographic whiteness, and ultimately, exclusion from material resources.

Protecting White Privilege. At the core of whiteness as property and the right to exclude is the notion of white privilege. As noted in previous sections (“Epistemologies of Ignorance” and “White Racial Safety”), privileged thinking could result in white people opting out of racial conversations or race-conscious work. But white privilege also entailed centering white people’s needs and cultures, making it easier for them to navigate institutions and gain access to opportunities. While this might have felt to white people like the “preferred or the established norm” (Chris), “what we see as normal” (Lucia), or the “‘right’ way” the world is and should be (Erica), it was articulated by HSI specialists as an entitlement to special treatment. Liliana, Laura, and Daniel all connected their understandings of whiteness to a model of serving that actually only served white needs while excluding others, and Lucia and Carlota described it as inequitable access to opportunities based on skin tone. Thus, other, non-white people had to “conform to [whiteness] in order to get ahead, to get resources, to be respected” (Okoye). Closely
connected to ontological expansiveness (as described in the section above), this sort of white normativity and entitlement permeated all institutional spaces.

White privilege could also result in “whitelash”: when their entitlements felt threatened, some white people would engage in active resistance to race-conscious efforts. Participants framed this as fear of “losing control, losing power, losing privilege,” “resenting changing structure” (Lucia), and “worry of loss, or thinking that their lives are gonna get less compared to others” (Okoye). Whitelash also occurred when white people felt de-centered. Okoye explained that she had to contend with challenges from some colleagues to any equity efforts that were not “focusing on white people.” Elizabeth encountered similar struggles on her campus: when presenting on HSI work, some colleagues would push back, insinuating that they were trying to place “Hispanic student populations [as] more important than other populations.”

Susana provided a specific example of how this fear of losing power manifested at her institution: referencing a specific department, she noted that “it’s predominantly white males. Yet, you and I know that the workers are predominantly Latino… The challenge has been convincing folks… [to] pass that torch to the young bilingual [workers] who can now connect, speak Spanish… It’s that control” – or the fear of losing it – that excluded Latinxs from promotional opportunities in that department. In a CoP session (#4), John provided another example of doubling down on white privilege through the literal protection of white people: “Doing this work as a white person, there’s an assumed level from other white folks that like, ‘Oh, I got your back’ or… ‘OK, well, we’re gonna go easy [on other white people].’”
This tendency to close ranks around white privilege was also apparent in instances of interest convergence, or the idea that racial progress for URM groups only occurred when it aligned with white interests. As an example, Lucia told a story in a CoP session (#2) about their board of directors, who only responded favorably to a DEI presentation when it became clear that DEI efforts were also “serving white students.” Liliana provided another specific example: she was working on a scholarship for undocumented students but was told to change the name to something more innocuous, not referencing Dreamers. But to her surprise, it was later revealed that the scholarship would be available to everyone. Thus, programs designed to benefit underserved students were only supported if white students could also be beneficiaries.

**Protecting Demographic Whiteness.** Another way that whiteness-as-property manifested was that whiteness itself was valuable and in need of protection. HSI specialists reported colleagues who believed – or at least acted as though they believed – that democratizing higher education and allowing broad access to their campuses would upend the exclusivity of whiteness. While this was not a point of discussion for those participants from open access technical colleges, it was a common theme for those who worked at four-year institutions. Some described campus leaders who were concerned with the looming “demographic cliff” of college-aged students that would largely be driven by a decline in the white student population,\(^{18}\) as if the “sky was falling” (Felix). But at the same time, these administrators seemed to ignore the projected growth of

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\(^{18}\) According to WICHE data, the number of high school graduates in the U.S. is expected to peak around the year 2025, followed by a decline through 2037 (Bransberger et al., 2020). The number of white students is expected to decline most precipitously while the numbers of Latinx, Asian, and multiracial students are expected to increase. See also Grawe’s (2018) work on the looming “demographic cliff” in higher education.
Latinx students that would not only help to offset white enrollment losses, but also increasingly become the regional community that they were seeking to serve. Daniel posited that the reason for this was: “There is an exclusivity that [my institution] wants to convey. And if [they] allowed all Black and Brown students that they admitted into the university [by providing adequate scholarships], the fabric of the university would change fundamentally.” Other participants noted that this change was being met with resistance due to “a perceived cost” (Chris), the desire to “protect a white institution” and “[fear] of letting it go” (Noemi, CoP #4). HSI specialists, therefore, reported that sometimes their institutions engaged in gatekeeping practices that slowed the rate of demographic change.

**Exclusion from Material Resources.** As campus leaders did not shift institutional priorities toward supporting HSI work, it followed that there was little or no shift in institutional resources allocated to those efforts. This was yet another function of whiteness-as-property: that whiteness was intimately bound up with not only power and privilege but also material resources. HSI specialists repeatedly reported that administrators subverted access to resources, and budget allocations continued to reflect and reify historically white ways of conducting business rather than being redistributed more equitably. One of the most often repeated themes in this study, participants decried the failure of senior leaders to fully “commit” to HSI through a significant reimagining of how funding could be prioritized. For example, Okoye’s board questioned the value of spending money on it, Dr. B stated that nothing was allocated to HSI during her time on her campus, Catalina noted that there were “a lot of great ideas but not the [monetary]

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19 As mentioned in “Chapter III: Methods”, the participants of this study worked in or near a mid-sized, majority-minority city that had seen the Latinx population more than triple since 1990 (Levine, 2016).
capacity” to execute them, and Felix reported that HSI was “an initiative that was never coupled with dollars.” Chris also commented, “In [all my] years in this role, I’ve never been given any resources that are in addition to what I already had when I arrived and told that those resources were specific to the HSI initiative” leading him to call the effort “an unfunded mandate.” In fact, he described “resistance at institutional levels” to the perceived cost of enrolling and retaining more Latinx students, especially as administrators worried about what they might have to “give up or sacrifice or change about these processes and systems that we’ve had in place for years and years and years.”

Erica also described not knowing how to navigate the labyrinth of funding decisions, because when there was a windfall through grants or other sources, she saw that money “being put in certain pockets of the university… [Latinx enrollment is] growing but we’re not growing in financial resources.” This led her to wonder, “How can we get to the table where we get a piece of the pie when it comes to funding and positions?”

In fact, how funding decisions were made were often aligned with white interests. Susana, for example, talked about the avocational courses that her technical college offered to the community – a positive effort, but “unsustainable” because the tuition paid for the courses did not cover the cost. Yet, resources continued to be funneled into the program because the predominantly white users of these classes “understand the system… They go to the board meeting. They complain to the president… They have the ear of the governor.” Instead of those monetary and space resources being directed toward Latinx servingness, they were funneled to those “who [have] the loudest voice” and “understand how decisions are made” within white power structures, which was a very small but vocal group of mostly white community members.
Even when the institution threw them a proverbial bone, HSI specialists reported that it was not enough or that they had to constantly prove the value of the investment. Penelope, for example, described coming into her newly created Latinx-serving role “with zero dollars” but also a mandate to “change the world within this framework with no money.” After advocating, she received a $3000 budget – a pittance for the job she was charged to do. Felix also expressed gratitude for some resources that had been allocated to supporting students of color on his campus, but then he felt “like you’re constantly having to prove [laughs] your existence” to keep receiving the funding. The continued failure of institutions and leaders to allocate resources toward servingness was deemed deeply problematic. In a CoP session (#4), Camila described it as “a moral obligation. It is an ethical obligation… As a business that takes people’s money to serve the people whose money you take… we owe [students of color] to be able to do this work.”

**Soft Money and Piecemeal Funding.** Because of the failure of senior leaders to reallocate resources toward the goals of servingness, HSI practitioners had to rely on other sources of funding to move their agendas forward. Some were fortunate enough to have HSI or other grants to help support HSI work, such as DEI professional development (Carlota, Silas) and TRIO programs (Susana). But the danger of relying on grant funding was that it was “soft money” – if the grant went away, so did the programming. Yatzuri talked about struggles they encountered related to this issue: because of a grant, they were able to hire for additional HSI-related positions. But once the grant ended, they “didn’t have funding to keep them alive” and lost a key position that “was doing a lot.” Moreover, sometimes grant funding was not even an option. In a
CoP session (#2), John revealed that once, a local foundation denied a grant request by saying, “This is a fundamental support function of the college and should be funded through your ongoing operational budget.” John found it “embarrassing” that their institution was essentially being reprimanded for not doing its job of supporting their own students.

More common than relying on grants, HSI specialists described a piecemeal approach, cobbling together funding through various institutional channels. Tapping into the operating budgets of senior leaders was one common strategy. For example, Dr. B noted that since there was “nothing formal” for the HSI budget, she had to make annual requests to the president’s office. But if she missed the window for some reason, she would be out of luck, so she “really had to be on [her] toes.” Oftentimes, securing funding for HSI efforts required collaboration with other campus departments. While this strategy will be outlined in greater detail in Part III below, it is important to bring this into the conversation on exclusionary practices due to the burden it placed on HSI practitioners. Okoye described this as “getting the scraps or getting the little bit leftover or having to claw our way to get funding.” In the first CoP session, several participants illustrated why it felt like this: Carlota described a Latinx-serving event that they had been holding for eight years that never had a budget. She explained,

Every year I always had to tap into different departments or even outside sponsors to make the event happen… And here I’m asking myself, ‘Why am I looking for funding, if we had this event for so long and we’re striving to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution, shouldn’t there be a budget for this?’
Lucia responded in the chat that she encountered a similar situation, wherein their campus’s biggest Hispanic Heritage Month event always had to be funded by patching funds together from multiple offices, student organizations, sponsors, and sometimes even paying for expenses out of her own pocket. She commented, “[When] there is no funding for HSI initiatives, how exhausting it is to collaborate on everything that you do.” The overwhelming sense from HSI specialists was that a formal and robust institutional investment in servingness efforts would free up the time and energy needed to do the work, rather than having to hustle for resources.

**“Do More with Less” and Epistemic Exclusion.** Inevitably, the lack of institutional investment in HSI work meant that these efforts were not only underfunded but also understaffed. The personal toll of uncompensated labor will be described in greater detail in the next section, but it is also important to highlight here as it is closely tied to exclusion from material resources. Many of the HSI specialists talked about HSI being an add-on to their duties-as-assigned, which amounted to more than a full-time job. Susana held a dean role, was head of operations for one of her college’s campuses, and was directing three institutional priorities – including HSI. She characterized this as having to “do more with less.” Similarly, Dr. B held a cabinet level position, managed the operations of two campuses, and was also responsible for all DEI and HSI efforts for her institution. Erica explained that she was appointed as a co-lead for her campus’s HSI committee but had not been released from any other responsibilities in order to focus on that work.

Many of the HSI specialists also talked about being tasked with time-intensive translation work that was deemed essential to HSI initiatives, and yet they were doing it
for free on top of their regular job duties. Carlota, in a CoP session (#1), said that when she brought up the idea for even a part-time translator, the response was, “Oh, you know, we’ll give it some thought,” but really, “there’s no thought into it.” Felix also described how his campus’s HSI efforts were implemented “with not a whole lot of money, just people.” The Latinx-serving center he ran had “the same amount of staff or less” than when it started, despite having 2500 more Latinx students on campus. This limited his ability to serve, as he had to be “laser focused on the students that need us the most versus trying to cast such a wide net with very little people.” The same rang true for Daniel, who commented, “A lot of people are just finding ways to make do with what they have.” And sometimes, the job just could not get done. As an example, Yatzuri described a “very successful” Spanish orientation program “that unfortunately died because of lack of human resources. It’s a lot of work… and it was very difficult to find someone to do that.” So even what was considered essential servingness work fell by the wayside due to understaffing the initiative.

The “do more with less” mentality was also reflected in epistemic exclusion, or the notion that the scholarly work and content areas of faculty of color were less valued or viewed as less rigorous than other forms of research and knowledge. While this was not as common a theme as other discussion points brought forward by HSI specialists throughout this study, it was likely a function of the participant pool, which only had four faculty members, for whom this might be top of mind. Lucia, a Spanish professor and advisor for Latinx student organizations, provided the insight that colleagues saw her work as “all fun” or “not academic enough… So it’s not like we’re equal.” This translated directly to a depreciation of her work and therefore a lack of commitment to
additional resources or personnel into her “department of one”: despite an influx of Latinx students in her interpreting and translation program, she was still left to wonder, “Why have I been there eight years and I still don’t have at least a half-time person, when we’re trying to increase our student population from the Latino community?” Daniel provided a similar example from his campus about “how whiteness works” through epistemic exclusion:

[It] is an assumption that ‘you people’ all do that stuff… We have Spanish professors who are experts in Spanish Iberian literature, and the assumption is those people can also teach Spanish for the professions, Spanish for the medical field, Spanish for business. So right there, whiteness manifests in a way of kind of diminutizing an entire field… And so when we say, ‘No, to do this right and do right by our students… we need to have somebody who’s trained in this.’ And our administration’s response is, ‘Do more with less, do more with the people that you already have on campus.’

The “do more with less” mentality restricted resources toward programs that largely served Latinx students and placed additional labor on the backs of those who were already stretched thin, all but ensuring less positive experiences and outcomes for Latinx students.

**Scraps of Pie.** The dearth of resources devoted to HSI and other DEI efforts sometimes created division between minoritized groups – particularly between Black and Latinx students – who felt they needed to fight for the same sliver of pie. It started with institutional hoarding of resources and portioning off only a small amount for all DEI work, characterized by Okoye as the “pie mentality.” In a CoP session (#4), Camila also
described this phenomenon in terms of “pieces of pie”: by helping one URM group, others think that they “can’t be supported, or can’t be seen because there’s only so much of “being seen” allowed. And so if they get to be seen, then we don’t get to be seen.” Many of the HSI specialists reported dealing with this challenge. Catalina noted, “There was actually a big resistance to certain things that were Latinx-serving because they were afraid of what other demographics would think and having to balance that.” The idea that if the institution invested resources in HSI, they would have to show a good faith effort to provide equitable resources to other URM groups, made administrators re-think portioning resources to any of these efforts at all. Felix also encountered this on his campus, as he described in a CoP session (#1): his “challenges have been in the form of not so much, ‘Let’s make sure this is open to all students,’ but moreso… ‘we gotta make sure that we’re doing the same thing for Black students or for Asian American students or for others.” There was a sense on some campuses, as Lucia pointed out in a CoP session (#1), that Black students believed that investment in HSI “was going to take away resources from them.” As there was institutional stinginess to expand the pieces of pie they were doling out, this created “pushback” (Lucia), “tension” (Catalina), “contention” (Felix), and “division” (Penelope) between students of color.

What About Fundraising? It is important to note that a number of participants said there were not enough resources, period – not for HSI, not for anything beyond basic operations. In a CoP session (#1), Susana, who had recently taken an administrative position at a public technical college, noted that “the lack of resources is a real thing.” Camila described her institution as “broke.” And Bella revealed that her institution was “a little short… especially after COVID” due to a drop in enrollment. This resulted in not
replacing staff members who moved on and not providing the resources for Latinx-serving efforts. Ultimately, a few months after Bella’s interview, her institution closed its doors for good due to budget issues.

Being keenly aware that their campuses, particularly post-pandemic, were struggling with resources in general, it seemed to many HSI specialists that the logical answer would be to “increase the pot” (Chris). And yet, administrators dragged their feet in directing fundraising efforts toward HSI. A number of participants described seeing money coming in from donors, but HSI was not “thought of as a need” (Erica) and there was a lack of initiative to actively fundraise for Latinx student programming. Catalina provided a specific example in that she had advocated for funds for undocumented students, putting the idea forward directly to the VP for development, but the VP did not “see that as a priority” and therefore was “not having those conversations [with donors].” Ultimately, Catalina concluded that Dreamers were “not gonna get served.” Even when there was an institutional commitment to fundraising for Latinx and other URM students, these efforts fell by the wayside. For example, Chris described a declaration by his campus leaders that they would be directing fundraising efforts towards a specific need that would help many low-income URM students in the wake of the social unrest following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, but since then, Chris had noticed a “shift away from that”:

Our identity as being a historically white institution has allowed for that prioritization to erode over time, whereas other initiatives specific to fundraising might have been given more amplification, more time, energy from senior levels
of administration to the fundraising staff, that might appeal to a broader white and wealthy base of donors.

Thus, as campus leaders set the strategic direction of the institution, as long as their priorities centered white interests, the slice of proverbial pie allocated to HSI and other DEI efforts would never grow. Daniel had come to a similar conclusion in that the deans, VPs, executive leaders, and advancement officers who were responsible for fundraising efforts are “just very bad at their jobs [if the job is to become an HSI]. Or they’re doing a different job.”

_The Personal Toll of Whiteness_

All of the ways that whiteness manifested added labor and required additional emotional energy of HSI specialists. They felt this personal toll in the form of “outsider” treatment, having to prove their worth, taking on invisible labor, and experiencing burnout, battle fatigue, retaliation, disillusionment, and disengagement. And while mostly true for Latinx/URM participants, it could also affect white HSI specialists as well.

_Outsiders and “Imposters”_. Similar to Latinx and other URM students, HSI specialists who themselves were PoC often had difficulty feeling a sense of belonging on their campuses, particularly as their faculty, staff, and administrators remained predominantly white. In a CoP session (#3), Felix, who was born in the Caribbean, explained, “We’re still occupying spaces that were not designed for us. I’ve been in this country for 35 years. There’s not a day that goes by that I still feel like I’m not welcome in many spaces that I go.” Noemi, in a CoP session (#6), described a feeling of “loneliness”: she felt as though she could not relate to the few Latinx coworkers she had because “their way of handling the whiteness is to assimilate. Where for me, I prefer to…
be true to my authentic self.” So their conversations never “resonated” with her. Lucia also revealed that she was in the “process [of] just finding that place, that idea of belonging” on her campus. She noted that this outsider feeling might have been a function of imposter syndrome, or the self-doubt many first-generation and PoC felt on college campuses. Penelope described similar feelings about being an “imposter”: as she had been a “non-traditional” adult student who completed her degree shortly before stepping into her HSI-related role, she was constantly wondering if she “was good enough” for her position.

**Overlooked and Undervalued.** HSI specialists reported being hyper scrutinized, passed over, or constantly having to prove themselves and the value of their HSI work. In particular, practitioners of color needed to work harder than their white counterparts to be noticed as leaders and given their dues. Repeatedly, participants recounted times when colleagues did not listen to them (Carlota, CoP #6), they were “overshadowed” or “not given credit” for ideas (Erica), their contributions were “overlooked” and they were therefore not included in important committees (Susana), or their credibility was “questioned” (Bella) because of their skin color or racial/ethnic identity. In addition to feeling overlooked, HSI practitioners who were PoC were often held to different standards than their white peers. In a CoP session (#6), Noemi pointed out that “we have to prove ourselves constantly.” Felix also talked about being over-scrutinized, “like we have to justify our existence.” He described what that meant for his work on a day-to-day basis:

For many years I’ve been the first one to be at the office and the last one to leave… I feel like that was how I needed to do it, to prove that I was worthy. And
to prove that I can do the job… I’ve seen a lot of people advance next to me… I don’t know if it’s preferential treatment or the way folks advance versus others. I think it’s very noticeable.

The consequences of whiteness for many HSI specialists, then, was doing more work than their white colleagues but being less recognized.

HSI specialists often poured their hearts and souls into working toward the aims of servingness. But because HSI work was under-supported and undervalued on many of their campuses, HSI specialists of all backgrounds felt this as a particularly personal sting. In the last CoP session (#6), Carlota described “not being valued for the work that [I’m] doing” as offensive and hurtful “because then I don’t think you’re actually valuing who I am.” Other participants echoed this feeling in their interviews. For example, while Camila felt “honored” to be engaged in HSI work, the lack of compensation made her feel “undervalued and also makes you feel like then this work is not really that valued.”

Along the same lines, Catalina noted that HSI work was always viewed as secondary to her full-time job responsibilities. As a result, she felt “discouraged,” “isolated,” “disempowered,” and “devalued,” leading her to “wonder why I was taking this on if nobody cares.”

**Invisible Labor.** “Taking HSI on” for many of the HSI specialists meant engaging in additional labor above and beyond their regular job duties. As described in the “Do More with Less” discussion above, HSI work was frequently an add-on, understaffed, and underfunded. But PoC in particular who were engaged in this work also often took on additional labor in the form of cultural taxation, filling unique niches within the institution that would be difficult or impossible for their white counterparts to fulfill.
These roles included de facto mentoring of and advocating for students of color, serving as “diverse voices” on committees and in educating white colleagues, and filling their institutions’ Spanish translation needs.

**Supporting Students of Color.** HSI specialists who were also PoC described getting pulled into both informal and formal mentoring and advising situations for URM students at higher rates than their white peers. As was outlined in the “Part I: Servingness” section of this chapter, students of color tended to seek out faculty and staff with similar backgrounds, cultures, and experiences because they could more readily relate to and trust them. Participants reported feeling a calling to go above and beyond for these students, which will be illustrated in greater detail in “Part III: Strategies” below, but the additional time and energy spent with students who needed support was “taxing” (Lucia, CoP #1). Sometimes, even, the relationships that would form between HSI specialists and the URM students they served would be frowned upon by colleagues. For example, Penelope, in her interview, ascribed this sort of pushback to the fact that she raised the bar for the level of servingness she provided, thus setting higher expectations for her colleagues. So instead of being recognized for the additional labor she put in to help her URM students thrive, she was reprimanded for doing work that fell outside her job description.

Because HSI specialists were often in positions to get to know students of color and their personal experiences, they often felt compelled to advocate for them and their needs. Again, HSI specialists were committed to championing Latinx students’ causes, but it took a toll, as they were sometimes the only ones pushing against the current. Carlota asserted that “most of the work that’s being done to advocate for our minority
students comes from minorities.” Susana also questioned why that was: “Is it the responsibility only of the minority representatives… to always bring up the minority issues? Where you become that voice for every Latino issue?” HSI specialists conveyed both a deep sense of dedication to Latinx and other URM students but also a heavy sense of responsibility to do more for them – because if they did not do it, who would?

*Serving as the “Diverse Voice.”* As discussed in the “White Racial Projects” section above, HSI specialists who were also PoC were often tasked with bringing a “diverse” perspective to various committees and programs. While participants recognized the importance of having people who understood the experiences of URM students on decision-making bodies, because their campuses did not do enough to hire and retain PoC, they were the ones who were tapped to do this work time and time again. Again, HSI specialists such as Lucia reported that they “do it with [their] hearts,” but they were often already “overworked” or it felt like just “another responsibility.” Even white HSI specialists identified this as a challenge for their colleagues of color. Chris, for example, recognized the “overtaxing” of his BIPOC counterparts who were “asked to be on multiple hiring committees, being the lone or one of the only voices from their discipline who might be asked to participate in the whole host of campus activities.”

Another form of invisible labor for HSI specialists was responding to the ever-present and often challenging task of educating their white colleagues on a host of issues related to race and racism. Education was an oft-used strategy for counteracting the effects of whiteness, as will be outlined in Part III below, but it also many times felt like a burden. In a CoP session (#1), Carlota characterized having to educate her coworkers as a “battle.” Camila called it a “tax that comes on Brown and Black folks… of having to
constantly help people come to understand why that’s not OK [when they pushback against HSI work or get defensive]… It’s exhausting.” The tricky part, as detailed in the section on “White Racial Safety” above, was educating colleagues in such a way that they did not retreat from the conversation. Navigating white emotions could be draining – even for white HSI specialists. As John noted in a CoP session (#3): “There’s a lot of fragility out here, and sometimes it gets exhausting just trying to appease that.”

*Translating for Free.* By far the most often described form of invisible labor for HSI specialists was translating documents and serving as interpreters for Spanish-speaking students and families. Instead of paying for translation services or creating positions expressly for interpreters, their institutions would look to them for free labor as the need for Spanish language services grew. As Yatzuri commented, “even if your job description doesn’t say ‘bilingual’… you are going to use your Spanish.” As with other aspects of servingness, HSI specialists did the work because they understood it was important and that if they did not do it, it simply would not be done. And yet, this time-intensive, technical task became a “constant interruption” (Noemi) or an add-on to their already full schedule. Spanish-speaking HSI specialists reported that these requests were often made in an offhand way, belying a lack of awareness of the time and skill that translating work required. Susana, for example, reported that colleagues would assume that, since she could speak Spanish, she should just “go ahead and translate,” not understanding that “it’s not that easy…that’s a whole other skill set. But there’s just this assumption that… you should just add this to your job.” While to some, the additional labor felt merely “exhausting” (Lucia, CoP #1), to others, it felt like they were being taken advantage of in order to fulfill a basic function of servingness that the institution
refused to invest in. And these additional expectations placed upon Spanish-speakers had a racialized aspect that often felt “unfair” (Penelope) and discriminatory. As Elizabeth noted, expecting them to do translation work “literally isn’t something that you would do with any other Caucasian peer or colleague.”

**Burnout.** Because of the additional expectations placed upon HSI specialists – particularly those who were PoC and/or Spanish-speakers – they reported a strange mixture of feeling like they were overextended but, at the same time, that they were never doing enough. On the one hand, HSI specialists felt a deep commitment to their Latinx students and HSI work, but on the other hand, they were already incredibly busy, “wear[ing] three or four different hats” (Noemi), feeling “tapped out” (Laura), or “having multiple jobs” (Bella, John) – and some quite literally had multiple jobs, as described in the “Do More with Less” section above. Laura explained that getting involved in the HSI committee was something she had chosen to take on but, she lamented, “It’s challenging because I think it’s super important and I want to do it, but I also have so many things that are a priority.” Similarly, Erica questioned her HSI leadership role because she was pulled in too many directions and she never felt like she was “doing enough.” And Camila described feeling “like absolutely I wanna do this [HSI work], but… as an extra thing on top of everything else, I feel like I’m dropping balls left and right.”

Adding HSI responsibilities without relieving these practitioners of other job duties did not set them up for success. Moreover, it created undue pressure as they were made to feel as though they were not living up to the expectations placed upon them, however unattainable these expectations might have been. Daniel noted how “frustrating” this situation was because “you end up beating your head against the wall… If your goal
is to serve your students, you feel like you’re coming up short. And some days you’re like, ‘Why?’ Most days you’re like, ‘I know why.’” The “why” that Daniel referred to here was his institution’s willingness to place the burden of servingness on the backs of those who were already overextended – people who would do the work no matter what because they cared so deeply. Thus, HSI specialists would sometimes find themselves in a catch-22: between filling institutional needs that would help Latinx students and fulfilling their own job responsibilities. The result, unsurprisingly, was that, as passionate as HSI specialists felt about HSI work, sooner or later they would end up depleted.

**Battle Fatigue.** More than just burnout from the sheer volume of labor, “battle fatigue” refers to the weariness experienced by HSI specialists from constantly fighting the institutional current. It was a mental and emotional drain, the accumulation of years and sometimes decades of fighting whiteness in all its manifestations to ensure that their students were served well. Penelope compared this phenomenon to a sort of Sisyphean game of Jenga, in which HSI specialists were trying to rebuild the higher educational system in race-conscious ways, but as soon as the metaphorical Jenga tower fell, it would get rebuilt exactly as it was. Institutions would never fundamentally change and HSI specialists would find themselves back at square one. Dr. B also characterized the work of fighting whiteness as a “game,” adding that having to convince her colleagues of the right thing to do took “so much energy.” Similarly, Felix talked about the “exhausting” task of having to “repeat” himself and “remind folks” of the needs of the Latinx community. Okoye also commented on the weight of this struggle: “It is a heavy lift to have to bear every day… I’m always answering the question about the ‘why,’ why this is important… The battle fatigue that you feel… is a huge burden to carry.” Part of the
reason the fight was so taxing was that there were so few engaged in the battle: in a CoP session (#2), John made the point that at each of their respective institutions, “it is one or two people against the machine.” And another reason seemed to be that the battle never let up: Daniel emphasized that “there’s always a fight” leaving him to “wish it wasn’t so hard every single day.”

**Retaliation and Other Consequences.** Because of the burnout and battle fatigue that HSI specialists experienced, they would sometimes try to limit their exposure to uncompensated or racialized labor. This could backfire on them as setting appropriate boundaries and advocating for oneself was sometimes met with disapproval. In a CoP session (#6), Noemi talked about faculty and staff of color on her campus who would “draw a line for how much they can handle” but then be “perceived as, ‘Oh, she’s not involved or she doesn’t want to do these things.’” This led Noemi to worry about building a reputation for being “difficult” or getting verbally “pulled apart” behind her back. Elizabeth illustrated this challenge with the following scenario:

Let’s say you have a Spanish speaking student come in and… they don’t have someone bilingual at the front… So they’re trying to find a bilingual staff member. So the bilingual staff member is like, ‘Well… I’m doing my own work.’… And then they’re looked at as not a team player… So this added layer of having to find a balance being a professional and being collaborative and… having boundaries and being able to advocate for yourself in a way that still doesn’t come across as angry or mean… is very, very challenging.

The point that Elizabeth made here about not coming across as “angry” or “mean” is indicative of another challenge that PoC HSI specialists faced in that they were
constantly working to defy stereotypes of their race/ethnicity. For example, John, in a CoP session (#3), described how PoC “don’t want to advocate for themselves because they also feel like they’re… being the disruptive Brown person in the room… [thus] reinforcing stereotypes that they assume are already at play.” And Penelope recalled how colleagues in whom she would confide about work struggles would use her words against her, labeling her as “the angry Latina” or “unprofessional.” So PoC HSI specialists had to walk a tightrope of pushing against the institutional current to advance an agenda of servingness, but do it in a way that was palatable to white colleagues and did not confirm their racialized stereotypes. To Penelope, this was “emotionally draining” and ultimately one of the reasons that drove her to leave her institution.

Another emotion that whiteness evoked in HSI specialists was fear. Some mentioned being afraid to stand up in certain situations because of the possible interpersonal or professional ramifications. Lucia, for example, spoke about her early days on campus when she thought if she spoke out, she was “going to upset somebody… [and] lose my position.” A few of the HSI specialists, like Lucia, indicated that once they grew in confidence in themselves and their positions on campus, they felt more empowered to voice concerns, interrupt microaggressions, and the like. Yet, on a number of occasions in the interviews and CoP sessions, participants double checked that what they were about to reveal to me was confidential, or made the request that I work extra hard to anonymize their stories. This belied a concern that their honesty about campus conditions for PoC would be used against them somehow. Daniel also talked about “the fear that [whiteness] generates on campus” that made some of his colleagues of color “not feel safe talking out… just voicing their opinions.” The result was that many PoC
would “pull away.” Thus, hegemonic whiteness created an undercurrent of fear among PoC on campus, sometimes stifling their voices or causing them to retreat.

Sometimes, real experiences were motivating these fears, as HSI specialists – particularly PoC – experienced negative consequences when they pushed for change. In a CoP session (#5), Carlota disclosed feeling “traumatized” by a colleague when she “just wanted to communicate and it turned out to be counterproductive.” Daniel asserted that the administration on his campus was actively “trying to stamp out challenges.” And John, in a CoP session (#3), talked about “backlash” that made them wonder, “Is the strategic thing today to simply do nothing?” As a DEI administrator, John also provided a specific example that illustrated this backlash: after a “very reasonable conversation” with a faculty member about a bias incident that occurred in their classroom, the faculty’s department chair accused John of “harassment” and started telling others, “I’m not sure if we should have this [DEI] department. They’re just overstepping their bounds” – thus, calling into question the legitimacy of John’s very presence at their institution.

HSI specialists also sometimes feared that this sort of retaliation would follow them beyond the boundaries of their campus. Penelope, for example, described a coworker who was “dismissive and defensive and making my life very difficult in the work.” This could have had dire consequences for the trajectory of her career as, “in [our mid-sized city], especially in higher education, it’s very easy to leave a really poor reputation.” A saving grace for Penelope was the connections that she was able to cultivate at other institutions and her ability to “build my own narrative for them [so they could] see who I am and how I work and how I operate versus hearing secondhand how
problematic I was without telling the full story.” In these ways, whiteness worked to keep PoC HSI specialists in their proverbial place.

**Disillusionment and Disengagement.** Sometimes the personal toll that whiteness took on HSI specialists resulted in various degrees of disengagement. When it came to burnout, there were stories from participants that, at times, they scaled back on HSI work to focus on their full-time jobs. Daniel also reported that, in response to fear of retaliation and battle fatigue, he had seen colleagues of color “pull away” which was “unfortunately… the opposite of serving.” Even if counterproductive to the aims of servingness, setting limits on their engagement was a common tactic. Elizabeth provided one example of a well-intentioned DEI officer who wanted to make *Yo hablo español* badges for all Spanish-speaking staff but many of her colleagues did not want to be added to the list “because they know that what’s gonna happen is they’re going to be pulled into all sorts of situations… to do other work, to do extra.” And sometimes, the work became so much that HSI specialists physically shut down: Carlota, in a CoP session (#6), commented that, “when the burnout happens… even though you don’t want to disengage, your body is just so tired that you automatically do it. It’s like a shut off moment.”

Sometimes HSI specialists chose to disengage as a result of the combination between battle fatigue from fighting institutional currents and the underlying knowledge that the current will never change direction. In a CoP session (#6), Carlota described this disillusionment as the source of her own disengagement from aspects of HSI work: “It’s hard to keep engaged… when you wish more impact was done on students and it’s not. So then you pick your battles.” This sentiment was echoed in the interviews of the three HSI specialists who had left their positions – and higher education altogether – prior to
data collection for this study: Dr. B, Catalina, and Penelope. As described in the section on “Hiring and Retention Woes” above, all three indicated that frustration and disappointment with their institutions’ failure to embody an ethos of servingness was at least one of the reasons they ended up leaving. They described being guided by a higher purpose to help the community and having a lot of energy and passion for supporting Latinx students when they started, but after seeing little progress, they determined it was time to “just let it go” (Dr. B). Penelope indicated that she ended up feeling like “a hamster on a wheel”:

If I can’t do my job and help change the system – because that’s what I was hired to do – I’m not doing it anymore. And that’s… why I ended up leaving. It was very, very hard for me because I thought about the [students] that I was leaving behind. I felt like a woman in an abusive relationship leaving her children with the abuser.

She still got emotional recalling her experience of working tirelessly toward goals that, in her estimation, the institution was not serious about seeing through. Feeling taken advantage of and defeated, Penelope left the world of higher education. In this situation, whiteness took both a personal toll on Penelope as well as on the Latinx and other URM students she sought to serve.

**Summary of Part II: Struggles Toward Servingness**

As detailed in the first part of this chapter, participants’ understandings of servingness entailed connecting with the local Latinx community, centering Latinx students’ experiences and needs, fostering a sense of belonging, increasing the institution’s bilingual capacity and diverse representation among faculty and staff,
building an HSI infrastructure with purpose and intention, and committing material resources to these endeavors. But for each component of servingness, HSI specialists perceived barriers, and they drew direct lines to whiteness: white understandings (biases, colorblindness, and ignorance), white feelings (a need for racial safety), white pervasiveness (demographically and ontologically), white protection of resources (whiteness as property) and even the personal toll that whiteness took on them, all of which interfered with their ability to enact a race-conscious model of servingness. In the next section, I detail the ways in which HSI specialists worked to counteract the impact of whiteness so that ultimately, they could better serve their Latinx students.

**Part III: Strategies for Disrupting Institutional Whiteness**

Despite the challenges that whiteness presented for HSI specialists – and possibly even because of them – many felt compelled to stay in the fight. As Elizabeth noted, “These things [like racism] are near intractable and they move in one direction. So unless you’re pushing against it, you’re swept up in it. If you’re not pushing against it, you’re an accomplice to harm.” In this final results section, I answer my research sub-question #2: *What strategies do HSI specialists employ to disrupt institutional whiteness?* The ways in which HSI specialists pushed against institutional whiteness varied but there were many common threads throughout the interviews and CoP sessions. Here I outline how they navigated white attitudes, understandings and feelings, counteracted demographic and ontological expansiveness, unraveled white racial projects, and cracked through the walls of material exclusion to move their institutions in the direction of servingness. I also detail the practices they engaged in to help cope with the personal toll that whiteness took
on them and describe hopeful signs that some of their institutions were, in fact, progressing toward transformation.

**Navigating White Attitudes, Understandings, and Feelings**

As outlined in Part II, biases, colorblindness, epistemologies of ignorance, and the tendency to retreat into white racial safety often delayed or undermined HSI work. These white understandings, attitudes, and feelings related to race required HSI specialists to penetrate the armor around colleagues’ hearts and minds, opening them to new ways of seeing and understanding racial issues, and paving the way to stronger engagement with a race-conscious model of servingness. They saw this as part and parcel with HSI work, as John expressed in a CoP session (#2) when they described their position as “the director of thoughts and feelings.” As white understandings were learned, they could also be unlearned, and so HSI specialists worked to educate their colleagues, called them out and got them to think critically when they engaged in bad behaviors, interrogated “colorblind” practices, and ultimately, served as cheerleaders for their white colleagues to engage more deeply in servingness.

**Educators, Storytellers, Expert Communicators.** One of the most often employed strategies to counteract whiteness cited by HSI specialists was education – both formal and informal – of their white counterparts on campus. Even though many of the participants expressed frustration with their colleagues, they also demonstrated a patient understanding that everyone has developed their own racial understandings as a function of their exposure and experiences. In a CoP session (#4), for example, Carlota explained that she tried to “giv[e] some grace” because many of her colleagues were not “intentionally being ignorant.” In the same CoP session, Camila agreed, saying: “Even
though… we want everyone to be able to do all the hard things, the reality is that not all people are gonna be able to do them. But we need to figure out how to get them there.” John summed it up well when they said, “bringing [colleagues] back to seeing the invisible, making it visible – it’s just constantly part of the work here.”

Making whiteness “visible” was accomplished through education. Before they could start dialoguing about HSI work or the concept of servingness, HSI specialists had to first disabuse their colleagues of general racial understandings that were rooted in white supremacy, providing educational opportunities that deconstructed false notions while painting a racial picture that was truer to URM students’ experiences. Laura and Silas, who worked at different recently designated HSIs, both emphasized the importance of this matter, as the demographics of their faculty and staff had not shifted as quickly as that of their student bodies. The goal of this education was to “open hearts and open minds” and get their colleagues to “think differently” in order to serve their students better (Camila). And it was understood that they had to approach this work in the spirit of “guidance and helping them feel supported… to shift their mentality” (Bella). HSI specialists were able to accomplish this through formal professional development, storytelling, and effective communication strategies.

**Professional Development.** Very commonly, HSI specialists described organizing formal learning programs for colleagues to help shift perspectives and narratives about students of color and how their institutions could or should be responding to the changing face of their student bodies. Sometimes, the focus was on instructors by increasing cultural competence, inclusive pedagogy, and equitable assessment. HSI specialists who themselves held senior leadership positions also described introducing professional
development around race into leadership spaces. And they described a variety of formats and learning tools. For example, as a DEI administrator, Okoye had access to resources to purchase books for faculty learning communities around various equitable and inclusive practices, and John, also an administrator, launched conversations on race with their senior leadership team using shared readings, and offered an anti-racism series for employees and students as well.

Importantly, the readings and format of these experiences were curated “very intentionally” to get their colleagues on board. Lucia, for example, described an interactive workshop for which she was a presenter that explicitly addressed issues related to colorblindness in the classroom and walked participants through various scenarios, asking them how they would respond. An important aspect of these professional development opportunities, then, was the dialogic nature of the experience.

As educators, HSI specialists understood that they could not simply tell people what to think or do, but rather needed to engage them as active meaning-makers so that they could work through their own racial understandings and responsive practices.

A final professional learning experience that was described by HSI specialists was providing opportunities to attend conferences or outside trainings. As these were more costly than in-house learning opportunities, there were few mentions, and usually only in cases where it was supported by grant funding. Catalina, for example, noted that funding for professional development was “typically limited” but with the support of a grant, faculty were able to attend conferences and an “immersive training” to “implement new practices in their classrooms.”
**Storytelling.** Another method that HSI specialists employed to break down white understandings of race and racism was storytelling. As they described it, putting students’ experiences at the forefront of conversations was an effective way to build empathy and change narratives. Many of the participants in this study were natural storytellers and painted beautiful – and sometimes heartbreaking – pictures of their students’ journeys. They often found themselves in informal conversations with colleagues, retelling students’ experiences, or even their own personal stories, in ways that expanded their colleagues’ racial understandings and touched their heartstrings. In a CoP session (#3), Noemi, for example, disclosed that she often recounted her family immigration history and her first-gen college experience, particularly to her white female colleagues, who were “eager” to learn. She noted, “I am happy to educate my peers around me… because the people that ask do take something away from my experiences.”

One of the most powerful uses of storytelling as an educational tool was when HSI specialists invited the students themselves to share at panels and other forums. In a CoP session (#2), for example, Liliana described her strategy of connecting Latinx students to campus leaders because if it came “directly from the student it can completely bring a different perspective.” Bella characterized these opportunities as “vital” for the education of colleagues so that they could “be compassionate about some of the struggles that [Latinx] students face on a day-to-day basis.” One group of students in particular whose stories were deemed important to share by Bella and other HSI specialists were Dreamers.

Even through the act of storytelling itself, some HSI specialists pointed out that their colleagues had developed deeper listening skills. Lucia, for example, described
coming from a “high context society” and how different it was in the U.S. as “people want you to get to the point.” But through her repeated story sharing, she had started to see her colleagues be “more open” to others’ stories in general and develop “a different way of listening” – which paved the way for deeper empathy.

**Effective Communication for White Racial Safety.** HSI specialists also learned that they had to adapt their communication styles to respond to their colleagues’ fear, hurt feelings, and defensiveness, garner buy-in, and more effectively promote servingness. Camila asserted that, while “a lot of people say, ‘No, we just need to call racism what racism is,’” that was not always the most effective approach. Instead, she affirmed that she had to “say things in a way that some people can receive this… [and] feel comfortable… I’ve been having to learn a lot about, how do you get people to listen in equity work who don’t wanna hear what you’re saying?”

But placating white feelings was a thorny issue that took time and energy to navigate. They indicated that it was “tricky” to make sure that white people did not “feel like they’re at fault for everything” (Carlota), and to approach these conversations in a “compassionate but honest manner” (Lucia). This was clearly echoed by Okoye, who had to walk the fine line of “not putting [white people] on the defense” but “still challenging with grace and with kindness”:

I’ve seen recently in some comments, ‘This is trying to make me feel bad for being white.’ And so if they’re brave enough to say that to me… my response is, ‘Well help me to understand why it’s making you feel bad as a white person. And then I feel like I have to put my therapeutic counseling hat on for a second to say,
‘And what’s wrong with feeling bad? Sometimes progress and growth happens from feeling bad.’

Okoye concluded by stating that she often grappled with the question, “How can we support our white colleagues to get them in a place of having these tough conversations emotionally?” Camila (CoP #4), who also walked this fine line, acknowledged that even though this approach created additional emotional labor for her, she was “willing to do that if it means that when [white colleagues] get in front of our students that they’re not gonna have to process this.”

“Feather Rufflers.” On the flip side of placating white feelings, sometimes HSI specialists took a more candid approach of calling a spade a spade. There were moments when participants indicated that the more effective strategy was to directly call people out for bad behavior, point out their biases, and push them to think about how to do better. Camila, for example, indicated that she spent a lot of emotional energy creating “safe spaces” for white feelings, but she also realized that sometimes she had to “mak[e] people feel uncomfortable. Sometimes it’s calling stuff out and just saying, ‘We got to do better.’” As a DEI administrator, John saw this as a necessary function of their work: “My job is to get in fights with people and push feathers… So unfortunately I do have to speak rudely or bluntly sometimes.” John gave specific examples of situations in which they would call out colleagues’ biases: having to recenter conversations in meetings to be inclusive of everyone when women and PoC were ignored; telling a fellow administrator very candidly how to do his job better in service to URM students (CoP #2); and holding faculty members accountable for missteps in their interactions with students of color (CoP #4). At one point, John’s honesty cost them a “really close personal and
professional relationship,” but, they asserted, “I had to hold that person to task.” Okoye, also a DEI administrator, had a similar approach to John. She commented that if colleagues are not “on board…with where we are moving as the institution, we need to let them know… And I’m here to be your reality check that you are going to have to make some adjustments.” Even so, she contended that this could still be accomplished “with respect and dignity” and in a way that would be supportive of her colleagues as they made those adjustments.

**Interrogators.** HSI practitioners understood that combatting racial misunderstandings could not be done through education alone. Rather, they recognized the fundamental need to create culture shifts by disrupting entrenched whiteness within institutional practices and policies that had often gone unaddressed because of colorblindness and epistemologies of ignorance. Thus, HSI specialists spent time and energy interrogating seemingly “race-neutral” practices and policies that had racially disparate impacts. They questioned those responsible for implementing these practices, forcing them to think critically about the impact, bringing to light ways of knowing, being, and doing that fell outside of whiteness, and pointing out where they could improve their practices to better support Latinx and other URM students. This was closely tied to servingness because, as Chris commented, “servingness means not just using the same formula that we’ve always used and assuming it will work, but instead allowing for the possibility that we have to change who we are to best support and serve our student populations.”

Fundamentally changing “who” the institution was entailed, according to Camila, “questioning everything” through the lens of their customer – in this case, increasingly
Latinx students— to “design our systems, processes, programs, [and] approach” to meet their needs. Even established HSIs were described as needing a paradigm shift, as just “doing what we [always] did” was no longer enough to center the needs of their Latinx students (Laura). Some HSI specialists felt the need to interrogate just about everything that happened on campus. Susana, for example, would convene with leadership to ask questions such as, “Did you consider this?... let’s explore that.” Similarly, Lucia would also question, “Do we have the right people? Do we have enough people?... What do we need? What else have we not envisioned?”— all necessary questions because, as she noted, “That idea of changing things, disrupting them, it’s not at the top of [white people’s] agenda.” And Okoye noted, when white campus leaders would block changes that would benefit URM students, she felt compelled to “challenge them back.”

HSI specialists also provided example after example of specific decisions, practices, and policies that they openly and actively interrogated, resulting in meaningful change. As described in the “Colorblind Institutional Process” section in Part II above, Silas was involved in an effort to allow heritage/native speakers of non-English languages to earn retroactive credit for their bilingual skills: “I just asked a question of a typical practice that we did and [they responded], ‘Oh, yeah… Wow, we can do better.’” Another “small battle” Silas won was around a financial literacy program that was geared toward white, middle-class students, so he simply asked, “‘How culturally resonant is it?’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, yeah, we need more of that.’” Penelope also “did a lot of fighting [back]” on her campus. One example she offered was when campus leaders tried to move her HSI role into a less strategic position. She pushed back, asking, “‘How do you expect anyone to take us seriously about anything else if we’re under student activities?’ And so
we [successfully] fought to stay.” And in a CoP session (#5), Liliana recounted when she questioned an office’s English-only policy (also described in the “White Linguistic Spaces” section above), and the compliance office responded by sending a video to all employees informing them of their right to speak non-English languages. This had an immediate effect, as Liliana reported, of empowering employees to speak Spanish on campus.

Sometimes these interrogation strategies did not work in the way that HSI specialists would have hoped. Susana, who had recently taken an administrative position on her campus, questioned why their GED and ESL program participants – largely adult learners and PoC – were not being provided the same services that their high school aged population was receiving. The response from campus leadership was, “That’s a good question” – but they did not provide a solution. This led her to conclude that leaders were aware of the inequity but had no interest in shifting resources toward these students and were therefore passively preserving the racial status quo: “You know, so when you don’t get a direct answer? That’s another PWI moment.” In a similar fashion, John, in a CoP session (#3), talked about their struggle against their institution’s policy to hold students’ transcripts for “ransom” when they had a past due charge on their account. In revealing that the leadership team remained committed to the practice, John lamented, “Those are really gutting feelings… because we are often the ones who have to point out… ‘this is a really bad idea’… Pointing that out doesn’t always give you allies.” And yet, HSI specialists often continued interrogating these practices and policies because they knew that sometimes they would win a battle and, little by little, change the way the institution operated. As Carlota noted, “fighting the current” was exhausting but she did it anyway
because she “knew that this is really worth the cause. When they say ‘pick your battles,’ this is one of the ones that we did have to fight because our students deserve better than what we’re currently doing.”

**Encouragers and Self-Reflective Practitioners.** As HSI specialists navigated white understandings and feelings, they became skilled cheerleaders for their white colleagues to engage in race-conscious servingness. This positive reinforcement was critical due to the deep self-doubt that many would-be white allies expressed around their role in the work. In a CoP session (#4), for example, Camila noted that it was important to “acknowledge how hard this type of work is” and to tell white colleagues, “You matter… We need people like you who are willing to put yourselves in a position that is difficult and challenging, and to figure it out.” And HSI specialists were there supporting them to “figure it out”: white allies on Carlota’s campus, for example, wanted to support HSI efforts but “sometimes they might be afraid that if they ask a question, it’s gonna be offensive.” This led her to conclude that URM staff like herself needed to “bring down the shield” and help them understand what their role could look like. Felix also asserted in a CoP session (#5) that there were many white allies who “do care” but “they just don’t know how to help” so it was up to him to “create the platforms and the spaces for them to come in.” Bella summed up what this support looked like and why it was so important:

You cannot expect whiteness to change from day to night if you’re not also there to support [white colleagues] with their needs as well… We’re here to guide them [and] through that guidance and helping them feel supported, we’re able to shift
their mentality and their perspective… And in the long term that helps them serve their students better.

Overcoming self-doubt and learning to leverage white privilege were also issues that white HSI practitioners themselves dealt with. But based on what my white participants shared, it was clear that they engaged in deep self-reflexivity, or constantly interrogating their own understandings, feelings, and the ways that they benefitted from whiteness in order to become more effective allies. As an example, Chris, who identified as a white male, revealed that he had “spent a lot of [his] professional career trying to engage in meaningful ways with those elements of [his] identity” and that he “hope[d] to contribute in some meaningful way to an eradication of white and/or male privilege.” John, who identified as white and queer, also contributed this thought: “I firmly believe that white people have to be part of justice work” which, for them, entailed “actively betray[ing] their whiteness” and using their privileges to recenter Black and Brown students and colleagues. John also used the model of “cultural humility” in working with their white colleagues to help them understand how to approach their work with URM students.

Even Camila, who was Latina but self-identified as “white-passing,” talked about this part of her identity and what it meant for her work with URM students. In particular, she recognized that PoC “have been harmed by people who look like [her]” so she had to “always remember that and think about, ‘OK, how am I going to show [them] that they can trust me, that I’m on their side, that I want to help, that I’m an ally?’” This self-awareness was the first step toward meaningful allyship and effective engagement with Latinx and other URM students. And through reflection and learning opportunities, they
better understood their own positionalities and the ways they might be contributing to – or could be breaking down – barriers to servingness.

**Counteracting Demographic and Ontological Expansiveness**

As described in the “Diverse Representation Among Faculty and Staff” section in Part I and the “Demographic Whiteness” section in Part II above, HSI specialists recognized the value of white allies but also felt very strongly that diverse representation was an essential aspect of servingness. Given that their employee populations and campus spaces remained predominantly white despite their diversifying student bodies, HSI specialists engaged in specific strategies to counteract both demographic and ontological expansiveness: they were “opportunists” for hiring, they forged intentional communities and counterspaces for Latinx students and colleagues, and they directly supported and advocated for their students as they navigated white spaces.

**Opportunists.** When it came to demographic whiteness, HSI specialists recognized that the process of turning over their campuses to become more diverse was a long and slow road. Their primary strategy here was patience, as they waited out the gatekeepers and staff turnover opened up possibilities for new and diverse voices. Okoye noted that by “wait[ing] for attrition” her campus had started undergoing a “culture shift.” Similarly, Silas noticed a “shift in generational identity… with new hires [and] with retirements.” Camila also asserted that the “literal turnover of people and leadership changes” changed her campus’s approach to equity work and strengthened support for HSI efforts over time. Dr. B and Yatzuri, who had both worked at the same technical college, both pointed to specific examples of gatekeepers who, once they left the institution, opened the floodgates for practices that served Latinx students. This included
the promotion of a Latina colleague into a cabinet-level position for DEI work, which, according to Yatzuri, “gave [them their] power back to be able to make more things happen.”

More than just hoping that open positions would be filled by more diverse candidates, HSI specialists pushed their campus leaders and hiring managers to be more intentional about their hiring practices, as mentioned above in Part II, “Hiring and Retention Woes”. For example, they urged their colleagues to “think outside the box” in order to recruit, mentor, and retain talented PoC on their campuses. In a CoP session (#5), Felix shared that he was “relentless” about “proving [to] people that there’s worth in diversifying spaces – financial aid, admissions, housing, the registrars – just having key people in key places on campus. It’s super important” and he was therefore constantly reminding his campus leaders that “hiring with intention is necessary.” HSI specialists also pushed to require bilingualism as a necessary skill (Dr. B), passed along names to search committees of highly qualified Latinx candidates (Catalina) and insisted on diverse representation on hiring committees (Susana, CoP #2). To this last point, some of the HSI specialists described a broader infiltration into spaces that had historically been loci of white power and control. In a later CoP session (#5), for example, Susana noted that Latinx faculty and staff at her institution were “taking over some white spaces,” becoming more visible, and making their presence felt culturally, socially, and linguistically.

Community Builders and Culture Affirmers. Another way that HSI specialists worked against the current of ontological expansiveness was to intentionally cultivate community among not only URM students, but “staff and instructors as well” (Elizabeth)
so that everyone would “feel that [they] mattered” on campus (Liliana, CoP #5). Among colleagues, sometimes this took the form of Latinx affinity groups, as Yatzuri discussed, but much more often participants described culturally affirming practices that they employed in everyday interactions. In a CoP session (#3), for example, Susana described showing up in an “authentic” way in meetings, checking in with everyone about their personal lives and well-being before getting down to business. This helped colleagues “feel a sense of belonging” and was particularly “appreciated with Latino faculty and staff.” In the same CoP session (#3), Noemi concurred, stating that “belonging starts with a warm welcome.” For a number of HSI specialists, fostering community also entailed linguistic responsiveness, as Lucia pointed out in a later CoP session (#5) that speaking Spanish made her feel more at home, and so she also made a point to speak Spanish with her colleagues and students.

In addition to making space for URM colleagues, participants talked extensively about the ways they engaged their students so that they would not feel like bodies out of place in these white spaces. These practices started from pre-admissions, as many HSI specialists discussed bilingual and parent-focused elements of admissions programs. But this form of servingness went even beyond formal programmatic elements and encompassed ways of being and relating that resonated with Latinx families. For example, Noemi described her work in a campus visit program in which she would make a point to sit with parents, “let[ting] them know that, hey, I’m also from [the same neighborhood] or I also speak Spanish.” Assuming the role of “host”, she would ensure that her guests were well taken care of and took the time to learn them by name.
Integrating Latinx-centeredness into white spaces also meant for the few faculty participants in the study, “bring[ing] culture into your classroom” (Lucia). For staff, it often involved supporting the development of Latinx student affinity groups that could become safe havens in the larger white milieu. Noemi, who advised two such organizations, believed that they were helping to create community among students, but that they were much more effective with a high-touch “advisor, mentor, and guide.” Thus, she was highly engaged, showing up at their meetings and programs, providing logistical support for their work, and being their biggest cheerleader. She also knew that community meant making it fun, because that is what would get students to “gravitate” toward staff, get to know them, and ultimately build trust.

Other HSI specialists who worked in cultural centers also described the ways that these counterspaces became sites of belonging and inclusion on campuses that otherwise largely operated through the lens of whiteness. Laura worked to make her intercultural center a “hub for students to gather and to have a safe space to come and have fun, to share their culture and to also just share their lives.” Felix described his Latinx student center as integral to helping students “feel that they’re part of a larger [Latinx] community here on campus.” He and his staff created connectedness where Latinx students might otherwise feel untethered. Sometimes this was through formal channels, such as near-peer student “ambassadors,” and sometimes, it was as simple as “a DJ and churros” – a cheap and easy event that attracted a huge crowd of students. Even HSI specialists who were not connected directly to cultural centers also found ways to host co-curricular programs that carved out space for Latinx students. Yatzuri, for example,
started the first Latinx student retreat at her college aimed at connection, self-care, and motivation.

As important as these Latinx-centered organizations, programs, and counterspaces were, HSI specialists also strove to help students develop a sense of belonging, community, and support across campus, even in white-centered spaces. Catalina accomplished this through a “personalized touch” to student care in which she was in communication with colleagues across siloes, ensuring that each student was receiving the support and services they needed. Along the same lines, Noemi described soft hand-offs, in which she made phone calls to colleagues, walked students to other offices, made personal introductions, and encouraged students to take advantage of the resources available to them – not just in Latinx-specific spaces, but all across campus.

**Listeners and Supporters.** Inevitably, however, no matter how much HSI specialists worked to create counterspaces and integrate *Latinidad* into the fabric of their institutions, Latinx students would often run into challenges in white spaces that affected their experiences and outcomes. In these situations, HSI specialists supported students directly, by comforting and encouraging them, and being the person they could go to when they felt like a body out of place. First and foremost, this support work required creating space for deep listening – “providing that space even within the classroom to talk about things that are difficult… things that the students are experiencing” (Lucia). Even when they knew they could not fix the problem, HSI specialists understood that the listening piece was still powerful and important. As Noemi noted, “[Sometimes] all I can do is just… make them feel welcomed and seen and heard.”
But for students to feel comfortable enough to open up, HSI specialists first had to build trust. They accomplished this by being honest and transparent, but also by becoming vulnerable and sharing their own experiences. As Lucia asserted, URM students begin to trust when they “see that you’re kind of like them, that you’ve gone through this… that you’ve cried for the same reasons. They see that you want to elevate them, that you’re there to provide support. And they come and find you.” The safety that Latinx students felt with HSI specialists and other supporters made it possible for them to “come out” about a variety of challenges they were dealing with – from immigration status (Bella) to accessing resources (Daniel) to difficulties with instructors (Liliana) – making it easier for HSI specialists to provide the support they needed to thrive.

**Advocates.** Sometimes HSI specialists took matters into their own hands when they became aware of challenges that their Latinx students were facing within white spaces. This often took the form of an intervention with an instructor or staff member. Yatzuri, for example, would “advocate for those students” who were experiencing difficulties with certain processes “and try to bring down some of those barriers we have in those specific places.” HSI specialists provided specific examples of reaching out directly to staff or instructors who did not understand some of the issues that their Latinx students were facing, with the intention of building empathy and helping colleagues employ more supportive practices. They characterized this as “bring[ing] that awareness piece back into the classroom” (Liliana), “advocat[ing] for [students’] rights” (Carlota), and “fight[ing] the system together” alongside the affected student (Noemi, CoP #4). And finally, in rare instances, HSI specialists also talked about supporting student activism, like Daniel, who specified that he would use his own experience to be “there to support
students if and when they try to organize” – to crack open white spaces and center Latinx student needs.

**Unraveling White Racial Projects**

White racial projects, as described in Part II above, involved the co-optation of HSI language for the benefit of the institution while not substantively changing conditions for Latinx and other URM students. Small wins and incremental changes were allowed but even a publicly stated commitment to becoming an HSI did not prompt transformational thinking or action. To fight the tendency for their institutions to cling to business-as-usual practices and spur them to truly embrace servingness, HSI specialists made efforts to reclaim the meaning of “HSI” across their campus communities and worked various angles with campus leaders to gain support for meaningful and transformative changes. To these ends, HSI specialists became collective meaning-makers, influencers, strategists, interest convergers, and, in some cases, even activists.

**Collective Meaning-Makers.** HSI specialists worked to change the institutional narrative around HSI and build a Hispanic-serving organizational identity by co-creating shared understandings of “HSI”. This was important as HSI was sometimes only defined by its federal definition and therefore devoid of the servingness aspect, sometimes the idea of servingness was not fully developed, and sometimes there was a void altogether in communicating what HSI meant. Thus, HSI specialists had to clearly and consistently communicate HSI goals, actions, progress, and needs, help stakeholders think critically about what HSI would mean for their own areas, and keep these efforts front of mind for their colleagues in order to move beyond incremental racial progress. HSI specialists like Liliana viewed this as their “responsibility”: “making sure that we develop, bring that
awareness to the community… Because this is new, I think that not everyone is really understanding what the HSI initiative is all about.”

In the beginning of this process, this entailed “planting seeds” (Lucia) and “dismantling myths” about what HSI did and did not mean (Carlota, CoP #1). But as momentum grew, HSI specialists like Erica honed in on the “why” – “why we do this work, why it’s important” because “sometimes people get lost in what [it] really means.” Focusing on the “why” in these dialogues was critical to creating a shared understanding of the urgency of this work. Laura noted that it was “probably the most important thing: to show… why we need to do this… and to really get people around the table around an idea and supportive of it.” This was even important for campuses that had already achieved the HSI designation. Catalina mentioned, because HSI on her campus was “no longer [about] recruiting,” her work often entailed “engag[ing] more folks across campus to get buy in… [and asking] how are we gonna be serving?… What does being an HSI mean? How can we be more intentional in the work… regardless of what office you’re in?” Thus, after coming to shared understandings around the meaning of HSI, dialogues turned to what it meant to operationalize it. As Lucia commented in the chat function of a CoP session (#1), “Everyone should have a good idea of why this work is important and how it impacts everyone” [emphasis added].

Sometimes this meaning-making happened through informal conversations. As John noted, “Every time HSI comes up, I just want [my colleagues] to really focus on that S-word – that we are serving these students… Just asking some challenging questions.” But often, these dialogues were part of formal professional development opportunities. A number of participants reported having used books by Dra. Gina García – a renowned
HSI scholar – as content for discussion series, and even bringing Dra. García to their campuses as a guest speaker. These opportunities often covered wide swaths of their institutions, as HSI specialists took their “show on the road” to engage across academic units (Felix) and within entire divisions (Camila). Catalina also talked about hosting lunch-and-learns to help colleagues grasp the servingness concept and establish common vernacular, but also to “engage people and bring them along” so they could become “ambassadors for the work.” In this way, reclaiming the meaning of HSI had a cascading effect across campus, helping them build a Latinx-serving organizational identity.

HSI specialists also leveraged established institutional missions to help their colleagues make sense of a Latinx-serving organizational identity. A number of HSI specialists who worked at Catholic colleges invoked their institutions’ guiding values when advocating for a focus on servingness. Lucia’s and Bella’s campus, for example, centered “serv[ing] the underserved,” which, according to Lucia (CoP #1), made for fruitful conversations across campus around the meaning of HSI. Bella also noted that this mission was foundational to supporting Dreamers, which was a core component of servingness. Camila, an HSI specialist at a different Catholic college, drew a direct line between their institution’s Catholic values and the work of HSI as “critical in helping the institution accomplish its mission.” For HSI specialists at both 2-year and 4-year public access institutions, mission was just as easily leveraged in helping colleagues understand a Latinx-serving identity. Dr. B, for example, explained that her technical college had for a long time provided bilingual services to the Latinx community, and therefore servingness was in their “DNA and [their] fabric.” HSI, then, was a “natural” extension of the services they were already providing. And in a CoP session (#5), Felix, who
worked at a four-year public campus, described making the case that becoming an HSI was simply “the right thing to do as an access institution.”

Centering student voices was also identified as an important strategy for the collective meaning-making process and to inform the strategic direction of HSI initiatives. As Chris noted, servingness meant “providing students the opportunity to define how they can best be served.” Noemi also believed that student voices were effective in “convert[ing]” colleagues to the mission of servingness, and her strategy was to tell students:

The best that you can do is complain about [your struggles on campus] and tell us everything that you’re feeling, telling us what really are the resources that you need, what is missing. Because even if you don’t get them, at least you’re gonna leave this place better than when you found it for the next student.

Catalina also put this into practice on her campus by conducting focus groups to capture students’ understandings around “What does it mean to be at an HSI? What does it mean for you to be Latina, Latinx? And trying to get more student voices… to create these narratives around identity and experience” because “when you ask them to share their experiences… it just starts to build a bridge.” John concurred that the bridge between students and administrators was often built by their individual voices, which culminated in “emergent themes” that informed HSI work.

Finally, HSI specialists recognized a need to sustain the conversation to keep the focus of the HSI narrative on servingness. In a CoP session (#1), for example, Felix described, after an initial “parade of sit downs” with campus stakeholders, “finding ourselves reinventing and reintroducing [the HSI committee] to campus… Folks need to
be reminded about how important this is for campus was how important it also is for our larger community here in [the city].”

**Leadership Influencers.** While HSI specialists worked to garner buy-in across the campus community and come to some shared understandings of what HSI should mean, it would not be enough to truly transform their institutions if they did not also have their leadership on board. Thus, HSI specialists engaged the highest levels of leadership in meaning-making dialogues, making appeals to their better nature, and figuring out other ways to influence their thinking about the goals of HSI. This entailed gaining access to leadership circles, as well as sometimes altering communication styles to speak the “language” of administrators.

**Access to Campus Leaders.** Influencing campus leaders was often easiest for those HSI specialists who already held administrative ranks and others who had ready access to leadership circles. John, who reported directly to their president, noted in a CoP session (#1) that they had to do “a lot of handholding/coaching on my end, to get key leaders to prioritize creating specific programs or efforts for Hispanic students” – which is how John started laying the “groundwork” for HSI. Dr. B, who was also an administrator, commented that she had to “educat[e] the senior leadership” and “guide them step by step” on how they were going to accomplish their goals. Other HSI specialists who were not cabinet level leaders often nonetheless had access to these spaces. For example, Erica was appointed by the chancellor as co-lead for their HSI efforts and she therefore had access to cabinet level leaders. She commented, “I’ve learned being in certain spaces of leadership to be a champion [for students]… I would say one of my strengths is influencing.” She indicated that she was able to be an
influencer by “build[ing] rapport” and “mak[ing] [her] mark” – becoming a known and trusted entity to campus leaders.

Some participants who worked at smaller campuses also had personal access to high level leaders even if they did not occupy senior leadership positions themselves. Camila, for example, commented that the hierarchy at her small school was somewhat flattened: she could email campus leaders directly and “make recommendations. I can ask for meetings with people… And so there are ways to leverage that type of… connection to make changes.” Other HSI specialists who worked at similarly sized institutions described similar access to and ability to influence their administrators: Noemi and Laura both talked about bringing ideas to campus leaders, who would often be amenable to implementing them. Those who did not have direct access to leadership would sometimes play a game of institutional telephone to influence their leaders’ decisions and actions. Carlota, for example, did not personally know the VP for DEI on her campus, but she worked closely with a colleague who did, and would frequently “put a plug in [the VP’s] ear” about HSI efforts.

For administrators and other practitioners alike, access to and influence with executive leaders on campus was a fickle thing. Thus, HSI specialists had to find their way to decision-making tables where they could use those spaces to advocate for Latinx and other URM students. Silas, for example, recognized the importance of being in “the right place at the right time” to influence policy, and Erica also mentioned that she had had to “force [herself] to be in spaces where [she] know[s] people of color are not at.” Noemi joined “every meeting, every committee” that dealt with HSI and other multicultural work. She noted in a CoP session (#5) that, while she might not “really have
to be there… I just know that if I’m not there… who else is gonna the say the stuff that has to be said or think about the things that nobody else is thinking about?”

Sometimes HSI specialists were invited into spaces where they were not actually expected to share their perspectives: Felix, for example, talked about being invited to meetings as a “token” Latino but instead of responding with “resentment or anger” he would say, “‘OK, you invited me… and now I’m gonna set the conditions.’… So I’ve taken advantage of being pulled into those situations… Now I’m representing a community [and] my community is counting on me to do my best.” And when they were not invited at all, strategies to get a seat at the table ranged from soft-handed, “hey, can I join?” queries (Susana) to “fight[ing their] way in” (John, CoP #2).

“Playing the Game.” Sometimes influencing campus leaders required a change in communication styles, using language that resonated with administrators to nudge them toward an agenda of servingness. John, for example, said in a CoP session (#2) that they had to “frame everything through that lens of ‘organizational development’… You have to speak very coded language, institutional language, in order to get folks to sort of nod their heads, to let you move forward.” Dr. B described this codeswitching as “playing the game”: in challenging intransigent administrators, she would have to “get creative” and “acculturate…saying that, OK, this was too harsh. Let me see how Americanized I can be and pass the idea. [laughed] And that helped… but it was just a game” to try to convince her fellow administrators of the right thing to do.

Other HSI specialists “played the game” of white privilege, using their whiteness or white-passingness to garner credibility. John noted that the way they presented “open[ed] doors”: 
When I need policies to get passed or I need someone to give me a yes, I’m showing up in a suit. I will have a little bit of facial hair. I will talk a specific way and everyone will go, ‘Yes, yes’… I constantly think about this: how do I use my whiteness in an advantageous way to serve my students? And how do I disrupt my white peers’ thinking? Because I know that if I say something it is going to carry a different weight, unfortunately, and stick in their brain a little different.

White HSI specialists were not the only ones who were able to leverage whiteness to influence campus leaders and other stakeholders to reimagine HSI work. Camila, who described herself as “white presenting,” explained that it afforded her the ability to “codeswitch” and “roll in a lot of different spaces” so she would use that to her advantage to “figure out how to relate with people and then get them to change the way that they look at things or how they feel about some of these things that I find very important.” Similarly, Daniel, who described himself as a “white Mexican man,” asserted that one of the “benefits” this has afforded him was, “I can stand up in a meeting and I know it offers me a certain protection… [While other] faculty and staff of color get shot down… I can get away with saying things on campus.” Because of the relative protection that whiteness extended to him, Daniel felt he could be bolder with his administrators, and he “tried to take advantage of that as much as [he] can.” Sometimes, according to participants, this sort of boldness would yield positive results, and sometimes, it did not.

**Strategists and Champions for Latinx-centeredness.** Once they had access to campus leaders, HSI specialists understood that they could not waste opportunities to upend business-as-usual practices and accelerate racial progress on their campuses. In a CoP session (#2), for example, Felix noted, “It’s important to really take advantage of
any crevice that opens in that door where we can get our finger and then a shoulder and then the rest of our body to really talk about this.” Through strategic advocacy, HSI specialists pushed administrators to think critically about why and how they should better serve Latinx students. This required the purposeful use of data as well as the promotion of HSI infrastructure to organize and sustain the effort.

**Disaggregating Data.** When administrators opened a crevice or a door, HSI specialists came prepared. As race-consciousness was not always at the fore of administrators’ minds, HSI specialists had to fill that gap and help them understand the need. Felix, for example, advised his fellow CoP participants (#2): when talking to campus leaders, “always come with that bag of tricks and facts that are gonna… engage them, blow them away. And then look for that opportunity to say… “This is how we can do things differently.”” In a later CoP session (#5), Felix circled back to this idea of fact-based intentionality to influence campus leaders: it was important to be “insistent, vigilant and equipped with evidence.” The evidence, in many cases, was data, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, that HSI specialists used to show a need for race-conscious decision-making and prioritization for campus resources devoted to HSI work. It started with simply the local, national, and institutional enrollment trends, projecting how quickly they might reach 25% Latinx enrollment based on those trends (Okoye), using the data to “nudge” administrators to recognize “the value of this community” (Felix, CoP #2), and having strategies to help them see the “opportunities” this growth presented (Susana).

In addition to enrollment data, HSI specialists honed in on outcome data, such as retention and graduation rates, to strategically reinforce the need for HSI infrastructure.
Okoye, for example, used her institution’s strategic plan goal around retention to bolster HSI efforts. Their HSI task force focused on specific strategies to close the “equity gaps” broadly across the campus but also within specific academic programs. Even HSI specialists who did not make a direct connection between HSI work and their institutions’ strategic plans were still able to strategically use retention and graduation data to nudge administrators toward prioritizing HSI efforts. Using language such as “clos[ing] the gaps in race/ethnicity” and providing information about when and why they were losing students (Erica) spoke to administrators. Liliana indicated, for example, that her institution’s data “is speaking volumes” and making it “obvious that [what they were doing] is not working.” The data helped make the case to create an “[HSI] foundation… to move [them] in the right direction.” Yatzuri and her HSI committee drilled down even further, looking at not just retention and graduation rates, but also completion rates for individual courses, and showed this data to “upper leadership so we can open their eyes, to see where in their scope of work they can do something to support the cause.”

Perhaps the most effective use of data for the strategic prioritization of HSI efforts was to show campus leaders not only where the needs were, but what actually worked to meet those needs. Proving that a particular program had a positive impact on Latinx retention rates helped HSI specialists make the case for greater investment in those programs. The most poignant example of this strategy came from Felix, who had taken a “deep dive” into the data and found that “the hole in the sack [for Latinx student attrition] is in the first three semesters.” Using this information, he and his staff began a Spanish welcome program for new students, and found that students who attended this program “outperform by miles the students who did not attend – in retention, GPA.” Because this
was such a “game changer,” Felix was able to use the impact data to expand the program. Similarly, he was able to show that the emergency fund he administered for Latinx students was associated with significantly higher retention rates. In these ways, Felix was “assessing what we’re doing so we can improve it” – and scale it up.

Finally, given the dynamic nature of their changing student bodies, HSI specialists understood the need for revisiting data, refreshing metrics, and working with administrators on a regular basis to give the initiative a “jolt of energy” (Felix) and ensure continued momentum.

**Developing Critical HSI Infrastructure.** While working to convince their campus leaders of the importance of focusing on Latinx enrollment and retention, HSI specialists also advocated for – and in some cases developed – specific infrastructure to further these goals. As Felix noted in a CoP session (#5), “You have to educate [campus leaders], then get them excited. Then the third prong is, ‘If we want to scale it, this is what we need to do.’” HSI specialists, then, demonstrated the need for structures that could help them make racial progress, such as HSI committees, HSI-specific positions, and embedding HSI goals into strategic or DEI plans.

As an administrator, Okoye was able to organize an HSI task force that was data-driven, took part in professional development hosted by both local (*HSI Coalition*) and national organizations (HACU, *Excelencia*), and had begun the process of educating the whole college community about the future of the endeavor. But HSI specialists who did not occupy administrative roles had to work their campus leaders to make these sorts of changes. Catalina, for example, had to “build that case” for HSI structures by helping her administrators see the connection between HSI and their institutional goals. And Felix, in
a CoP session (#2), advised his fellow participants to “document” and “create inventories” of Latinx-serving work in case they ever found themselves in front of campus leaders, to be able to say, “‘Well, we’ve done this, this, this, that and the other, but we could be doing more if we had the support’… Having those [documents and inventories] in hand could be a great ammunition for us to ask for more and to validate that what we’re doing holds great value.” Through careful record-keeping and always being prepared to take advantage of strategic moments to share this information with decision-makers, Felix was able to not only build HSI programs but enhance their impact.

Finally, some HSI specialists at campuses with less support from leadership had to get creative in working within existing structures, essentially baking HSI work into the institutional cake. At Carlota’s institution, for example, before an HSI effort had been formally launched, she and a colleague were able to embed the beginnings of HSI work within an existing multicultural committee, starting with translations. Similarly, Penelope built out translating work in offices that were primarily family-facing – work that continued even after she had left the institution. And Chris also took matters into his own hands, as his campus leadership had not set directives for building capacity for servingness nor had they provided additional resources:

No one said, ‘Because we’re an aspiring HSI, we have to hire more staff who are able to speak Spanish’… It seemed to me to be important. And yet it was never like, ‘You get a new line in your office, a new salary line, and this person, now and forever, will always need to speak Spanish.’… It was just something that our [specific] office prioritized in my [time] here and now we have three full time staff who speak Spanish.
Even though this critical infrastructure for servingness was not prioritized by his campus leaders, Chris saw the need and, for as long as he would have the power to do so, he filled it.

**Interest Convergers.** When influencing and strategizing failed, HSI specialists often turned to interest convergence as a tool to disrupt the racial status quo. Penelope, for example, revealed that “getting that buy-in” meant that she had to “figure out how to make [campus leaders] give a shit about these kids because it’s gonna benefit [them].” Thus, instead of focusing on how supporting URM students was just the right thing to do, HSI specialists would sometimes have to demonstrate to campus leaders how HSI efforts would help them – their bottom line, their responsibility to all students, and their egos – to further the aims of servingness.

**The Business Case for HSI.** HSI specialists used the language of “return on investment” to motivate actions that would serve their Latinx and other URM students. Penelope, for example, “learned very quickly” that administrators were motivated primarily by money. She and other HSI specialists who found this to be the case played into the co-opted HSI narrative that this effort could be used to boost their bottom line. Some HSI specialists worked the angle of the possibility for federal grant funding to get administrators to pay attention to Latinx students. More often, however, the potential increase in enrollment numbers itself was a motivating factor. As these institutions were primarily tuition-driven in an era when overall college enrollment was expected to decline (see footnote on p. 184), HSI specialists were savvy enough to play up the promise of more warm bodies in institutional seats. As Okoye noted, some campus leaders were on board with HSI “because they know enrollment’s going to help our
bottom line of finances and... I’m cool with that.” Felix also described sharing the “value added” with campus leaders as Latinx student enrollment grew, and Erica, who worked at the same campus, affirmed that “the higher ups are really paying attention” to the national growth of Latinx students as they faced a decline in their white counterparts. Participants, then, leveraged this interest in enrollment goals to show the benefit that striving for HSI would have for the institution.

*The “All Students Matter” Approach.* While HSI specialists were clear that Latinx and other URM students were the primary focus of their servingness efforts, they also understood that the “all students matter” mentality was pervasive on their campuses, often making it difficult to move institutional actors to invest in Latinx-specific programming. Thus, HSI specialists played into this “all students matter” notion to ensure that administrators saw the benefits of HSI not just for students of color, but white students as well. Quite a few participants described having to communicate how “HSI benefits everybody” to campus leaders and other colleagues to garner buy-in, understanding that while Latinx-centeredness might get lost in this approach, at least some aspects of their agenda of servingness would be supported. Noemi, for example, noted that, as her campus rapidly diversified, “We still have to consider the whole student population instead of just focusing in on one student population... That tactic also works because we’re still serving the student needs, but it’s just kind of like going around it.” This idea came up in a CoP session (#1) as well, as participants discussed the need to converge interests within a framework that would be palatable to those who were most focused on serving white stakeholders.
**Keeping up with the Joneses.** Sometimes HSI specialists converged HSI efforts with other interests, such as administrators’ eagerness to maintain a positive image. By comparing their campuses’ HSI efforts with those of their neighbor institutions, HSI specialists knew that they could appeal to campus leaders’ desires to keep up with, or even one-up, their peers. Dr. B noted, for example, that as soon as the first HSI in the state received its federal designation, suddenly “now [her administrators] wanted to do it.” Lucia also played on their tendency to compare, saying, for example, “I just attended this event and… I’m so impressed with how they’re doing things here or there [with their HSI efforts].” And John echoed this sentiment in a CoP session (#2), describing how they leveraged the *HSI Coalition* as a source for comparison:

[I tell campus leaders that] there are other schools locally also doing this. That’s a huge benefit because then all of a sudden for one, presidents tend to have egos and they’re like, ‘Oh, well, I wanna do this too.’ Or they hear, ‘Oh, they were at that panel and I wasn’t?’… Sometimes I play them that way, but also getting them to understand [that] other people are moving on this. So at the least, this is a business strategy.

By converging HSI goals with campus leaders’ interest in “keeping up with the joneses,” HSI specialists were able to move some of their initiatives forward.

**Activists.** A much less commonly cited approach to disrupting hegemonic whiteness was engaging in activism, such as protests or other demonstrations, to hold their institutional leaders accountable for fulfilling the goals of HSI. Daniel was one of the few HSI specialists who specified this as an essential component of pushing back
against business-as-usual practices, and even so, he recognized it as one of many different roles that practitioners can play:

> Some days you wanna be real romantic and go off there and stick your fist in the air, and that’s great. But other times you have to do the hard work of applying for grants. And no one, I think, can do just any one of those things and be successful. If you’re only institution building and you’re not yelling every once in a while, and if you’re only yelling, who’s gonna listen to you? So it has to be a mix of both things.

As a tenured faculty member, however, Daniel was somewhat inoculated from some of the consequences that other staff members might face if they engaged in protests or demonstrations. John was another self-described activist, but as he explained in a CoP session (#2), his brand of activism had evolved since he took on an administrative role. Rather than the “fist shaking” that Daniel described, John came to understand that “shaking the system” now as an administrator entailed “decid[ing] what part of the system [I] wanna take out… My activism is my job.”

**Cracking Through Material Exclusion**

One of the most challenging barriers to servingness that HSI specialists encountered revolved around the failure of their institutions to provide adequate material resources to operationalize servingness effectively. When asked if they could wave a magic wand and change anything about their campus or their HSI initiative, for many, their greatest wish was for more financial and human capital to do the work. But in the absence of these resources, HSI specialists pieced it together on their own: they “hustled” for the finances, took on extra work themselves, built coalitions to spread the work
around, and connected with community members and organizations to support the aims of servingness.

**Hustlers.** With small or no HSI budgets, HSI specialists had to get creative to cobble together the money necessary to do their jobs. Okoye, for example, did have a budget as a DEI administrator but found it was sorely inadequate for the need. So she responded by “getting [her] hustle on to try and pull things together” and was therefore affectionately referred to as “Hustler in Heels” by her staff. One of the ways she “made it happen” was through collaborations and partnerships with various campus offices to “jointly share that fiscal responsibility [for] positions or programming.” This was an oft-cited tactic: meeting individually with deans or heads of departments – those who did have a budget – to contribute funding and/or staff hours to accomplish the various components of servingness. A case in point was Penelope, who started with a budget of zero. She was adept at “convincing folks to use their budget” to translate materials because it would cut down on the number of inquiries they would receive: she told the financial aid department, for example, “[Spanish-speaking families] can read if you give them the information. But if they don’t have a way of obtaining the information at all, then they’re going to come to you.” And what happened? Things started getting translated.”

Sometimes, however, HSI specialists had to look outside the institution to piece together funding for their priorities. One way, particularly for administrators, was through writing grants, as Dr. B and Okoye did to fund positions and programs that would support URM students. Other participants got even more creative, looking to corporate sponsorships of HSI-related programs. Felix, for example, discussed his efforts to try to
fund their Spanish open house internally. At first, he “kept nudging at folks on campus [saying], ‘Hey, this holds value.’” But when the funds were not forthcoming, he secured funding from local companies. Interestingly, however, once the program proved successful year after year, he noticed “now people wanna be part of the good stuff” and ultimately, a campus office decided to sponsor the program out of their own budget.

One of the more creative ways that HSI specialists hustled for resources was in collaboration with students. Daniel was involved in an effort to raise money for a Dreamers scholarship, a fundraiser that was “100% student-initiated.” In a CoP session (#1), Noemi also talked about helping student organizations fundraise for their programming, letting them take the lead on asking various departments to contribute but guiding them in their outreach. But not everyone was equally as comfortable with this tactic. In the same CoP session, Lucia, for example, said that in putting together cultural programming, sometimes she would “have the students help during the event and then request funding… We got them involved, but it didn’t feel right [because] if I was doing this big event on campus for Hispanic Heritage Month, I should have had that funding.” Thus, HSI specialists hustled in whatever way they could in order to secure the funding for the work, even if they felt they should not have had to.

**Doers.** Since so much of servingness came down to human capital, and human capital was in short supply, HSI specialists often found themselves doing a disproportionate amount of the work themselves. They took on this additional labor out of a sense of responsibility to their students. Camila, for example, commented in a CoP session (#4) that “we owe [students of color] to be able to do this work and to me, in my mind, there’s just no choice.” Similarly, Yatzuri described servingness as a “willingness
to do anything” – even the things that she should not have to – “But I am willing to do it [because] I have the talents, I have the skills to be able to fill in those gaps.” Indeed, for many of the participants, like Penelope, this ethos of “above and beyond” was “just standard.” So they just did the work. Several HSI specialists framed this as “doing what you can with what you have” (Daniel; Noemi, CoP #1) and it included components of servingness such as translation work (Noemi, CoP #1), taking the time to build relationships with students (Felix, CoP #1), and pioneering Latinx-centered academic programs (Bella, Lucia, Daniel). And sometimes this required asking for forgiveness, not permission, as Carlota noted in a CoP session (#4): “because otherwise it wasn’t gonna get done.”

Coalition-Builders. But HSI specialists were not alone. They were adept at building out coalitions of people who could provide critical assistance for HSI efforts, even though it was not written into their job descriptions. As Lucia commented in the chat function of a CoP session (#1), she would “collaborat[e] with many different areas of the university and stakeholders to… develop innovative ideas and strategies to work around HSI challenges” because “it impacts everyone on campus.” These collaborations started with relationships and they required getting colleagues excited and passionate about the work. HSI specialists were also very strategic and intentional in whom they invited to participate, and they included white allies in the process.

Nurturing Relationships. Getting more stakeholders to jump into HSI work often started by building the groundwork, one by one, through personal relationships. Repeatedly, participants described relationship-building as “key,” like Erica, who underscored the importance of fostering rapport before she could engage in collaborative
efforts. Noemi referred to this personal touch as an aspect of servant leadership, because “if you want to get anything done with a group of people behind you, you have to take care of them… respect and value [them].” HSI specialists provided a number of examples of how they demonstrated their value for their colleagues, such as meeting face-to-face rather than communicating via impersonal emails and taking the time to get to know their colleagues on a personal level. For Penelope, this philosophy yielded results, as she was able to get faculty to voluntarily participate in programs that served her Latinx students when other departments – who were “clearly not building those relationships” – could not. Lucia, using the chat function in a CoP session (#3), also mentioned how these personal relationships helped grease the wheels for HSI work in that, even though this “very important work” was usually not compensated, it was “happening thanks to relationship building and not so much institutional power.” Thus, relationship-building became a powerful vehicle to build servingness capacity.

**Drinking the HSI Kool-Aid.** Relationship-building would only take HSI specialists so far; in order to build truly effective coalitions and convince their colleagues of the need to engage in often uncompensated labor, they needed to impress upon them the urgency of servingness. Camila noted, for example, that she had seen some success in “bring[ing] more allies on board and hav[ing] more people drink the HSI kool-aid” and helping them understand that “this work is shared work,” which was more effective than “try[ing] to force [them because] some people just don’t respond to that.” Some of this was accomplished through the collective meaning-making process (as described in the “Collective Meaning-Makers” section above) but cultivating allies who truly believed in HSI work required getting them to not only understand servingness, but to care about it.
While meaning-making was an intellectual process, HSI specialists needed to connect HSI work to their colleagues’ hearts. Catalina explained that with education alone, “not everybody’s gonna take the bait”; rather, she had to find ways to get them “excited” and “passionate.” By and large, the HSI specialists in this study reported being very successful in getting many of their colleagues to really believe in and commit to HSI work, such as Yatzuri, whose colleagues were committed enough that they “don’t care waking up at 6:00 in the morning on a Saturday to go do a retreat and go to the grocery store and pick up juice and fruit and be there.” In the absence of a lot of material resources, getting colleagues to “drink the HSI kool-aid” was one of the most effective ways they could build momentum for the initiative.

**Intentionality in Putting Together the Team.** Having widespread support for HSI efforts across campus was important, but HSI specialists also discussed the ways in which they chose, with great intentionality, who would be on their core teams or committees. There were several considerations. First, and most often cited, HSI specialists worked to ensure wide representation across departments that were essential to enacting servingness. This included, for example, admissions and financial aid, but also often student affairs or multicultural offices, marketing, institutional research, development, and academic departments, among others. Sometimes with so many areas of campus needing to be represented, HSI specialists got creative with structures, such as a core committee and then special “advisors” from various departments.

Secondly, HSI specialists considered power dynamics in putting together their teams. They were interested in making sure that those who would be most affected but had the least amount of power – the students – were represented, either directly or via
proxy; that is, through faculty or staff who worked closely with Latinx students. On the flip side, HSI specialists also sought out those who had the most power on campus – to allocate resources, make decisions, and/or influence others within their units. Getting some of these campus leaders involved took strategic thinking at times, such as Carlota’s tactic of inviting them as “ad hoc members that are instrumental to helping us reach the HSI designation, but don’t have to attend all meetings” (reported via the chat function of CoP session #1).

**Including White Allies.** Another key consideration in coalition-building was how HSI specialists engaged white colleagues. As Silas pointed out, “I’m not sure how quickly we can have faculty, staff, administration mirror the student body… And if you can’t change the identity of those that are in administration, staff, and faculty, then you change how they serve.” Engaging white allies was partially a numbers game, as HSI specialists calculated the logistical reality that they simply needed more bodies on board doing the work and therefore “that allyship piece is huge” (Felix, CoP #5). But more than that, participants also referred to the inclusion of white colleagues as a moral imperative. Camila, for example, pointed out that serving URM students was not just the responsibility of minoritized faculty and staff, but “it needs to be all of us.”

Cultivating white allies was not always as easy as simply inviting them to participate. On the one hand, some participants indicated that white allies felt “like they have something to contribute” (Lucia), were “very excited about helping students” (Yatzuri), and “more than willing to collaborate” (Noemi, CoP #6). On the other hand, HSI specialists recognized inherent complications when white people engaged in race-conscious work. There were the complex white understandings and feelings that
sometimes got in the way of white allyship (as described in the “Navigating White Attitudes, Understandings, and Feelings” section above). But there were other “tensions,” as described by Lucia, for example, in that white colleagues sometimes were just “not showing up.” Thus, it required more work at times to get white people on board.

Even with the complications and additional labor, HSI specialists indicated that it was well worth the effort, highlighting the advantages of having colleagues who could leverage their white privilege in ways that would serve the students. Camila, for example, in a CoP session (#4) noted that “[white people’s] voice tends to carry more weight in certain spaces” so she would encourage them to use that to the “benefit [of their] students.” Okoye also leveraged her white colleagues’ privilege to great effect to move HSI and other DEI goals forward:

I’ve cracked jokes with a couple of my fellow white executive males and deans, to say, ‘Hey, I’m gonna need you to go and use that white male privilege to move this, this, this and this along because myself and other females have had this conversation with da-ta-da-ta-da for two-three years and it’s just not moving forward. So I’m not opposed to using my allies in that kind of way, you know, for the greater good of our students.

In the end, she concluded, “I think that has made a difference.”

Many Hands Make Light Work. HSI specialists noted that once their committees and/or coalitions were formed, they were able to work across siloes to engage in servingness to great effect, often with few resources. This was necessary because, as Erica indicated, she and her HSI task force could “offer guidance, advice, collaboration” but they did not “have the capacity to do that [HSI] work” on their own. Repeatedly, HSI
specialists explained how the lack of resources to move their HSI goals forward was at least somewhat counterbalanced by “very passionate, intentional people doing things” – “not a whole lot of money, just people” (Felix) and that the primary resource they relied on was “the collective work” of colleagues across campus (Laura). Specific examples of work that would not have gotten done without the support of colleagues from various campus offices included executing Latinx-serving programs, translation work, community partnerships for student internships, tracking data for federal grant eligibility, and other logistical aspects of managing HSI work, such as through committees and subcommittees.

Sometimes, HSI specialists also recruited students to help with HSI work. In particular, several participants talked about leveraging their Spanish language skills to support translation work. In a CoP session (#1), Noemi explained that they used grant funding to pay some of her student ambassadors to translate marketing materials, and similarly, John discussed taking a chunk of money from their budget to hire four students to translate their admissions website and some printed materials into Spanish.

Importantly, HSI specialists were clear that they would never ask students to engage in uncompensated labor in the same way they might nudge their colleagues, as so many of these students came from low-income backgrounds, but if they had the budget dollars to do it, paying students to support servingness on campus was seen as a win-win.

In the end, HSI specialists really aimed at engaging the entire campus community as members of a coalition. Felix noted that a lot of the servingness work on his campus had been done on a “micro level” and so he continued to build momentum toward a truly “campus-wide effort to jump on board.” In the meantime, HSI specialists were persistent
in their efforts to continue working their networks, winning both hearts and minds, and convincing colleagues of how they could collectively work to transform campus practices and better serve URM students.

**Community Connectors.** Even as they worked to build out internal coalitions to engage in servingness work, HSI specialists recognized that “when it comes to supporting these students, we cannot do it alone, clearly” (Bella). Thus, the lack of institutional resources led many HSI specialists to seek outside individuals and organizations who could also provide critical support.

One source of human capital that helped advance HSI goals and promote servingness was alumni. Importantly, even though alumni were often looked to by their institutions primarily as donors, HSI specialists understood that their value went far beyond monetary contributions. Catalina explained, “There’s so many different ways to engage alums, whether it’s time, talent, mentorship. It may not always be giving.” So she had “reimagined” how to engage alumni, utilizing them as ambassadors to spread the word about the institution to other potential Latinx students. Bella also talked specifically about informal mentorship, in that alumni who were Dreamers would come back to her campus to share their stories with students who were in a similar situation. There were countless ways that alumni could – and would – support their students without charge, and Bella found that “a lot of [the alumni] are willing to do that because they care about our students just as much as we do.”

Another way that HSI specialists connected with their community as a resource was to tap into community members’ vast wells of wisdom for guidance as they advanced their HSI efforts. Participants mentioned having informal “sounding board” relationships
with prominent Latinx community members and organizations through personal or professional connections, as well as colleagues at other institutions, who could “give us some insight as to what they’ve done or what’s worked and what hasn’t worked as they try to obtain this HSI status” (Elizabeth). Some talked about sending cohorts of colleagues to participate in professional development opportunities sponsored by local community organizations to support their race-conscious efforts. Others described their creation of formal community advisory boards to “take a pulse on the community and also hear their recommendations, their thoughts on how the university could move forward… on areas of opportunity” (Felix). According to Susana, this was important to help their institutions “think differently to meet the needs of the students and families.”

But in addition to “helping bring the community closer to campus,” as Felix explained in a CoP session (#1), it also brought their “campus leaders and university resources closer to the community.” These mutually beneficial, bidirectional partnerships included matching scholarship programs with local organizations and foundations, working with the Mexican Consulate to provide additional educational support for adult learners, supporting student chapters of a Latinx-serving non-profit organization, creating experiential learning opportunities for students within the community, and of course, connecting students directly with the resources and people from these organizations. In describing one such partnership, Noemi commented, “It was just very fulfilling and very, very just nice and cool to see so many adult Hispanics ready to help Hispanic students, ready to give that advice, ready to answer their questions.”
Dealing with the Personal Toll of Whiteness

As described in Part II, HSI specialists felt a personal burden as a result of institutional whiteness, from the emotional toll of feeling undervalued or overlooked, to the invisible labor and burnout associated with being a PoC doing DEI work, to retaliation and disillusionment. Yet despite the challenges they encountered in HSI work, many chose to stay in their positions, working day after day to fight institutional currents and operationalize servingness for their students. To do this, HSI specialists drew strength and motivation from their personal passions and experiences, their internal attributes, and their community, and they also learned to set boundaries that helped them prioritize and sustain the most important aspects of the work.

Leaning into their “Why.” Almost all participants in this study described their motivation for engaging in HSI efforts as tied intimately to their personal values. Words that came up repeatedly to describe their work were “calling” and “passion” and they leaned into this to continue to find meaning and purpose, despite the barriers they often encountered. Several mentioned that they felt lucky or blessed to be able to be paid to do something that they found so valuable. As Felix commented, “When the work you do is parallel with your set of values, it’s very easy to fall in love with this work and to find joy in every aspect of it.”

Oftentimes, these personal values were derived from HSI specialists’ own experiences and backgrounds. Almost all the participants described their identities as Latinx, first-generation college students, immigrants, and/or low-income as having informed their understandings of how students navigated higher education and the struggles they encountered along the way. This empathy was at the core of their
persistence to continue creating pathways for Latinx and other URM students and advocating for their needs. Liliana, for example, described the struggles she faced as an English-language learner with parents who were just as confused about the college process as she was. She therefore saw herself as inextricably connected to the students she served, commenting, “This is who I am. I am part of this.” Penelope also talked about doing the work that she did “from a place of healing” – treating her students’ families “how I wish that my parents would have been treated and talked to and engaged with.”

Many of the other HSI specialists shared similar personal stories, explaining that seeing themselves in their students compelled them to “pay forward” the educational opportunities that they had access to, “giving back” to their community and working to make their institutions more Latinx student friendly.

Because servingness was so intimately connected to their sense of purpose, identity, and community, HSI specialists described a deep sense of gratification in doing this work, which also fortified them to carry on. Their reward came through as a sense of “joy” (Felix; Noemi, CoP #6), being able to engage in “invigorating” and “exciting” work (Catalina), and feeling “useful” (Noemi, CoP #1), “energized” (Felix), “fulfilled” (Noemi), “affirm[ed]” (Lucia, CoP #6), and “validated” – knowing that they were making an impact (John, Carlota). There was also a sense of pride in their work and sometimes even their institution for making strides towards servingness (Catalina, Lucia, Okoye), the feeling that they were part of something historic on their campus (Liliana), and gratitude for both their colleagues and their students (Catalina, Silas). Thus, despite the workload and the challenges, HSI specialists were able tap into these feelings to forge on.

Felix reported that his staff wondered about him, “How do you come with your tank full
every day?” To which he would simply respond, “I checked five boxes today. I helped 10 students… I helped the colleague across campus understand the work we do a little better… It doesn’t take much to fill my tank.” Similarly, Yatzuri expressed that despite how incredibly busy she was, she “love[d her work] so much.”

**Drawing from Internal Attributes.** HSI specialists were also endowed with a variety of personal characteristics and orientations that helped them stay in the game. Their courage, boldness, tough skin, personal drive, natural optimism, and innovation helped them face and navigate the challenges that whiteness presented. While not all HSI specialists possessed the same types of characteristics, there were two in particular that bubbled up often in our conversations: authenticity and perseverance.

**Authenticity.** Being able to show up to campus as themselves and not “assimilating” or hiding who they were was one way that HSI specialists, particularly those who themselves were Latinx, warded off the blows that whiteness dealt them. Sometimes this would make them feel vulnerable – especially for HSI specialists like Lucia who were self-conscious about their accent, background, and experiences – but once they more publicly embraced their identities, they described this as “liberating.” It was not only freeing for them, but, as Penelope pointed out, not “toning [themselves] down” also gave tacit permission for students to do the same.

Participants also drew a connection between authenticity and the ways they expressed care or love for their work, their students, and their coworkers. In a CoP session (#3), for example, Felix described the importance of embodying his “authentic self” by “show[ing] people the way I feel in my heart… that we need to set the right conditions for our students and our families.” This, he believed, would “convince a lot of
people to do the right things… [because] they’re gonna feel the same things that I’m feeling.” And in the same CoP session (#3), Noemi also described her strategy for leadership as “being true to my authentic roots” in a way that “express[es] care and love for my team.” She noted that if they “want the institution to embrace Latinidad, so do we.” Thus, being true to themselves was beneficial not only to HSI specialists, but also helped pave the way for greater cultural openness and affirmation across campus.

**Perseverance.** One of the most often cited attributes that assisted HSI specialists in combatting whiteness was their internal tenacity or stamina – even when the road was long and they were tired. Because “institutional change takes time” (Noemi, CoP #3) and “sometimes things aren’t going to happen like you expect them to” (Laura), participants kept coming back to the idea of persistence. In a CoP session (#1), Felix, for example, characterized himself as “relentless”: “I don’t mind knocking on the same door twice or three times because I know our students need it, our families need it.” When they faced institutional gatekeepers, delays, or setbacks, participants provided example after example of how they forged on, persisting until they got a “yes” or were able to move the needle toward servingness. As Liliana noted, “We can’t give up. There’s so much work to do.”

**Self-Care and Boundary-Setting.** No matter how positive HSI specialists tried to remain, the burden of burnout and battle fatigue sometimes compelled them to take a step back and focus on themselves. Sometimes this took the form of self-care rituals, such as journaling, exercising, spending time with family and faith communities, stress management techniques, attending therapy, honoring weekends for rejuvenation, and taking vacations away from work. More often, HSI specialists discussed setting
boundaries to decrease their own invisible labor and keep their institutions from sucking them dry. Recognizing that they could not change the institution overnight, they took the “healthy” approach of focusing on what they could control and honing in on the one or two things they knew they could accomplish or where they knew they could have the biggest impact. This necessarily meant that they would have to say “no” to some meetings, committees, or other requests. But they were clear about their priorities, asserting, as Noemi did, that “If I have to drop anything, it’s not going to be my students.”

Setting boundaries was not only helpful to the HSI specialists themselves, but it was also used as a way to push the institution to invest resources in positions or programs that would benefit Latinx students in the longer run. The primary example that came up in the interviews was the uncompensated translation work that many HSI specialists had taken on out of institutional necessity. Elizabeth explained that she used to translate everything and “was greatly taken advantage of” but then she came to understand that “every time we translate or interpret, it gives [the institution] a reason to not hire a bilingual upfront person… Every time we do this invisible work, it’s not just detrimental to us… but it’s detrimental to our community.” And so they drew a line in the sand.

**Leaning into their Community.** As much as HSI specialists were fortified by their own passions and personal attributes, sometimes they turned to others to boost their morale. In particular, participants reported leaning on like-minded colleagues for support, both on their campuses and off.

**On-Campus Supporters.** A number of HSI specialists expressed gratitude for supervisors or mentors who provided support for both their professional work as well as
for them personally. They described mentors who validated and guided them and supervisors who provided opportunities to grow and develop as professionals. Importantly, they also talked about administrators who believed in them and therefore invested in their ideas, allowing the work that they felt so passionate about to take shape. Lucia, in a CoP session (#6), recognized her mentor as “the kind of people you want… to have on your corner.”

Much more frequently, HSI specialists talked about supportive teams who made their work easier. These were colleagues who were proactive in partnering on Latinx-serving projects and programs (Lucia), served as sounding boards through challenges and offered advice based on their deep knowledge and experience (Liliana), and picked up each other’s slack when someone needed help (Okoye). Witnessing the care that many of their colleagues had for their students and their genuine interest in learning how to serve them better not only “energized” HSI specialists (Catalina), but it also helped facilitate their jobs and their agenda of servingness. Participants also talked about the importance of personal support that colleagues extended to them – coworkers who helped them “decompress” (Penelope) or made them feel “connected” (Noemi), “appreciated” or “embraced” (Lucia, CoP #3). And there were even colleagues who stood up for them when they were being mistreated. For example, in a CoP session (#3), Lucia described an incident in which she was the recipient of a microaggression, and another colleague she characterized as an ally told her after, “You know, I’m gonna talk to this person about this because I saw it happening. You don’t have to go and explain. I’m gonna go ahead and do it for you.” Lucia described feeling “amazing” to have had that support. The participants in this study characterized these on-campus supports as essential not only as
partners, but as personal lifelines. As Liliana commented, “I don’t think I can survive without them.”

**Off-Campus Sources of Support.** Sometimes, however, HSI work felt like a lonely job. A number of participants described feeling “alone” in their institutions, or not having a lot of allies they could count on internally. These HSI specialists, as well as many who did indicate that they had on-campus support, sought out practitioners at other institutions or in the community who were engaged in similar work. While some participants recognized local community organizations as sources of support, the most often cited network of dedicated allies that they talked about was the *HSI Coalition*, from which I originally drew the participants for this study.

As an organization with a specific mission of connecting HSI specialists to better engage in servingness, this group filled a very specific niche. For one, participants detailed how the learning opportunities they had access to as members of this group were critical to their own development. They gleaned best practices, learned from each other’s experiences or even mistakes, shared research and resources, gained nuts-and-bolts advice about HSI efforts, generated ideas, and took advantage of collectively created materials they could adopt and use at their own campuses. Catalina talked about how the “different perspectives and the lenses that [the *HSI Coalition*] brings help[ed] shine a light and amplify the possibilities” and how it was a “source of energy and inspiration” for her own HSI work.

But more than just a source of professional support, the *HSI Coalition* was a space for camaraderie and commiseration. As Dr. B expressed, the group provided a “sense of community, but also sisterhood and brotherhood.” Being connected to like-minded
practitioners who were also experiencing many of the same challenges on their own campuses helped with morale as they came to understand that they were not alone in the struggle. For example, Camila explained,

> Sometimes you feel like, why am I still doing this? Like why, what’s the point? Even when you have successes and there’s great stuff happening. But sometimes it’s nice to know that other people are having similar experiences or barriers exist and so that you know it’s not just because your institution is the worst on the face of the earth.

HSI specialists described mutual encouragement the coalition members offered each other, reminding them of their “why” and helping them to keep going.

Interestingly, HSI specialists who participated in the CoP sessions echoed many of the same sentiments about this group as they did about the *HSI Coalition*, even though it was not explicitly asked. Similar to the coalition, the CoP was utilized as a space to share resources, and participants characterized it as a learning opportunity – a dedicated time to reflect on and dialogue about their practice. Importantly, it also became a mini-community. Participants described a sense of solidarity with each other and came to understand the connections of their work across institutions. And they expressed that these sessions fortified them, affirmed that they were not alone, and counteracted isolation. Susana, for example, commented at the end of the first CoP session, “I think it’s the first time for me that we can talk about some of the dynamics that are going on and that we should collectively try to figure this out together.” So much of what participants shared throughout the sessions resonated with each other – very frequently, participants would find themselves nodding along with what others were saying,
“echoing” or “building off of” previous comments, describing “similar experiences,” and using the chat function to validate each other’s stories and experiences.

HSI specialists who participated in the CoP felt that it was a safe space to share and be vulnerable. Carlota, for example, expressed in the final session that it had been a great way to share her struggles and “cope with all the stress,” and Noemi mentioned in the same session that she felt valued in the group and never felt she had to “prove” herself. In fact, for Noemi, it was a profoundly affirming experience, as she commented that “with the Community of Practice, I feel like I have a bigger scope of the higher education space overall… [which] reinforced a belief in me that I do want to stay in this space or something related to it.” Words of encouragement and support were frequently shared in the CoP sessions, and they used the time to also celebrate each other’s work – not something that always happened on their respective campuses.

**Hanging on to Hope.** It is important to note that because of the nature of my research questions, the bulk of this chapter has necessarily focused on challenges. But every participant in this study was also able to point to positive developments on their campuses and many (although not all) of the HSI specialists indicated that they saw glimmers of institutional change, which shored them up when they were feeling beaten down. Camila, for example, commented,

> Sometimes we get bogged into the hard stuff because that’s where we’re spending all of our energy. But there’s a lot of really awesome things happening… And we wouldn’t be doing this otherwise if we didn’t think our students could benefit from being a part of our institutions.
For HSI specialists in this study, there were two primary sources of hope for their institutions: campus leaders who championed servingness and indications of culture shifts as institutional understandings and practices transformed over time.

**Leadership Makes the Difference.** While some participants in this study expressed deep dissatisfaction with their campus leaders, a number of HSI specialists described administrators who were “supportive” of HSI work. But the term “supportive” had a range of meanings. Sometimes, it seemed to be a more passive support, as HSI specialists expressed that their administrators understood servingness in theory but, while they did not get in the way of those doing the work, they also did not seem to be doing much to proactively put servingness into practice. For example, John mentioned in a CoP session (#1) that while his fellow administrators would read and talk about servingness, “unfortunately for my leadership, sometimes it still seems very abstract, or that they can’t connect it to… the [students] in the building.” Other participants described supportive administrators who thought more critically about HSI work, maybe even initiated conversations and were receptive to recommendations, but were still trying to “figure out” how to move resources or make meaningful changes. Bella, for example, described a wave of HSI energy with a new VP whose heart was in servingness, but so far, the jury was still out on whether or not she would be able to deliver: “[The VP] does talk about HSI budget. She talks about a lot of stuff like that… I don’t know if and when that will happen or be effective, but I do know that there is support there for that.”

The campus leaders who inspired the most hope, however, were the most hands-on – those who personally orchestrated HSI efforts and accelerated transformational change. Oftentimes PoC themselves, these administrators served on “project management
teams” (Catalina), worked “behind the scenes” to develop and implement action steps (Liliana), incorporated HSI goals into institutional strategic plans, formalizing the effort (Carlota), and insisted on being CC’ed on communications around HSI work to ensure that the recipients understood its importance and prioritized it (Noemi, CoP #1). Yatzuri described a cabinet-level VP on her campus as their “carta bajo la manga” [ace up their sleeve] and the “mom of HSI” because of her passion and unwillingness to let HSI requests be dismissed without a fight. And these leaders’ deep investment in servingness yielded tangible outcomes. Lucia described, for example, a president who personally fundraised for a Dreamers scholarship, and an administrator who supported her to create a new academic program that served primarily Latinx students.

While it was important to have at least one champion for HSI work within upper administration, there was greater hope on campuses where there was a groundswell of support across the administrative team. A number of participants talked about the power of multiple leaders advocating for HSI efforts and the difference it made, but here I will highlight the interesting case study of the technical college where Dr. B, Susana, and Yatzuri all worked. Dr. B was herself a high-level administrator who helped launch her institution’s HSI effort. At that time, she was “start[ing] from zero” and, despite her efforts, did not see many of her HSI recommendations implemented. But after she left the institution, there was a wave of diverse hires across the leadership team, whose collective efforts resulted in hard money, a structure, and a position for HSI work. Susana, who arrived on campus after Dr. B left, indicated that executive leaders were now “committed to making sure that we have the resources for this initiative.” And Yatzuri, who occupied a staff position at the same institution, reported another unique form of tangible support
from their campus leaders: some HSI committee members were adding HSI work on to their duties-as-assigned as uncompensated labor, so a directive came down from administration to supervisors that everyone involved in HSI should be “excused from their regular duties to participate in meetings and dedicate a couple of hours a week to do the work.” In this way, their campus leaders truly institutionalized servingness by ensuring that it was integrated into the fabric of the workday and therefore sustainable. And this act demonstrated tremendous support not just for HSI, but also for the people on the ground floor doing the work.

**Culture Shifts and Progress Made.** At the end of the day, HSI specialists sometimes were able to step back and take stock of the racial progress that they had helped create and the momentum that HSI efforts generated. For example, Felix reminded his fellow participants in a CoP session (#2) that “anything that we do holds great value… We need to acknowledge that… it’s steps in the right direction.” And sometimes, these “steps in the right direction” added up to wholesale “shifts” in the way their colleagues understood HSI work and the ways in which their institutions operated. Okoye, for example, revealed that even though she had to work every day to de-center whiteness within her campus culture, she felt like they were in a “period of transition and transformation” where they were “moving things forward.” Similarly, Lucia asserted her pride in their HSI work and, while she recognized the challenges and the long road ahead, she also described a “rethink[ing]” of business-as-usual practices that was making its way into their strategic plan and would significantly tip the scales in favor of servingness. And Chris reported that even the aspiration to become an HSI itself had opened the floodgates to allow race-conscious understandings to enter into “strategic conversation about the…”
future of [his institution].” Naming a number of changes that came about as a direct result of HSI efforts, he recognized, “All of these things contribute to serving our… Latino students.”

While some reported a sense that their institutions were just starting to ride the wave of change, a few HSI specialists described being on the other side of the tidal wave. This was most notable at one of the recently designated HSIs in the study. Noemi had been a student on that campus before she became a full-time professional there, and in a CoP session (#6) she talked about the changes she had witnessed from her student experience when “they were watering very tiny little baby roots” to present day, when the services were “very, very different… So just seeing those changes over time, physically seeing the change in staff, the change in policy, the change in mission statements, the change in everything is an amazing experience for me.” Silas, who worked at the same institution, had a similar take on how their campus had shifted: “With the new hires, with the retirements, and with the professional development that we have thanks to the HSI designation and the grant funds, I think our institutional empathy is starting to grow.”

But no matter where their campuses were on their journeys toward embodying servingness, the HSI specialists who continued to work on those campuses all expressed a relentless belief in the importance of their work and the potential their institutions had to make a positive impact in the lives of their students. Even Daniel, who had some of the sharpest criticism for his institutional leadership and the practices of his institution, expressed some sense of optimism about the potential for impact and change: “What else is there but hope?”
Summary of Part III: Strategies for Disrupting Institutional Whiteness

In this section, I summarized the strategies that HSI specialists reported using to counteract the effects of institutional whiteness in order to advance the goals of servingness.

When encountering white attitudes, understandings, and feelings that interfered with honest and meaningful engagement with race-conscious work, HSI specialists invested time and energy into educating their colleagues and employed effective communication strategies to sway their hearts and minds. They also “ruffled feathers,” interrogating white norms, biases, and harmful practices, and encouraged their white allies to do the same.

Responding to the demographic whiteness of their campuses, participants provided practical hiring strategies. They also pushed back against the ontological expansiveness of whiteness by leading the way on culturally affirming practices and advocating directly for their students when they were harmed, and created counterspaces of community, oases in the sea of whiteness where PoC could feel affirmed and supported.

Disrupting white racial projects entailed campus-wide efforts to engage in collective meaning-making so that stakeholders could come to a shared understanding of the true meaning of “servingness.” It also required HSI specialists to become influencers of campus leaders and expert strategists, leaning on data and leveraging interest convergence as tools to advocate for critical HSI infrastructure and accelerate racial progress.
Facing the sticky issue of exclusion from material resources, participants got their “hustle” on, coming up with creative ways to piece together funding through cross-campus collaborations. They also personally went above and beyond to do the work themselves in the absence of human capital, and they were expert coalition-builders, laying the groundwork by fostering relationships, intentional and strategic outreach, and engaging allies of all racial backgrounds to participate in the work. For additional support, they leveraged community partnerships and alumni connections for resources in the form of time, talent, and treasure.

When whiteness took a personal toll on HSI specialists, they grounded themselves in their purpose, found strength and maintained motivation through personal attributes such as authenticity and persistence, and sometimes limited their exposure to uncompensated labor. And they leaned on other practitioners – both on and off campus – as sources of encouragement and support. Finally, HSI specialists shared the ways they felt a sense of hope for their work, their institutions, and their students, as many were witnesses to transformative leadership and the beginnings of cultural shifts in understanding – and enacting – servingness.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This study explores how HSI specialists in an emerging HSI region both
encountered and countered whiteness on campuses in transition from predominantly
white to Latinx-serving. Knowledge gaps in HSI/eHSI research justified the need to learn
directly from practitioners who were responsible for and most closely connected to HSI
work, particularly on campuses that were striving to embody a new organizational
identity that integrated servingness. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews and a
Community of Practice (CoP) with HSI specialists, this study creates new understandings
of how these practitioners conceptualize and navigate the historical legacy of whiteness
on their campuses. Specifically, it sheds light on the barriers they perceive institutional
whiteness presenting as they work toward a race-conscious model of servingness, and the
strategies they employ to disrupt it.

This final chapter situates the research findings within existing literature and
provides practical takeaways. In Part I, I expand upon what is known about race-
conscious models for servingness to include elements that were particularly salient to the
participants in this study who work at campuses in transition. I also connect HSI
specialists’ understandings of how whiteness operates on their campuses to theories of
institutional whiteness and provide additional nuances that apply to recently designated
and emerging HSIs, based on the findings. I then revisit the strategies HSI specialists
employed for counteracting the effects of the historical legacy of whiteness on their
campuses and put these strategies into conversation with literature on URM faculty/staff
and DEI practitioners in higher education. In Part II, I delineate the implications this
study has for practice, including strategies for HSI specialists, administrators, and other
faculty and staff who are interested in enacting servingness on college campuses. In Part III, I conclude with a discussion of the limitations of the current study and possibilities for future research.

**Part I: Implications for Theory**

In this section, I directly connect themes from my findings to existing literature on HSIs and theories on whiteness. I discuss new understandings of HWCs in transition to HSIs, based on the experiences and interpretations of practitioners responsible for HSI efforts at recently designated and emerging HSIs. The sections below mirror those from my findings: conceptualizing servingness, nuancing theories of whiteness, and engaging in strategic counterhegemony at campuses in transition.

*Conceptualizing Servingness at Campuses in Transition*

Exploring HSI specialists’ understandings of servingness was important to lay the foundation for what they understood to be the fundamental purpose of HSI work and when, why, and how that work was derailed by the historical legacy of whiteness on their campuses. The HSI specialists in this study possessed a strong foundation in HSI research and scholarly definitions of servingness, which they clearly articulated. My research findings confirm that the ways that HSI specialists conceptualized servingness mapped well onto existing literature. The research-based definition of servingness includes not only meeting 25% Hispanic enrollment, at least 50% of whom are low-income, but also engaging in both culturally affirming and supportive practices that foster positive experiences and outcomes for Latinx students (García & Koren, 2020).

To this definition, however, participants in this study provided some additional nuance. Servingness was envisioned by HSI specialists as not only focusing on Latinx
students but extending broadly to all historically marginalized students. To many HSI specialists, being unapologetically Latinx-serving and ensuring that institutional efforts at servingness supported all URM students were not mutually exclusive goals. In fact, quite the opposite: HSI specialists understood the common struggle of minoritized people on college campuses and believed that servingness would provide them with a “blueprint of success” (Felix) that could be applied to other URM populations and that HSI work fundamentally was about addressing all minoritized students. This is consistent with the only other empirical research that explicitly explored whiteness at an HSI. In their case study, Scott and colleagues (2022) found that staff of color connected the HSI designation to the idea that all students of color should – and would – benefit.

The specific aspects of servingness participants emphasized in their interviews also aligned closely with existing literature on the subject. As described by García and colleagues (2019) based on an extensive review of HSI literature, “structures for serving” include the components outlined in Table 4 below. When asked to articulate what servingness meant to them, HSI specialists in this study touched upon all these central structures without prompting. They did emphasize certain aspects as being more central than others; for example, fewer participants discussed mission statements and incentive structures, but almost everyone talked about diversity of faculty/staff and Latinx community engagement as foundational to HSI work.

Additionally, there were areas missing from Garcia and colleagues’ (2019) framework that were particularly salient to participants and might deserve to stand alone as structures for serving at campuses in transition. These aspects of servingness included critical race-conscious leadership orientations, scaffolding “dynamic” diversity, bilingual
support services, providing special consideration for Dreamers, and constructing a collective Latinx-serving organizational identity. In Table 4, I have incorporated these extensions of García’s framework. Finally, participants’ reflections on servingness indicate one further clarification to the “Compositional diversity” structure, particularly as it pertains to institutions striving to become HSIs.

**Table 4**

*Structures for Serving, Amended for HSIs/eHSIs in Emerging HSI Regions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Themes</th>
<th>Structures for Serving (based on García et al.’s 2019 Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness at HSIs and the findings from this study)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Leading to Serve                        | - Mission and values statements  
- Diversity plans  
- Leadership & decision-making practices  
- Critical race-conscious leadership orientations* |
| Resource Development and Allocation     | - HSI grants  
- Institutional advancement activities  
- Incentive structures  
- External boundary management |
| Fostering Compositional and Dynamic Diversity | - Compositional diversity: faculty, staff, administration, graduate students  
- Dynamic diversity* |
| Building a Culturally Affirming Infrastructure | - Engagement with the Latinx community  
- Culturally relevant curriculum & pedagogy  
- Programs and services for minoritized students  
- Bilingual capacity*  
- Special consideration for Dreamers*  
- Shared Latinx-serving organizational identity* |

*Note.* The elements indicated with an asterisk are additions not included in García et al.’s (2019) Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness at HSIs, but rather added as elements identified as central to servingness by practitioners at recently designated and emerging HSIs.
**Critical Race-Conscious Leadership Orientations.** HSI specialists reported that so many aspects of servingness could not be enacted without proactive and ongoing engagement on the part of campus leaders. But more than just how these administrators made decisions, allocated resources, or embedded HSI work into institutional priorities, a thread that was woven throughout the interviews and CoP sessions was also how these campus leaders were thinking about and understanding the work of servingness. According to participants, their leaders’ understandings about how race, racism and white supremacy operated determined how deeply they supported servingness efforts and therefore profoundly impacted outcomes and experiences for Latinx and other URM students on their campuses. HSI specialists brought forth many examples of administrators’ lack of awareness, cultural competence, or cultural humility, self-doubt or unwillingness to engage in racial discomfort, colorblind and ignorant attitudes, and disconnects between their symbolic support for HSI efforts and any meaningful action to enact servingness. I argue, then, that a necessary structure of servingness for campuses in transition includes critical race-consciousness among campus leaders.

These findings are echoed in literature on educational leaders more broadly. While not specific to HSI/eHSI campuses, scholars have argued that, in order to be effective in their equity efforts, educational leaders must first engage in critical self-reflection (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Blackmore (2010) points to the importance of participating in professional learning around race and racism “to identify how systemic discrimination works in and through education and allows those in power to ignore their privilege” (p. 57). Other scholars have called upon leaders to forge authentic relationships with BIPOC stakeholders. For example, Bornstein’s (2019) formulation of
“transformative educational leadership praxis” highlights the importance of developing an equity-minded, critical consciousness, but also recognizes the need to understand both the challenges and assets of marginalized students and build meaningful relationships with them and their communities. Similarly, Alemán, Jr. (2009) conceptualizes a “LatCrit” educational leadership philosophy that rejects internalized whiteness and is rooted in coalition building, and Liu (2018) urges white leaders to engage in listening as a “form of radical white praxis...to learn how to be unobtrusive and unimportant” (p. 110).

Educational leaders who do not engage in such self-reflexivity and cling to colorblind, race-neutral, or meritocratic ideologies, on the other hand, are less willing to challenge the status quo (Evans, 2007). This was clearly mirrored in the findings of this study: many HSI specialists described campus leaders who exhibited a similar lack of self-awareness, were unable or unwilling to recognize racially rooted inequities, and assumed an “all students matter” orientation. Participants on these campuses reported policies with racially disparate outcomes that remained intact, and administrative intransigence rather than transformation. In short, the findings from this study and extant scholarship on educational leaders suggest a need for HSI/eHSI administrators to center marginalized voices and understand their own social positioning as a central component for servingness.

**Compositional Diversity of Students.** While García and colleagues’ (2019) framework already includes compositional diversity across all constituencies, here I nuance this structure for servingness, particularly for recently designated and emerging HSIs. The participants in this study indicated that outreach efforts specific to Spanish-speaking families and other prospective Latinx students was foundational to servingness.
Those who worked at eHSI campuses in particular emphasized increasing the compositional diversity of their student body through targeted enrollment strategies. Consistent with research on eHSIs, it has been found that more than half of eHSIs have recruitment efforts that specifically target Latinx students as “the ability to serve more of their community” as well as the possibility of federal HSI grants to better serve those on their campuses were the primary motivators for striving for HSI status (Santiago & Andrade, 2010). Thus, while recruitment strategies that provide greater access to students from a variety of backgrounds is touted in HSI literature as critical to servingness (García et al., 2019), incorporating bilingual and bicultural elements into recruitment practices for the specific purpose of achieving HSI was also highlighted as central, particularly at emerging HSIs.

**Dynamic Diversity.** Aligning with García and colleagues’ (2019) framework, compositional diversity, including that of students, faculty, staff, and administrators, was central to HSI specialists’ conceptualization of servingness. In a decolonized vision of HSIs, campus members of varied racial, cultural, religious, and other backgrounds would be “united by their desire to disrupt dominant structures” (García, 2018a, p. 137). But that unity does not always happen organically. HSI specialists in this study recognized that there was sometimes a tension between the increasing Latinx populations on their campuses and other URM groups. Consistent with research that suggests that non-Latinx students of color can feel “othered” at HSIs (Willis et al., 2019), participants in this study described instances of anti-Black biases that not only marginalized Black members of their community, but also played into cross-group tensions.
More commonly, however, HSI specialists indicated that the source of this division was due to “pie mentality.” There were extremely limited resources dedicated to all URM groups and these groups were – even if unintentionally – put into competition with each other for those resources. It created resistance to HSI work from both other minoritized stakeholders as well as some administrators who were afraid of possible pushback from non-Latinx students of color and white campus community members alike. One case study at an HSI with significant populations of both Black and Latinx students showed similar trends: competition for scarce resources allotted to students of color as well as intergroup distrust contributed to tenuous relationships between the groups (Literte, 2011). Thus, while research supports the idea that “increasing the structural diversity of an institution is an important initial step toward improving the climate” (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 286), a critical mass of racially diverse stakeholders alone is not enough to foster a campus climate that is conducive to the aims of servingness.

In this study, participants viewed the tension between Latinx and other URM students as manufactured by institutional narratives around the meaning of HSI and therefore they believed it could be undone through education and collective meaning-making. By dismantling myths about who is served with servingness and reframing HSI beyond a zero-sum analysis, HSI specialists reported being able to de-escalate some of the contention. They also indicated that they were able to build cross-racial solidarity through scaffolded opportunities for students with different cultural backgrounds to learn from each other and understand their shared struggles.
Research on this subject is not specific to HSI campuses, but it has been argued that compositional diversity is a necessary but insufficient condition to reap the benefits of diverse campus environments. Specifically, there is a need for cross-racial interactions in both informal and formal spaces (Cabrera et al., 2017; Franco & Hernandez, 2018; Gurin et al., 2002). Garces and Jayakumar (2014) term this dynamic diversity, which refers to both “meaningful numbers” of URM students but also opportunities for quality cross-racial interactions in classrooms (and other “microenvironments”) and disruption of historical patterns of exclusion. Dynamic diversity allows for full participation in social and civic environments that is enjoyed by all (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014) and can improve campus climate for underrepresented stakeholders (Hurtado et al., 1998). Indeed, Literte (2011) concludes from their case study that institutionally supported programs that provide opportunities for meaningful intergroup dialogue can be effective in easing conflict between Black and Latinx students and fostering positive intergroup dynamics.

Dynamic diversity also has the added benefit of providing students of all backgrounds with positive non-academic outcomes, as it has been shown that opportunities for institutionally supported intergroup interactions can produce enhanced understandings of the “other” as well as decreased prejudicial attitudes (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000, p. 18). As HSI scholars have urged researchers and practitioners to think beyond traditional outcomes as measures for servingness (e.g. Cuellar, 2015), this is one possible outcome that may warrant future exploration.

**Bilingual Capacity.** Participants in this study put a very heavy emphasis on bilingualism in their outreach efforts, web and print materials, academic and co-curricular programs, and, for those with large populations of Spanish-speaking immigrant students,
bilingual educational support services. Bilingualism is discussed in some literature on HSIs, often as it pertains to specific academic programs and pedagogical practices. For example, HSI scholarship in this area highlights effective bilingual teacher preparation programs (Garza et al., 2020), explores the complexities of creating bilingual, transcultural courses (Cedeño & Schwarzer, 2022), and describes the development of faculty awareness and use of translanguage as a pedagogical practice (Cavazos & Musanti, 2021).

Very little HSI research, however, touches on the importance of bilingualism embedded across campus structures outside of the classroom. One exception is the Martinez and Gonzales (2015) study highlighting six collaborative academic-student affairs programs. Guided by Rendón’s validation theory (1994) and based on the results of their study, the authors argue that the rich knowledge and abilities that Latinx and other nondominant students bring – including their bilingualism – should be “fold[ed] into… the institutional fabric” (p. 69). Similarly, the participants in this study underscored the need for building their institutions’ bilingual capacity as a practical support for students and families as well as “normalizing” the use of Spanish as a culturally validating practice. It is possible that, since most research on HSIs is done in areas that are Latinx-rich such as California and Texas, it is a matter of course that Spanish-speaking students in those regions would encounter Spanish-speaking faculty and staff who could support them, or that speaking Spanish in both informal spaces as well as institutionally supported co-curricular programs is so normalized that it does not rise to a place of salience in the literature on long-established HSIs. But in an emerging HSI region where there is a dearth of Spanish-speaking faculty/staff, building bilingual
capacity within the institution was emphasized again and again as an essential aspect for servingness.

**Dreamer Support.** HSI specialists were profoundly concerned about the experiences and outcomes for their undocumented students and underscored their needs as a central element of servingness. This had become an even more pressing issue since the winddown of the DACA program began in 2017.20 Participants in this study focused on financial resources for Dreamers and awareness-building to foster more undocu-friendly campus climates, which is consistent with literature on undocumented college students (see for example, Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

While research on undocumented college students has proliferated in recent years, and in particular, research-best methods for serving them, the intersection between servingness and Dreamer support has not been explored in depth in HSI scholarship. One notable exception involved a case study of an HSI in California that examined, from both students’ and practitioners’ perspectives, existing structures for serving Dreamers and what would be needed to better serve them. The results mirror those of this study: awareness-building for faculty/staff and additional resources for Dreamers rose to the top of their priorities (Person et al., 2017). This topic may be gaining ground in HSI scholarship, as Dreamer support at an emerging HSI was also the subject of a contemporary podcast on servingness: the guest speaker, Dr. Sandy López, described the social, financial and other support she is able to provide as the director of an undocumented student center on her campus (García, 2023). Like the participants in my study, Dr. López explicitly connected this Dreamer support to the concept of servingness.

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20 See footnote on p. 128 about the current state of DACA.
While no research exists that has tallied the number of undocumented students at HSIs, it is likely that they serve large numbers as nearly half of undocumented college students are Latinx (Feldblum et al., 2020). It is interesting, then, that Dreamer support is not often mentioned in scholarship on servingness. One possibility for this phenomenon is that most of the research on HSIs is done in places where there is greater awareness of these issues and support for Dreamers due to a critical mass of immigrants in the community. California and Texas, where much of the HSI research has been done, have the largest numbers of unauthorized immigrants, at over 2.7 million and 1.7 million respectively (Migration Policy Institute, 2023), and undocumented college students, unsurprisingly, are also concentrated in these states (Feldblum et al., 2020). These states also have more Dreamer supports built into campus structures. For example, Cisneros and Valdivia (2020) found that the majority of the 59 undocumented student resource centers across the country are located in California. Moreover, states like California and Texas not only offer in-state tuition rates for undocumented residents but also state-based financial assistance. In the Midwest state in which this study took place, however, there were fewer than 100,000 total unauthorized immigrants (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). It was also not considered an undocu-friendly state in that it did not support in-state tuition rates for Dreamers at public universities, driver’s licenses, or any form of state financial assistance. Therefore, Dreamers’ challenges were compounded by less access to resources to make it through college as well as a general lack of awareness around their needs. Thus, the visibility and support of these students was likely more salient to HSI specialists as a pressing need, and therefore deemed as a central concern of servingness on campuses in transition.
**Shared Latinx-Serving Organizational Identity.** The last missing puzzle piece in the structures for serving framework that was very salient to HSI specialists at recently designated and emerging HSIs was the need for a campus-wide Latinx-serving organizational identity. This included both common understandings around the concept of servingness itself, as well as critical HSI infrastructure embedded into the fabric of the institution.

As noted in the literature review, organizational identity answers the question, “who are we, as an institution?” (Albert & Whetten, 1985), and yet, HSI has been criticized as a “manufactured” or peripheral identity (Contreras et al., 2008). As campuses in transition grapple with this emerging identity (García, 2019), participants in this study underscored the importance of collective grappling. As such, they reported creating opportunities for colleagues across their campuses to learn, dialogue, reflect, and come to a shared understanding of the meaning of servingness and how it might be operationalized within their institutional contexts. In this way, they could “clarify their own mental models about HSIs” (Núñez, 2017, p. 291) and interrupt business-as-usual practices to better serve their Latinx and other URM students.

**Whiteness at HSIs/eHSIs through the Lens of HSI Specialists**

In this section, I explore the ways in which HSI specialists’ understandings of whiteness align with, differ from, and nuance existing theoretical definitions, particularly in the context of institutions in transition from historically white to Latinx-serving. As described in Chapter III, “whiteness” is “an ideological, epistemological, and ontological force that functions to support individuals, actions, and appearances deemed ‘white’” (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021, p. 11) and “institutional whiteness” refers to the often-
invisible structures and processes that uphold this white hegemonic power (Applebaum, 2016; Leonardo, 2009; Matias et al., 2014).

Some participants offered definitions of whiteness that aligned closely with how these scholars have characterized it, such as “ownership of processes, of places, of conditions” (Felix) and “a set of cultural norms, expectations, and privileges conferred upon lighter skinned people for their own benefit” (John). These definitions, among others provided by participants, demonstrate understanding of the pervasive nature of whiteness and the reason for its existence: to reify existing racial power hierarchies by concentrating privilege and resources in the hands of those deemed “white” in our society. While not all participants had such readily articulated responses to the question, “How would you define whiteness?”, they were all able to provide cogent examples of when, where, and how it showed up on their campuses.

Just as scholars have asserted that both individuals (Matias et al., 2014) and institutions (Ahmed, 2012) can be complicit in reifying white racial hegemony, the participants in this study pointed to the ways that individual actors stonewalled racial progress as well as how institutional processes contributed to unequal experiences and outcomes for minoritized students. But their examples also touched on interpersonal aspects of whiteness that harmed URM students as well as larger systems of whiteness beyond campus boundaries that impacted how their institutions operated. Employing an ecological model of whiteness, then, I put forth that the ways that HSI specialists understood how whiteness operates on college campuses could be categorized broadly into four environmental “systems”: individual (internal), micro (interpersonal), meso (organizational), and macro (external to the organization) systems of whiteness (see
Figure 2 below). Here I turn to theory from psychology and sociology to ground this formulation.

**Figure 2**

An Ecological Model of Whiteness at Historically White Colleges in Transition

From a psychological perspective, Rogers and colleagues (2021) posit that how individuals think about race starts with the U.S.’s sociopolitical reality of pervasive racism, and they therefore situate the development of these racial understandings within the context of structural racism (the macrosystem). Drawing from Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model of human development and relying heavily on the literature on racial socialization, Rogers and her co-authors assert that the individual, microsystem, and macrosystem are “nested and operating in relation to each other jointly” (p. 275), as social and political systems fuel microsystem processes. Organizational theory enhances our understandings of how these systems influence each other by adding the “meso”
layer: as sociologist Victor Ray (2019) explains in his theory of racialized organizations, “Studies of racial ideology and racial attitudes – often abstracted from the context in which these attitudes develop and are expressed – should be contextualized in relation to organizational processes” (p. 47). Organizations at the mesosystem level are key to understanding racialization processes, as they both shape and are shaped by individual prejudices and broader social processes (p. 27) and play a role in maintaining racial hierarchies.

These varying systems of whiteness as articulated by participants in this study were all inextricably linked and fed into each other: internal attitudes and feelings informed the ways individual actors thought out about and communicated with each other, contributing to racialized interpersonal interactions, which could, in aggregate, become the organizational culture. Individual understandings and feelings were also reported to play a role in decision-making by institutional gatekeepers and those campus leaders who had the power to change – or not – organizational practices steeped in whiteness. The organizational practices themselves, often race-neutral on the surface yet racially disparate in outcome, served to mask the source of inequities through their apparent “neutrality,” thus reinforcing false narratives about minoritized groups. These findings align with Ray’s (2019) theory of racialized organizations: individual prejudices and racial understandings work collectively to influence organizational processes, which in turn maintains an inequitable racial order. And “objective” processes are enacted in ways that disadvantage PoC, “allow[ing] organizations to maintain legitimacy and appear neutral or even progressive while doing little to intervene in pervasive patterns of racial inequality” (p. 42). Moreover, HSI specialists pointed to external factors within the
macrosystem of whiteness, such as legal cases rejecting race-conscious practices, that complicated both organizational processes and individual understandings. Again, consistent with psychological and sociological theories, these macro-level “logics” or “schema” around whiteness could shape both individual racial development (Rogers et al., 2021) and organizational action (Ray, 2019).

Folding in the prevailing scholarship on servingness, García and colleagues’ (2019) multidimensional framework incorporates both organizational structures (meso) and external factors (macro) as determinants for an institution's ability to serve. In this model, racialized experiences such as microaggressions are an “outcome,” the natural consequence of the organizational failure to create an adequate infrastructure for servingness. Findings from this study as well as the aforementioned research on racial socialization (Rogers et al., 2021) highlight the importance of both structural components as well as these individual racialized understandings and microsystems of whiteness as essential aspects of the whiteness puzzle, providing important clues as to how to counteract it. Indeed, HSI specialists in this study reported spending much of their time and labor not so much in institution-building, but rather in education, influencing, and meaning-making with their colleagues. Again, however, because each system of whiteness informs and is informed by other systems of whiteness, none can be tackled in isolation.

Finally, the ways that whiteness interacted across these environmental boundaries also influenced the individual development of the participants in this study themselves as HSI specialists. As they navigated these various systems of whiteness and tested different strategies for moving their colleagues and institutions closer to an agenda of servingness,
they honed not only their skills but also their identities as HSI specialists. This internal sense of their professional selves was informed by personal backgrounds but also interpersonal interactions with both colleagues and students, as well as interactions with organizational processes.

Following, I map my findings onto the individual, micro, meso, and macro systems of whiteness. I also articulate the ways in which HSI specialists navigated and responded to these various systems of whiteness, while developing a servingness identity.

**Individual Whiteness: White Attitudes, Understandings, and Feelings.**

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) recognizes white people’s complicity in the maintenance of the racial hierarchy through deflection, denial, and a lack of personal investment in deconstructing or dismantling racism (Applebaum, 2010; Matias et al., 2014). Often, this comes in the form of colorblindness, or a refusal to “see” race; epistemologies of ignorance, or the “sincere fiction” that we as a society have evolved beyond the influence of race; and white racial safety, or the tendency to avoid dialoguing about race or interrogating personal understandings and feelings about race, thereby stonewalling forward progress (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2017; Gusa, 2010). And, while not typically incorporated directly into scholarship on whiteness, HSI specialists also discussed instances of biased understandings and behaviors derived from white-as-default ways of operating. These internalized aspects of whiteness were clearly articulated by HSI specialists in examples they provided of coworkers and campus leaders.

**Colorblindness.** Colorblindness manifested on participants’ campuses in a variety of ways. For example, HSI specialists reported that some colleagues embraced an “all
students matter” mindset that was antithetical to a race-conscious approach to
servingness. Sometimes this orientation made it difficult for HSI specialists to “hone in”
on particular groups and get them the support that they needed to thrive, such as financial
support for Dreamers. Consistent with similar research at a recently designated HSI, this
“focus on all students prevents institutions from focusing on the populations and groups
most harmed and minoritized in higher education” (Scott et al., 2022, p. 9; emphasis
added).

Participants also provided instances of colorblindness in which colleagues
espoused an “equality” rather than “equity” orientation, erasing Latinx students’
challenges and displaying a lack of willingness to even name specific populations that
were in need of greater support. But “equality,” referring to access to equal (same)
resources, assumes a mythical meritocratic playing field, leading some scholars to
conclude that “equality of opportunity means equal chances to become unequal and is
therefore a recipe for continuing inequality... Inequality is thereby legitimised as the
natural order of things” (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021, p. 451). This notion that
organizations should treat everyone the same without taking into consideration the
historical and social context of pervasive discrimination has been characterized by
whiteness scholars as “one of the most powerful frames of color-blind racism” (Moore,

**Epistemologies of Ignorance.** Similarly, participants in this study offered stories
about some of their colleagues’ epistemologies of ignorance, which they noted often
stemmed from a lack of exposure. Sometimes it manifested in subscribing to deficit
narratives that blamed URM students for disproportionately negative outcomes, rather
than their organization’s processes or practices. The failure to understand the root cause of inequities led them to embrace an “if it’s not broken, why fix it?” fallacy and push back against race-conscious changes. Echoed in the literature on whiteness, these sorts of post-racial orientations promote the fiction that as a society, we have evolved beyond the influence of race, and therefore inequitable processes remain uninterrogated and intact (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021). HSI specialists also reported interactions with many colleagues who thought they had a thorough grasp on racial understandings – a racial arrogance that is a central tenet of whiteness (Matias & Aldern, 2019). This lack of cultural humility bred complacency or, in the case of would-be allies, exasperation that their “help” was not perceived as helpful.

As described in scholarship and mirrored in my findings, this can result in “righteous indignation” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 64) and has led some scholars to conclude that “white antiracist work must start from a position of not-knowing and humility” (Stewart & Gachago, 2022, p. 8).

One of the major epistemologies of ignorance identified by HSI specialists was the failure of many campus colleagues to recognize the importance and power of Latinx students’ community cultural wealth, and in particular, their familial capital. As articulated by the participants in this study, and bolstered by scholarly work (Yosso, 2005), the family is central to Latinx students’ educational experiences as active, engaged, and essential supporters. To HSI specialists, servingness therefore necessarily entailed connecting with the family in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. But many of the participants in this study expressed frustration that this responsive work was difficult to enact as their colleagues questioned, delayed, or withheld monetary support
for these efforts. The lack of exposure, cultural incompetence, and centering of white linguistic and cultural norms in these cases reified the racial status quo (Cabrera et al., 2017).

**Biases.** Colorblindness and epistemologies of ignorance can also manifest in biases. While not often explicitly connected to the concept of “whiteness” in scholarly work, I would argue that racial biases are often the result of epistemologies of ignorance and therefore inextricably linked to whiteness. Implicit biases are unconscious associations or prejudices based on stereotypes of marginalized groups, formed through a process of racial socialization (Carpenter, 2008). Lack of exposure to real people from these groups along with immersion in micro, meso, and macro systems that denigrate minoritized people create these biases and then embed them into unconscious pathways. Examples from my findings, such as an administrator who associated Latinxs with less professionalized fields or faculty who did not see Latinx students’ potential for succeeding in STEM, can be understood as rooted in unconscious associations between Latinxs and lower aspirations and abilities.

Further, colorblindness both makes it difficult to recognize biases and exacerbates their effects, as it hides structural forms of oppression and blames marginalized groups for their own marginalization and thus reinforces the stereotypes in which the biases are rooted (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2021). In this study, colorblindness fed biases through double standards and differential application of rules and procedures that had disparate outcomes for students of color (such as, ironically, bias incident response systems), thus reinforcing the stereotype that PoC are more inclined toward bad behavior than white students. Intersectional biases
against women of color manifested in devaluing their contributions, thus exacerbating the stereotype that they are less competent than others. And inviting “more palatable” minorities (such as Latinxs) into decision-making spaces while leaving “less desirable” minorities (e.g. Black people) out normalized the absence of Blackness in these spaces and had the potential to intensify anti-Black biases.

**White Racial Safety.** Finally, when it came to individual or internalized whiteness, HSI specialists underscored a pervasive discomfort among many of their white colleagues around issues related to race and racism. In alignment with scholarship on the topic, the findings in this study point to campuses in transition as spaces where white racial safety must be protected in order to engage white allies in the work of servingness.

DiAngelo (2011) puts forth that white racial sensitivity sets the limits of engagement. With a low tolerance for racial stress and being easily triggered by uncomfortable racial conversations, white people often use a variety of avoidant tactics to restore “racial equilibrium.” In my findings – and reflected in the literature – participants provided examples of colleagues who conflated the idea of “comfort” with “safety” and used racial discomfort as a reason to remain silent when issues of race arose (Cabrera et al., 2017), to disengage from race-conscious work (Arao & Clemens, 2018; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Stewart, 2019), or to engage in behaviors that focused on their own feelings and needs, thus re-centering whiteness (DiAngelo, 2011). Some aspects of white racial safety as outlined by DiAngelo (2011, 2018) were not as ubiquitous in my findings, such as white solidarity (“going easy” on other white people), backlash for creating racial discomfort, and deflection of any responsibility for racial inequities.
One interesting nuance around white racial safety in my findings that is not prominent in the literature on whiteness is the effect that white racial safety had on would-be allies: people who wanted to engage in servingness but exhibited a sense of self-doubt. The phrase, “am I the right person to do this?” was reported by a number of HSI specialists as a particularized form of white disengagement that they often encountered from colleagues. The question belied a level of self-awareness around their own discomfort and an earnestness in wanting to overcome it, yet in not knowing how and not taking steps to learn, they deflected responsibility altogether, or placed the burden of education on their colleagues of color. For HSI specialists, this entailed additional labor trying to figure out how to approach white people in the “right” way—politely, carefully, and centering their feelings (DiAngelo, 2011).

Paved with Good Intentions. As a final note on internalized whiteness, it is important to explore the gradations between “intent” and “impact.” Some scholars of whiteness might argue that whether HSI specialists’ white colleagues were knowingly complicit in maintaining the racial status quo was beside the point, and that “intention” is neither important nor useful in understanding how whiteness interferes with a race-conscious model for servingness; only impact matters (Nishi et al., 2016). However, participants seemed to indicate that the difference between explicit and implicit racial misunderstandings was an important distinction. HSI specialists were quick to point out that mostly, their white colleagues espoused ignorant viewpoints unintentionally, resulting from a lack of exposure. This had implications for how HSI specialists responded: whereas explicitly problematic behaviors warranted more direct, blunt forms of communication, unconscious ways of thinking and acting required empathy and a soft
touch. As deeply invested members of a campus community who recognized that many of their white colleagues were trying to be good allies but often falling short, HSI specialists’ primary concern was “figur[ing] out how to get them there” – even if that meant placating white feelings.

**Microsystems of Whiteness: Interpersonal Interactions in White Spaces.** As ontological expansiveness refers to white people taking up physical and social space (Sullivan, 2006), it has implications for how white bodies and minds bump into bodies of color and/or box them out within these spaces. These microsystems of interaction are informed by internalized whiteness and collectively can constitute entire campus cultures. In this section I detail how HSI specialists described ontologically expansive behaviors on campuses in transition and how their understandings connect to existing literature. In addition, I explore the relationship between demographic and ontological forms of white expansiveness as well as one form of expansiveness that is all but absent in the literature: linguistic expansiveness. I conclude with a discussion of counterspaces and their complicated role in counteracting ontological expansiveness.

**Demographic Whiteness at Campuses in Transition.** While Critical Whiteness Studies makes clear the distinction between “whiteness” and “white people,” my findings indicate that ontological expansiveness cannot be extricated from the influence of literal, demographic whiteness. For participants in this study, the enduring whiteness of employee populations at every level of their organizational hierarchies contributed to the normalization of white ways of knowing, doing, and being, and placed in sharp contrast those relatively few bodies and minds of color who were pushing to upend business-as-usual practices.
Research on the demographic make-up of employees at HSIs reveals that they are well ahead of the national curve in terms of the number of Latinx instructors, staff, and even administrators on their campuses (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). There is, however, no similar research that describes what employee diversity looks like at emerging HSIs, or that compares the racial/ethnic employee make-up of HSIs in regions such as California and Texas versus those in emerging regions, such as the Midwest. But it is likely that those emerging and recently designated HSIs would not enjoy the same level of employee diversity as their counterparts in more Latinx-rich areas of the country. Indeed, the HSI specialists on these campuses indicated that their faculty, staff, and administrator populations were not diversifying at nearly the rate of their student bodies, and that diversity tended to be concentrated in particular “pockets” across campus – usually in spaces that had a specific mandate for serving students of color, such as multicultural offices. Consistent with Ray’s (2019) racialized organization theory, their campuses tended to “internally recreate institutional-level segregation” that sorted positions along racial lines, with those occupied largely by PoC being the least valued (p. 39).

HSI specialists also provided examples of what they described as biased or even “lazy” hiring practices that exacerbated this challenge: even when they provided references for qualified candidates of color and nudged selection committees to rethink their outreach practices, high-level positions in particular remained stubbornly white. Again, research bears out the pervasiveness of this phenomenon. Wade-Golden and Williams (2013), for example, in their comprehensive review of chief diversity officer positions across U.S. higher educational institutions, note that the idea of “fit” – which is
laden with white affinity bias – often trumps intention and opportunities to diversify cabinet-level positions. Evatt-Young and Bryson (2021) also underscore how excluding PoC from accessing positions of power is a commonplace function of “white solidarity” (p. 60).

While the HSI specialists in this study were clear that they had many white allies across campus, the relatively high level of demographic whiteness contributed to “arrested racial development.” Without a critical mass of PoC who could model non-white ways of embodying spaces, whiteness as the modus operandi remained invisible. The resulting lack of awareness bred the normalization of white bodies and minds and the concomitant estrangement of bodies and minds of color. This tracks with whiteness scholarship in predominantly white spaces in that the literal whiteness embedded into the campus environment, paired with white people’s sense of entitlement to white racial comfort, “means that they do not have to work on their racial selves” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 42). Thus, it becomes a vicious cycle: demographic expansiveness feeds epistemologies of ignorance which creates campus cultural conditions that alienate PoC. Whiteness feeds whiteness. This phenomenon has led some scholars to argue that diversification is “crucial for shifting institutional culture and norms” (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021, p. 73).

There were several participants who did, however, point to hopeful signs that this cycle was starting to break: at a few institutions, the growing number of Latinx colleagues across campus – not just in multicultural offices – not only helped create a sense of comfort, but it also made them more visible and began to normalize Latinx
cultures and use of the Spanish language. Demographic shifts, then, helped to disrupt the ontological expansiveness of whiteness.

**Ontological Expansiveness across Physical, Social, Academic, and Linguistic Spaces.** Consistent with whiteness theories, the findings from my study confirm the pervasiveness of ontological expansiveness across various campus microsystems. This included entitlement to physical spaces that resulted in marginalizing offices or centers dedicated to students of color. It also included white-normed spaces which resulted in the hyper/in-visibility of students of color and policing of their bodies and behaviors, making them feel like “bodies out of place” (Arday, 2018; Mirza, 2018; Stewart, 2019; Williams, 2020).

Ontological expansiveness also manifested in white social spaces, where PoC who did not conform to white normative embodiments were subjected to “othering” behaviors, such as microaggressions, and therefore did not feel as though they could show up as their full authentic selves (Ahmed, 2012; Cabrera et al., 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). Participants described coworkers who were oblivious to, tolerated, and even committed these racial microaggressions themselves, and the resulting alienation that students felt – as though they had to “wear a mask and just be somebody else.” The subtext was that the “somebody else” they had to conform to was a white-normed ideal.

To a lesser extent, possibly due to the small number of faculty in my study sample, HSI specialists reported examples of white academic spaces that manifested as a lack of investment in Latinx-centered academic departments, and pushback against non-Western content or pedagogical practices within classrooms. This aligns with research on
the subject revealing that academic agendas and teaching norms on college campuses tend to center white voices and pedagogies (Gusa, 2010; Hiraldo, 2010; Peters, 2018).

One interesting aspect of ontological expansiveness that was a central area of concern for HSI specialists was the way it saturated linguistic spaces. While at least one scholarly definition explicitly notes that ontological expansiveness extends to use of language (Sullivan, 2006), this is not an area of central focus within the literature on whiteness. And yet, my findings reveal that the concept of ontological expansiveness necessarily must include the consideration of language at institutions that are enrolling increasing numbers of Latinx students. At these campuses, not only were non-white bodies and minds policed to conform more closely with whiteness, but their literal voices were as well. Participants shone a light on the sense of linguistic entitlement that led some colleagues to enforce “English only” spaces, devalue and disinvest in Spanish services, and treat Spanish-speaking students poorly. The irony was that bilingual spaces, which are by definition more inclusive than monolingual spaces, were deemed as “exclusionary” by those whose language was no longer centered and therefore felt a loss of power and control.

Complicating Counterspaces. In the face of ontological expansiveness, many HSI specialists reported creating and/or connecting to campus counterspaces. This refers to offices or centers that have been intentionally designed with marginalized identities in mind, as well as the networks of people connected to these spaces (Patton, 2016). Counterspaces are powerful and important in creating a sense of belonging (Serrano, 2020). However, they can reinforce the myth that URM students have everything they need in those smaller spaces, and creates complacency in addressing the broader, often
toxic, environment. While whiteness allows for the creation of these spaces (often, as participants pointed out, literally on the margins of campus), it resists recreating the entire campus as a counterspace. This was also found to be the case in at least one HSI case study: despite appreciation for their campus’s Chicana/o Studies department as a space of cultural affirmation and connection, campus stakeholders were also “critical of the fact that the department is the only place on campus where people can find connections to Latina/o culture” (García & Okhidoi, 2015, p. 350; emphasis in original). This literature mirrors the importance participants placed on engaging in culture change within the microsystem of whiteness through demographic diversification and countering ontological expansiveness. As one participant noted, they were “creeping into” white spaces and working to normalize Spanish language and Latinx culture across campus. But that was a long, slow process.

**Mesosystems of Whiteness: HSI/eHSI Campuses as a Locus of White Hegemony.** Beyond the individual and interpersonal, whiteness also operates at the organizational, or mesosystem, level. Ray (2019) contends that organizations not only “link” macro- and micro-level processes, but they are also spaces of racial contestation and therefore “key to stability and change for the entire racial order” (p. 30). In this study, HSI specialists described a variety of ways that their campuses clung to whiteness despite the increasing diversity of their student bodies. As their institutions transitioned from historically white to Latinx-serving, participants reported the renegotiation of the meaning of “HSI” as a key component of organizational whiteness. Connected to Omi and Winant’s (2012, 2014) formulation of “racial projects,” framing the HSI designation as being primarily beneficial to the institution itself was a way for their institutions to
actively reorganize racial understandings and dynamics without fundamentally disrupting whiteness in practice. Following from this formulation, participants expressed that their campuses maintained the racial status quo through the ways that they managed servingness efforts, allocated resources, and engaged in business-as-usual practices.

**Rhetoric and Racial Projects.** Racial projects refer to the reinterpretation of racial understandings to maintain the status quo distribution of resources and power (Omi & Winant, 2014), and organizations play an important role in this racial meaning-making. As Ray (2019) asserts, “Organizations magnify the power and depth of racial projects and are a primary terrain of racial contestation” (p. 30). Specific to this study, campuses in transition are forced to contend with the changing face of their student bodies, but, participants reported, these institutions were also committed to hegemonic whiteness as a foundational organizing principle (Iftikar, 2017). Thus, recently designated and emerging HSIs renegotiated the meaning of HSI so as not to upset the existing racial order.

As hypothesized in the methods section, my findings bear out that HSI specialists did, in fact, see this phenomenon playing out on their campuses. They indicated that their institutions set the framework for HSI efforts within a “context of appeasement” rather than liberation and transformation. This manifested in symbolic gestures, public statements, and performative allyship, without the institutional resources or infrastructure to back them up. Many participants in this study indicated that their institutions’ HSI messages were “inconsistent” with their actions, there were “stated goals” that did not match “realities,” and there was a disconnect between written commitments to pursuing HSI status and actual material commitments to the effort. These findings are congruent with the results of a similar study of an eHSI in which the participants – Latinx students –
reported feeling as though their institution’s interest in becoming HSI was “inauthentic,” and that it displayed “institutional hypocrisy” and offered “false promises” (Velez et al., 2023, p. 8). Case studies at HSIs also reveal a similar phenomenon, in which stakeholders identify a disconnect between their institution’s HSI designation and the ways they engaged – or not – in servingness (García & Dwyer, 2018; García et al., 2018). More broadly, other scholarship on diversity efforts in higher education have demonstrated the use of public statements in support of diversity as performative rhetoric, where making a statement or writing a diversity plan supplants actual action to support diverse students (Ahmed, 2007b, 2012; Casellas Connors & McCoy, 2022; Mirza, 2018; Rollock, 2018; Squire et al., 2019).

The reason that many of the campuses in this study went to the trouble of publicly claiming their HSI designation or stating that they were pursuing it, according to participants, was interest convergence. This refers to the idea that racial progress only occurs when there are benefits to white people, and only if it does not disrupt white hegemony (Brown & Jackson, 2013). The HSI designation itself does not threaten white power, as the primary requisite is based on numerical diversity of the undergraduate student body, which in fact does not even require that the institution stop being predominantly white. Furthermore, there is no accountability mechanism for demonstrating actual servingness at HSIs (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Vargas, 2018). Thus, by proclaiming that they were, or were working to become, HSIs, these institutions could make a pretense that diversity was important to them and inoculate themselves from the outwardly appearance of not caring about the fastest growing college-going demographic group – all while not substantively changing internal structures or practices.
One key aspect of HSI as a white racial project was the commodification of Latinx students for the benefit of the institution. Many of the participants who worked at eHSIs in particular indicated that their campuses were pursuing HSI status because it made good business sense: marketing to the fastest growing demographic group was viewed as a buffer to help offset the anticipated drop in the white college student population. Some eHSI participants also reported that the possibility of federal grant funding was at least in part driving their institutions’ efforts. Similarly, scholars have pointed to the commodification of URM students to respond to pressures to diversify and to bolster enrollment (Ahmed, 2012; Blackmore, 2006; Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021; Leong-Salobir, 2013; Wilkinson, 2008), and specifically Latinx students to chase Developing HSI grant dollars (Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Velez et al., 2023). One HSI case study demonstrated investment in race-conscious efforts “only after it became a societal expectation and not supporting antiracism could have led to enrollment declines or other negative institutional impacts” (Scott et al., 2022, p. 9). In this way, diversity, and more specifically, diverse students, are reframed in terms of their economic value. Iftikar (2017) has referred to this phenomenon as a “neoliberal racial subproject” to feed their bottom line with Brown bodies without making any concessions to white racial power on their campuses (p. 150).

An interesting nuance that participants in this study highlighted was the way that their institutions reformulated the meaning of HSI to include benefits for “all” students. In the context of the mesosystem of whiteness, organizations could recreate this racialized HSI designation by reframing whom it was meant to serve. In this study, many HSI specialists indicated that they needed to speak the language of “all students” in order
to move the needle on servingness efforts within their institutions. But, importantly, they underscored that their use of “all students” was a rhetorical tool; while they affirmed that all students at their campuses deserved to be served, they also emphasized the realities of racial inequities that needed direct attention. Thus, many of them centered “all students of color” in their definition of servingness. This important distinction was also found in a similar study at an HSI:

The nuance between the White administrators centering of HSI as serving all students and colleagues of color expressing the need for HSI to support all students of color is an important distinction… the rhetoric of all serves as a tool of appeasing whiteness by presenting HSI status as beneficial to as many students as possible as opposed to centering the needs and historical marginalization of Latinx students and students of color. (Scott et al., 2022, p. 6; emphasis in original)

Organizations, then, co-opted the language of HSI and recreated its meaning in ways that would support – rather than disrupt – the perpetuation of whiteness on their campuses.

**Incrementalism and the Management of Servingness Efforts.** The recreated meaning of HSI as described in the previous section served as justification for the highly managed and incremental nature of progress toward servingness. To a number of participants, their campuses’ failure to serve URM students well was due to a lack of will to prioritize, and sometimes even an active deceleration, of servingness work. “Low hanging fruit” was a common theme in this study, in which HSI specialists described their institutions touting these small wins as evidence of their commitment to servingness. But once the fruit was all picked, there was not a subsequent effort on the
part of the institution to consider more substantive changes or, in some cases, even implement the most basic measures to create servingness infrastructure. Delays were common and active resistance to transformation was also apparent to many participants.

Consistent with scholarship on hegemony, those who enjoy the power afforded by the status quo will sometimes make material concessions to a certain limit – throwing enough breadcrumbs to the oppressed to keep them from rising up while not fundamentally altering the “essential economic order” (Im, 1991). This phenomenon also ties in with the literature on the performative nature of diversity efforts in higher education (Ahmed, 2007b, 2012; Casellas Connors & McCoy, 2022; Mirza, 2018; Rollock, 2018; Squire et al., 2019). But the specific nature of how this plays out on recently designated and emerging HSI campuses is an area that is not well represented in HSI literature. A notable exception is an exploration of Latinx students’ understandings of their institution’s initiative to become an HSI (Velez et al., 2023), but in both that study and the present project, HSI incrementalism was explored through the lens of stakeholders and not directly observed through a case study. The concept of small wins and slow change on campuses in transition to becoming Latinx-serving is an area that would benefit from further exploration.

**Whiteness as Property at Recently Designated and Emerging HSIs.**

Reimagining HSI as of primary benefit to the institution rather than to URM students as well as the incremental nature of HSI efforts are both closely tied to the concept of whiteness as property. This Critical Race Theory tenet holds that whiteness itself is a form of property, conferring material advantages on those deemed “white” while simultaneously excluding others from use and enjoyment of material resources (Bonilla-
Silva, 2006; Cabrera et al., 2017; Schooley et al., 2019). Ray (2019) also contends that whiteness as property is operationalized by organizations as they are responsible for “accumulating, managing, monopolizing, and apportioning the resources that make up racial structures” (p. 31).

In alignment with these theoretical principles, resource allocations at campuses in transition, according to participants, did not substantially change due to their achievement of HSI status or public commitment to become one. Few had budgets specific to HSI efforts, and those that did reported that they were sorely insufficient. Servingness work, such as translation and other essential labor, was often accomplished on the backs of volunteers rather than embedded into job responsibilities or additional staff positions. In such cases that servingness was compensated, it was often funded through grants, thus not fundamentally changing the operational budget equation in favor of race-conscious efforts. Scholarly work and content areas that centered Spanish and Latinx culture were devalued, justifying fewer resources for their departments to grow and thrive. And a number of participants reported that even scholarship or financial aid formulations resisted change to more race-conscious reallocations, restricting access to the campus along socioeconomic lines that overlapped with racial lines.

Scholars have posited that the reason for the failure of institutions to expand access to material resources and/or redirect them to more equitable effects is that it would require extricating the powerful influence of whiteness (Blackmore, 2006). Whiteness is the “embodiment of privilege” and enjoys protection within our social institutions (Cabrera et al., 2017). When this entitlement to resources, opportunities, or power is perceived to be threatened, white people often engage in active resistance (Gusa, 2010;
Iyer, 2022). This even extends to resistance to demographic shifts, as it would change the racial – and therefore cultural – identity of the institution which, according to both one of my participants and scholars of whiteness alike, must be protected as fundamentally white (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021).

**Instantiating Whiteness through Organizational Policies and Embedded Practices.** Organizations are also implicated in reproducing the racial status quo through their practices and policies. Institutional logics are organized around a “white frame,” or “an organized set of racialized ideas, emotions, and inclinations, as well as recurring or habitual discriminatory actions, that are consciously or unconsciously expressed” (Moore, 2008, p. 27). These logics or schemas order the reality of the organization; they are not only the habits of the institution but also the template by which new challenges are processed and solved. According to Ray (2019), existing racialized schemas are applied to organizational procedures, giving them the veneer of impartiality all while “obscuring or legitimating unequal processes” (p. 35).

In this study, HSI specialists identified many institutional policies and practices that operated from the hidden assumptions of whiteness and failed to consider the experiences and outcomes for BIPOC students. Their examples included administrative and academic procedures such as “transcript ransom,” demonstration policies, admissions practices, bias incident reporting systems, course scheduling, English language testing policies – all processes that “work[ed] for the implementers” but had disproportionately negative outcomes for students of color, English language learners, first-gen, and low-income students. They also underscored the failure – and sometimes even resistance – of institutional actors to interrogate these practices. Scholars problematize this
organizational complacency, asserting that all practices and policies have potentially been guided by whiteness, and therefore must be examined for racially disparate outcomes (Cabrera et al., 2017). But institutions that fail to do so will continue to reify whiteness (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021).

Finally, it is important to note that organizations are capable of change. HSI scholars, while understanding that this change may be slow, note that the embedded nature of whiteness can be rooted out through intentional and collective work, and therefore they should not be summarily dismissed as intractably racist in nature (García, 2015). A handful of participants pointed to hopeful signs that their campuses were, in fact, interrogating business-as-usual practices, shifting cultures toward greater race-consciousness, and fostering more positive experiences and outcomes for their URM students.

**The Macrosystem of Whiteness: A Sea of White Supremacy.** The final layer of whiteness that affected servingness work on HSI/eHSI campuses, according to participants, was the macrosystem, or the broader sociopolitical milieu in which these institutions operated. Institutions – and institutional actors – do not operate in a vacuum, and many of the examples of colorblindness, ignorance, biases, and white racial safety that participants provided in this study were reminiscent of larger anti-race-consciousness narratives and movements across the country. The macrosystem of whiteness, then, informs individual attitudes and understandings, as white supremacy in the U.S. is “in the air we breathe” and we have all therefore been “socialized by and into a racist system” (Rogers et al., 2021, p. 278). Organizations are also influenced by these macro understandings of race, and HWCs that are in transition to Latinx-serving may be
particularly vulnerable to racist discourses as their roots, traditions, practices, and structures have historically catered to a white student population, they continue to cater to a largely white alumni base, and their employee populations continue to be largely white.

HSI specialists indicated that national racial dynamics directly impacted their institutions’ organizational practice, such as through colorblind trends in political discourse, SCOTUS decisions that emboldened race-evasiveness, anti-DEI embedded into state budgeting processes, and racially motivated FOIA requests. A national climate in which white people felt like they were being “left behind” or victims of “reverse racism” made their institutions more cautious in implementing race-conscious efforts, and pervasive “cancel culture” prevented open, empathetic engagement, resulting in paralysis rather than progress. These findings are echoed in whiteness scholarship, which similarly explores how state legislature-initiated attacks on DEI programs (González, 2022) and legal challenges against affirmative action and “reverse racism” discourses (Cabrera et al., 2017; Tran, 2016) work to maintain white hegemony on college campuses. In particular, affirmative action and other race-conscious practices are heralded as a way to upend institutional whiteness in hiring and admissions procedures (Ray, 2019). But given that colorblindness is “emblematic of our contemporary racial understanding,” the use of race-conscious practices to remediate racial inequities is often attacked as unfair, unacceptable, and even unlawful (Tran, 2016, p. 30).

One interesting thread woven across these various aspects of the macrosystem was an undercurrent of fear: fear of white stakeholders of losing access to privilege or power, fear of institutions of upsetting white stakeholders, fear of institutional actors of running afoul of anti-DEI legislation or jurisprudence, fear of would-be white allies of
being vulnerable about their racial understandings. HSI specialists indicated that often, white colleagues failed to examine the source of these fears. Sometimes, their colleagues and campuses even denied fear as a motivating factor outright, as the ubiquity of a post-racial, meritocratic, and colorblind social lens worked to make racial inequities appear as part of the natural order (Cabrera, 2018; Tran, 2016).

Importantly, macrosystems are not immutable, as individuals and collectives of individuals have agency to influence national understandings and disrupt systems of whiteness through counter-storytelling, demonstrations, and political action (Rogers et al., 2019). Macrosystems, however, often reify existing power hierarchies through the recreation and reimagining of racial narratives, making racism and entrenched white supremacy a moving target (Omi & Winant, 2012, 2014). Movement in a racially just direction, then, is met with countermoves that stabilize schemas of racial subordination (Rogers et al., 2019) – both in our collective consciousness and within organizations, such as college campuses. Thus, HSI specialists understood the need for persistence and vigilance in their counterhegemonic efforts.

The Personal Toll of Whiteness on HSI Specialists Across Systems. Whiteness across all systems not only affected URM students’ experiences and outcomes, it also impacted HSI specialists themselves. At the individual level – and particularly for white practitioners – whiteness was a source of internal struggle as they negotiated their role in servingness work. At the macro level, responding to legislation and jurisprudence that stonewalled their servingness efforts added a layer of stress and exhaustion. But most of the reported toll was located at the micro and meso levels, and was particularly highlighted by the BIPOC participants. For example, HSI specialists of color cited
racialized interpersonal interactions with white colleagues, including being subjected to microaggressions, biases, and stereotypes. They also had to take on the emotional labor of navigating white colleagues’ attitudes, understandings, and feelings as they advocated for a race-conscious model of servingness. And at the organizational level, the institutions in which they worked often overlooked them, depreciated their work, held them to higher standards than their white colleagues, tapped them for “token” roles, and distributed labor inequitably, placing a weightier load on their shoulders.

Many of the participants’ racialized experiences mirrored those of other URM faculty and staff on college campuses generally, which is well-documented. Turner and colleagues (1999), for example, found similar trends with faculty of color at Midwestern college campuses, who often felt isolated, overlooked, and tokenized. And more specifically for URM employees at HSI campuses, as described in the literature review in Chapter II, a number of case studies revealed isolation, unsupportive microclimates, and a lack of belongingness for faculty and staff of color (Ek et al., 2010; García, 2016b; Gonzales et al., 2013; López et al., 2021; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010; Venegas et al., 2021).

A possibly unique aspect of these racialized experiences for many HSI specialists was that it extended to the work of servingness itself. That is, not only were they overlooked, hyper scrutinized, and/or undervalued as PoC, the Latinx-centered work that they were engaged in was also overlooked, hyper scrutinized, and undervalued. This left them constantly not only having to prove themselves, but also having to justify the value of their Latinx-serving labor, leaving them doubly stung by the machinations of whiteness. This is consistent with Ahmed’s (2012) assertion that, “if diversity and
equality work is less valued by organizations, then to become responsible for this work can mean to inhabit institutional spaces that are also less valued” (p. 4).

Invisible labor was also a prominent theme for HSI specialists in the study, which again mirrored literature broadly for PoC on college campuses. First explored by Amado Padilla (1994), this “cultural taxation” takes the form of serving as a minority representative on committees, de facto mentoring of students of color, acting as a “diversity expert” who can educate white peers on issues related to race, and translating documents or interpreting for Spanish-speaking families, even if that is not a part of their job description. Education and translation labor were particularly salient topics for the participants in this study, owing to the overrepresentation of white employees compared to the rapidly increasing diversity of their student bodies as well as the dearth of Spanish-speaking employees on their campuses.

More than burnout from these forms of invisible labor, HSI specialists also reported experiencing what is known as “racial battle fatigue.” Coined by educator William A. Smith, racial battle fatigue is “the physical and psychological toll taken [on URM people and those engaged in race work] due to constant and unceasing discrimination, microaggressions, and stereotype threat” (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014, p. xvii). As not only (mostly) PoC but also practitioners dedicated to culture change, the emotional labor of swimming against the institutional current and being buffeted by waves of whiteness created stress and exhaustion for many of the participants in this study. This phenomenon has been documented in literature across academic environments and within varying levels of institutional hierarchies. For example, women of color in college leadership positions (Subramaniam & Alcalde, 2023), staff of color at
a PWI who contend with the “pervasiveness of color-evasive and race-neutral narratives” (Briscoe & Jones, 2022, p. 667), and Latinx faculty and staff at an HSI who work to “disrupt racism and uphold diversity initiatives” (Scott et al., 2022, p. 7) all report experiencing racial battle fatigue. In one study on self-described campus “activists,” Gorski (2019) found that institutional and interpersonal resistance to their equity work – including invalidation and even retaliation – was one of the primary sources of racial battle fatigue.

Retaliation in this study took various forms. HSI specialists who set boundaries to restrict their uncompensated labor reported being viewed as less of a team player. Supported by whiteness scholars, the idea of “collegiality” is “embedded in a culture of whiteness” (Subramaniam & Alcalde, 2023, p. 199). To break the unspoken rules of white collegiality by protecting their time, HSI specialists were subject to gossip and social isolation. Participants in the study also reported having to manage the way they came across to white colleagues so as not to play into negative racialized stereotypes, particularly as it pertained to policing their emotions. This is also consistent with research that shows that PoC on college campuses have to “perform emotion management to control their feelings of anger and frustration” or face possible punishment (Wingfield, 2010, p. 253). And HSI specialists described instances wherein they or other colleagues of color were dismissed or silenced for working to disrupt the racial status quo. There are many accounts of similar occurrences in research in which URMs were gaslit, harassed, or punished for poking holes in performative diversity agendas and pushing their institutions to better serve their students of color (Ahmed, 2018; Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2020; Gorski, 2019; Ritter and Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2020; Rollock, 2018). Subramaniam and
Alcalde (2023), for example, remark that as women of color in higher education, they are “vulnerable to suspicion of pushing too hard or too much within spaces of institutionalized white fragility” where they “may be punished for too loudly critiquing institutional practices and structures and refusing to be complicit in [their] own silencing” (p. 189). The result, for many PoC, racial justice activists, and HSI specialists alike, is disengagement. As was seen in this study, disillusionment with the sincerity of their institutions’ desire to truly engage in servingness was widespread, and three of the twenty participants not only quit their institutions, but left higher education altogether as a result of the racial battle fatigue they felt. Similarly, Gorski (2019) found that college racial justice activists would “lose their spirit” and “disengage due to the physical and emotional tolls activism can take on them” (p. 1).

**Summarizing Systems of Whiteness at HSI/eHSIs.** Critical whiteness studies in higher education could add a lot to our understandings of historically white campuses in transition by attending to the various systems of whiteness and how these systems influence each other. By integrating both psychological and sociological perspectives into an ecological model of whiteness, we can better understand how whiteness operates at the individual (internal), micro (interpersonal/spatial), meso (organizational), and macro (societal) levels, as well as the unique barriers that HSI specialists face within each system. In the following section, I turn to the strategies that HSI specialists employed to disrupt these systems of whiteness.

**Engaging in Strategic Counterhegemony at Recently Designated and Emerging HSIs**

HSI specialists in this study understood that simply overlaying the HSI label onto existing organizational identities and structures would not be enough to embody an ethos
of servingness; rather, their campuses needed to engage in transformational change. But in order “to transform, disruption must first occur” (Leggett-Robinson & Scott-Johnson 2022, p. 177). Disrupting systems of whiteness can be thought of as counterhegemony. This concept, developed by social activist and political thinker Antonio Gramsci, is “the process that challenges the status quo and the normative arrangement of political and economic relations, aiming ultimately at human liberation” (Zembylas, 2013, p. 2).

Hegemony is able to persist in part because of the “passive consent” of the masses rooted in a “false consciousness,” or “the unquestioned views, assumptions, and beliefs we hold that support rule of the dominant class” (Gross, 2015, p. 60). Gramsci therefore advocated for a counterhegemonic approach that included not only a “war of maneuver” which directly, physically reclaims structural power, but also a “war of position” to create new and critical understandings to supplant hegemonic ideologies (Gross, 2015; Im, 1991). Within this framework, HSI specialists were not forcibly claiming power, but rather could be thought of as “organic intellectuals” who were waging an educative battle and uniting their colleagues in change efforts (Gross, 2015; Im, 1991).

Indeed, HSI specialists in this study described spending a lot of their time and effort in individual and micro level changes, cultivating racial understandings and creating coalitions. But they also understood that true transformation would only be possible with both the widespread development of critical consciousness and a change in structural conditions (Im, 1991), and they reported efforts at both. Consistent with scholarship on hegemony, participants in this study expressed some frustration that meso level practices, policies, and resource allocations were often challenging to alter, as hegemony is grounded in such sturdy and complex structures that it makes intervention
exceedingly difficult (e.g., Im, 1991). That said, this study was not designed to evaluate the effectiveness of HSI specialists’ work but rather delve into their understandings and document their strategies. Whether or not their efforts were successful, their strategies intentionally aimed to poke holes in the fabric of hegemony.

HSI scholarship as of the time of this writing does not include empirical research on whether or how HSI specialists, campus leaders, or other practitioners at recently designated and emerging HSIs employ counterhegemonic strategies. There is, however, scholarship highlighting the role of PoC, DEI administrators, and others engaged in the fight for transformational change in higher education, which can inform the work of HSI specialists at campuses in transition. Much of this scholarship focuses on micro level disruptions, wherein practitioners engage in political maneuvering and grassroots efforts in order to influence organizational cultures and processes (Alcalde & Henne-Ochoa, 2022; Swan & Fox, 2010). Disruptive leadership at the micro level is an artform of moving people, one by one, to both understand and care enough about existing inequities to work together toward the common goal of upending them (Leggett-Robinson & Scott-Johnson, 2022; Stewart & Valian, 2018).

In the following sections, I highlight how the HSI specialists in this study worked to do just that. I outline how they responded to and worked to undermine institutional whiteness by engaging in both authentic and strategic leadership practices, creating culture shifts, and innovating to solve problems. As their strategies were also deeply tied to who they were, I have italicized the roles that they embodied as they engaged in counterhegemonic practices.
**Authentic Leadership.** It is important to begin this discussion of HSI specialists’ counterhegemonic practices by recognizing how closely tied their personal and professional identities were. The ways they worked to enact servingness and to serve as catalysts for change were inextricably linked to who they were. Sixteen of the 20 participants were themselves PoC, and of the white participants, two claimed other marginalized identities. Thus, when they worked alongside their URM students and saw themselves reflected in their struggles, it propelled them into the role of change agent. Consistent with research on activists of color in higher education, their “labor is both physical and emotional and their identities are tightly bound to issues most people never acknowledge” (Gorski, 2019, p. 4). Even those few white HSI specialists in the study were *Self-Reflexive Practitioners* whose work was grounded in empathy and who reported spending considerable time exploring how they could leverage their whiteness to be better allies.

Drawing from their personal backgrounds and experiences, HSI specialists in this study frequently discussed the ways that being true to their authentic selves helped ground them in their counterhegemonic practice. Because they so closely identified with their students and the communities they hailed from, it created a profound sense of purpose. This in turn helped many of them maintain optimism and hope as well as the ability to persist, even in the face of institutional racism and setbacks to progress. This is also reflected in the literature on PoC and DEI practitioners on college campuses, who often display incredible persistence: even when they feel like they are hitting up against a brick wall, still, they tell themselves, *vale la pena* [it is worth the struggle] (González, 2022, p. 133; see also: Hodges & Welch, 2022). In staying true to themselves, they
understood when and how to engage in critical self-care and boundary setting. In literature on community and higher education activists, self-care is an important strategy for slowing burnout (Cox, 2011). Additionally, scholars point to the importance of community care, which addresses underlying toxic conditions (Cox, 2011; Gorski, 2019) – strategies the participants in this study leaned into. Thus, just as HSI specialists navigated ecosystems of whiteness, resilience could also be rooted in ecosystems of mutually supportive relationships.

Authenticity was also a way that HSI specialists were able to become highly effective *Culture Affirmers, Listeners, Supporters, and Advocates*, as many of them understood from first-hand experience the cultures, challenges, and needs of their students. Consistent with literature about faculty and staff of color at HSIs (García & Ramirez, 2018; Mendez et al., 2015), they became powerful validators, empowering agents, and navigators, built on trust and authentic relationships. Scholars have touted this sort of support as the first step toward transformation, as “listening and being listened to are the bedrocks of change” (Alcalde & Henne-Ochoa, 2022, p. 106). From one-on-one relationships, HSI specialists then became *Community-Builders*, not just among students but also faculty and staff of color and others engaged in the struggle. Communities such as theirs are often grounded in members’ shared struggles (Ahmed, 2012), and HSI specialists also underscored the care and reciprocity that fueled them.

One space that was a particularly important community of support for members was the *HSI Coalition*, from which I drew my participant pool. While some research points to the importance of campus-centered communities to faculty and staff of color (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010), little scholarship explores intercollegiate communities,
such as the *HSI Coalition*, and their role as purpose-driven spaces of learning, connection, and support. As the number of such intercollegiate HSI communities have begun to proliferate,\textsuperscript{21} this topic warrants further study.

**Shifting Cultures.** Through the relationships and communities that HSI specialists nurtured, they were able to disrupt whiteness at the microsystem level as *Educators, Storytellers, and Collective Meaning-Makers*. As Oakes and colleagues (1998) discuss, “third-order change,” which upends prevailing inequitable norms and practices in education, must start with transforming the attitudes and understandings of the educators themselves. The authors support a critical approach in which equity-minded practitioners take “an active and forthright confrontation of these [problematic] beliefs” as a necessary complement to top-down mandates (p. 301).

Storytelling was reported as an especially effective strategy for doing just that. Long used by Critical Race Theorists, “counterstorytelling” can be a powerful tool for engaging in critical race-conscious conversations (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013) and can “disrupt the culture of power” (Hodges & Welch, 2022, p. 72). In these ways, HSI specialists served as socializing agents in the development of their white colleagues’ racial understandings. Amplifying their students’ stories helped to challenge white-normative understandings of the world and disrupt “race neutral” discourses that actually serve to reinforce white hegemony. It also helped their colleagues make sense of the

\textsuperscript{21} While intercollegiate HSI collaborations in places such as Texas and California have existed for some time, newer grassroots coalitions have sprung up in recent years, such as in Arizona and Colorado, as well as a number of National Science Foundation-supported collaborations, along with the Alliance of Hispanic Serving Research Institutions, which was formed in 2022.
concept of servingness and to “drink the HSI kool-aid” which was a necessary requisite before their organizational identity, practices, and structures could fundamentally change. Consistent with Rogers and colleagues’ (2021) psychological perspective, these HSI specialists described disrupting racism within microsystems as contributing to changing norms and cultures.

But in doing so, HSI specialists also had to be attentive to the ways in which they nudged their colleagues—and their organizational cultures—away from whiteness. As described in the “Paved with Good Intentions” section above, participants understood the complexity of pushing their white colleagues out of their racial comfort zone while making space for them to feel their feelings. As they became Expert Communicators and Encouragers, they held in tension the need to placate white fragility while also continuing to educate, thus scaffolding their white colleagues’ development as allies. But at other times, HSI specialists asserted that they would be able to move the needle more quickly by being Feather Rufflers. In these cases, as they educated their peers, they weighed compassion for their white counterparts with passion for the students they served. As DiAngelo (2016) points out, a more direct approach to addressing racial issues with white peers can sometimes be counterproductive, and so HSI specialists had to find the right balance, walking a tightrope of white feelings while pushing their colleagues toward servingness.

Finally, to shift cultures, they had to not only call their colleagues out (or in), but also engage at the mesosystem of whiteness. Many accomplished this by questioning organizational practices and policies. Similar to Ahmed’s (2012) formulation of “institutional plumbers,” as Interrogators, HSI specialists helped unblock barriers to
racial progress by paving the way for more equitable and inclusive academic policies and institutional practices. Others worked to shift the mesosystem as Activists. Consistent with the conspicuous absence of the role of HSI practitioners as activists in HSI literature, only two HSI specialists reported embodying this role, and of those two, only one indicated that he engaged in traditionally understood activism efforts, such as demonstrations. The other described an evolution in their thinking about what “activism” meant, with their formulation seeming to be more in alignment with the idea of an “interrogator” of campus systems. Thus, the ways that HSI specialists worked to change their institutions from the inside out seemed to be consistent with research on diversity practitioners on college campuses, who more often engaged as institution-builders (Wade-Golden & Williams, 2013) than “fist shakers.”

Strategists. While being true to themselves was an important aspect of how they led for change, HSI specialists also reported contexts in which they did have to attenuate who they were and be more strategic to undermine systems of whiteness. This was also the case for the many PoC higher education leaders whose stories are chronicled in Alcalde and Subramaniam’s (2022) edited book, Dismantling Institutional Whiteness: Emerging Forms of Leadership in Higher Education. In these practitioners’ efforts to work both “for” their institutions and “against” them as they disrupted systems of whiteness, their pathways included both a fidelity to their authentic selves and standing firm in their truths, as well as “playing a game” at times that moved their work forward in measured and strategic ways. For HSI specialists, these “games” often took place when they were in positions to become Leadership Influencers, Opportunists, and Champions.
for Latinx-Centeredness, persuading campus leaders to act, to allocate resources, or to make decisions in the name of servingness.

To this end, participants in this study were highly adept Code-Switchers. Just as Swan and Fox (2010) found with DEI practitioners more broadly, HSI specialists displayed situational awareness and political savvy, allowing them to adapt across different contexts and employ a variety of discourses that would serve their agenda. Some of this involved turning to “culturally masculinized” approaches, such as disaggregating data, to “work defensively” (Swan & Fox, 2010, p. 581-2). Consistent with Critical Race Theory tenets, participants also became expert Interest Convergers, demonstrating how HSI work would be of benefit to the institution and its white stakeholders (Brown & Jackson, 2013): learning how to “talk the talk” of administration, making the business case for HSI, and sometimes employing “all students matter” rhetoric.

This ability to “play the game” was a source of consternation for some participants. They understood that they would sometimes have to appease their campus leaders’ colorblind ideologies or play into the commodification of Brown bodies in order to get them to listen and act. But many of the HSI specialists held their noses while doing it. Interestingly, some whiteness scholars would argue that there is a gray area between purist activism and co-opted DEI management, and that artificially creating a binary of “good diversity (social justice) and bad diversity (the business case) may not always be helpful” (Swan & Fox, 2010, p. 571). Rather, in understanding the tensions, complexities, and opportunities of code-switching and interest convergence, HSI specialists would inhabit that gray area, thus navigating micro- and meso-systems of whiteness to the greatest possible effect.
**Necessity is the Mother of Innovation.** No matter what strategy HSI specialists employed, the context of limited resources and staff capacity required creative thinking and initiative. They became *Doers*, often going above and beyond their job duties, but also, importantly, *Coalition-Builders* and *Community Connectors* as they understood many hands make light work. The committees and informal networks they drew upon both on and off campus were relational as well as intentionally and strategically curated. Scholarship on diversity work in higher education underscores the importance of such coalitions, as the collective work of grassroots leaders, organizational catalysts, and allies in positions of power, working in tandem, can be powerful vehicles for change (González, 2022; Stewart & Valian, 2018).

One of the most innovative strategies that HSI specialists reported was that of *Hustler*. This entailed piecing together budgets by working the campus, convincing colleagues to pitch in, even collaborating with students to amass the necessary resources for essential servingness efforts. Hustling was first and foremost grounded in good relationships that HSI specialists had cultivated with colleagues, so that the rapport was already there when they needed to make an ask. It was also a very boots-on-the-ground strategy, involving many phone calls, meetings, and a tremendous amount of persistence. While commonly cited by participants, there does not appear to be any research pointing to this phenomenon – either at HSIs or in other college contexts. And yet, it was a strategy that resonated deeply with the participants in this study. In limited-resource environments that are change-averse, this would be a particularly important strategy to explore further.
Summary of Part I: Implications for Theory

By setting out to better understand how HSI specialists at recently designated and emerging HSIs conceptualized and grappled with the historical legacy of whiteness on their campuses, I have provided a fuller, more nuanced understanding of these campuses in transition through the lens of those on the front lines of servingness. In particular, this research has provided a broader definition of servingness at recently designated and emerging HSIs by adding the concepts of critical race-conscious leadership orientations, dynamic diversity, bilingual support services, consideration for Dreamers, and a collective Latinx-serving organizational identity as essential structures for serving on these campuses, as well as a refinement of the compositional diversity aspect of servingness.

This study also explicitly explored the theoretical concept of whiteness, revealing how HSI specialists understood it and described it manifesting on their campuses. By situating their understandings within an ecological model of whiteness, I married psychological and sociological perspectives for a more comprehensive picture of how participants saw whiteness operating. At the individual level, I showed how colleagues’ attitudes, understandings, feelings, and biases stalled racial progress. At the microsystem level, I described how demographic and ontological expansiveness are closely related and can create racialized experiences for HSI specialists and other PoC, and also complicated the concept of counterspaces as a necessary but insufficient support mechanism. Within the mesosystem of whiteness, I provided insights into how organizations were often complicit with the perpetuation of whiteness, and in particular, highlighted how HSI specialists’ experiences on their campuses supported the idea that recently designated and
emerging HSIs often became “racial projects” that co-opted the language of HSI and reformulated HSI as being primarily of benefit to the institution. I also showed the connection between these racial projects and the incrementalism, resource exclusion, and white-centered policies practiced by these campuses, according to HSI specialists. And although macrosystems are often left out of analyses of postsecondary institutions, I provided examples of how HSI specialists felt the effects of jurisprudence, legislation, and race-evasive national narratives and movements on their campuses and their servingness work. Further, I demonstrated that, because each system of whiteness shapes and is shaped by other systems of whiteness, rooting it out necessitates a multipronged approach – attacking it by transforming individual understandings, organizational practices, and collective narratives that harm URM students.

Finally, I provided insights into how HSI specialists themselves were impacted by the pervasive and pernicious nature of whiteness – a theme that has not been explored previously in HSI literature. I also painted a picture of the types of strategies they employed to actively disrupt systems of whiteness, and showed where these strategies were similar to those of other DEI practitioners and where they departed from existing literature on the subject.

In the following section, I outline how this knowledge might be translated into practical action on campuses in transition.

Part II: Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have implications for practical application. In this section, I outline high-level takeaways and strategies that can be implemented on recently designated and emerging HSI campuses to counter the effects of historical and ongoing
whiteness and work toward the organizational embodiment of servingness. It starts with unmasking the hidden machinations of whiteness and follows with strategies specific to HSI specialists and campus leaders. I conclude this section with a discussion of the promise of Communities of Practice as a tool for community, engagement, and counterhegemony.

Make the Invisible, Visible

What was unearthed in this study was the deeply entrenched hegemony of whiteness on campuses in transition toward Latinx-serving and that this whiteness has created barriers to equity work and racial progress. The sources of these barriers often remain invisible and yet touch many facets of organizational culture and structures as experienced by HSI specialists. These practitioners, then, felt that it was not only incumbent upon them to challenge whiteness, but all their colleagues had a responsibility to play a part in dismantling it. While insidious and pervasive, whiteness can be rooted out: it is not a part of the “natural” order but rather evolved as a deeply embedded facet of American culture – and, like many cultural features, it may be slow to change, but it is not immutable (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). This requires becoming counterhegemonic, challenging the normalization of whiteness in our attitudes, interactions, policies, and practices (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

It is important in the face of such a seemingly intractable challenge to remember our agency. As Fasching-Varner and colleagues (2014) remind us, “As long as there have been oppressive forces, there have been individual/collective structures to challenge oppression” (p. xix). By exposing whiteness, defining it, and delimiting its effects, whiteness loses power (Moon & Flores, 2000). But to face and name the contours of
whiteness takes self-reflexivity, determination, and “courage to stay in the discomfort” (Stewart & Gachago, 2022, p. 9; see also: Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

**Pathways Forward for HSI Specialists**

HSI specialists have a daunting job. Working both “for” their institutions and “against” institutional currents as change agents is a fine line to walk and a heavy burden to carry (Alcalde & Subramaniam, 2022). But this study demonstrates that many are doing it to positive effect.

Based on the findings of this study, since HSI specialists embody so many of the roles that help to disrupt whiteness, there are many lessons they can teach us: that embodying leadership is best engaged authentically; that influencing administrators may require political savvy and strategic maneuvering; that the hard work of changing cultures starts at the micro level – one relationship, one mind, one heart at a time; that servingness often entails “hustling” and change-work requires an enormous amount of perseverance and hope. Because of the enormous amount of uncompensated labor and emotional energy this entails, the study also points to the importance of self-care to replenish internal reserves. Just as warriors suit up for battle, HSI specialists can – and do – take steps to protect themselves in the fight against whiteness. But there is also a collective responsibility on these campuses to foster an ethos of community-care as well, as this study has shown the paramount importance of networks of people rowing in the same direction and supporting each other. If we are to change our institutions from the inside out, it cannot be done alone. Our communities – whether they be our home communities, campus communities, or intercollegiate coalitions – are sources of strength. HSI
specialists have demonstrated that leaning into these communities not only bolsters the effectiveness of the work, but can also fortify, empower, and uplift those engaged in servingness efforts.

**Leadership Matters**

Most of the practical applications I underscore are directed to campus leaders, as they are the ones who create the conditions in which HSI specialists engage in servingness work and yet they are often out of touch with what it would truly take to make the transition from historically white to Latinx-serving. The findings from this study point clearly to the need for campus leaders to be highly engaged in HSI efforts and actively embed servingness as an institutional priority. For the participants who described involved and committed administrators, the hope for the future of their servingness efforts was much more palpable. And research confirms that “formal leaders [are] almost always critical to the success of the efforts that [begin] with informal leaders” (Stewart & Valian, 2018, p. 433–434). In short, for transformation to take place, campus leaders need to become HSI specialists themselves.

**Begin with Yourself.** As described in the section on servingness in Part I above, leaders need to engage in critical and honest self-reflection, dialogue, and learning in order to come to clearer understandings of how race operates personally, interpersonally, and institutionally, where whiteness manifests on their campus and how they might be complicit in reifying the racial status quo. This is especially important for white campus leaders, who as of 2016 still occupied 86% of administrative positions in higher education (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). Scholars point out that it is critical, then, that these white administrators take the initiative to examine the embeddedness of racism in
their own lives and institutions and embody anti-racist leadership practices to uproot whiteness, root and branch (Corces-Zimmerman & Southern, 2021; Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021). HSI specialists in this study demonstrated that they are willing to help with this process and have the expertise to be effective partners, if campus leaders are willing to listen and learn.

**Assess the Needs.** As HSI specialists in this study demonstrated, better understanding how whiteness is embedded in institutional structures begins with disaggregating data by race/ethnicity. These data should focus not only on traditional student outcomes such as retention, graduation, STEM participation, and GPA, but also campus climate and other student experience surveys, as well as processes and policies that may be causing disproportionately negative experiences or outcomes for Latinx and other URM students.

There are also a number of emerging frameworks that campus leaders can use as guideposts for servingness and measuring their progress: in addition to general DEI frameworks such as the NERCHE Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education (2016), there are now tools specific to HSIs and servingness such as the Seal of Excelencia framework (2021) and the University of Arizona’s comprehensive Operationalizing the Servingness Framework (Mitchneck, 2022). These measures ask campuses and their leaders critical questions, digging into every aspect of their institutional practices that affect students’ experiences and outcomes, including the components of servingness HSI specialists emphasized in this study, such as Latinx community engagement, bilingual capacity, diverse representation, student support, cultural affirmation, education of faculty/staff, and
organizational identity. They also dismantle deficit narratives about students and concentrate the focus on the institution’s responsibility to meet students’ needs. And, importantly, they attend to student outcomes beyond graduation rates – which are important and part of the servingness equation – but also focus on other indicators of “success” as well as “thriving.”

Significantly, HSI specialists in this study indicated that students must be empowered to help define what success and thriving look like to them and help shape what the institution can do to foster supportive conditions. In institutions that are hierarchical in nature and power is concentrated at the top with a relatively small group of people (as most college campuses are), high-status members dominate influential decisions and resource allocation. It is important, then, for campus leaders to make space for the voices of both students and the practitioners who are boots on the ground for their servingness efforts. Based on their experiences as minoritized DEI practitioners in academia, Kim and Mouton (2023) believe that through individual and collective agency, organizational change is possible; however, a requisite condition is continuous opportunities to provide a voice to those on the front lines of change to have real influence over policies and processes.

**Commit to Transformation.** A recurring refrain from the HSI specialists in this study was that change was slow, incremental, surface-level, and/or performative, rather than transformational in nature. There was a sense that this new HSI identity was often subsumed into existing organizational identities, allowing business-as-usual to continue uninterrogated and uninterrupted. But within a decolonial framework, Lazaridou and Fernando (2022) argue that “successful accountability” for transformative and social
justice leadership “is about active institutional reorganization, thereby dismantling existing power structures of whiteness” (p. 177). Campus leaders, then, need to question the assumptions that undergird campus practices and resource allocation, and not only make statements of commitment, but also fundamentally alter the structures and functioning of the institution (Boyce, 2003; Clark, 2000; Huff & Huff, 2000; Kezar, 2011). Such change is deep, pervasive, and intentional (Eckel & Kezar, 2003) and requires accountability measures beyond the good intentions of individuals (Scott et al., 2022).

Understanding the complexities of organizational change, administrators also need to work collaboratively with HSI specialists and other grassroots leaders to make transformational progress (Boyce, 2003; Kezar, 2011; Potter & Devecchi, 2020). HSI specialists in this study demonstrated that they possessed deep knowledge and experience, active coalitions across campus and in the community, and leadership qualities such as authenticity, empathy, and strategic thinking. Engaging with them as empowered partners could go a long way in helping campus leaders create the culture shifts necessary for servingness to take root.

Finally, a commitment to transformation requires a move in institutional thinking from “emerging” to “serving.” It was clear from the participants in this study that Latinx and other URM students who were already at these institutions were not getting all their needs met as many of the campus structures were not conducive to their success or thriving. Therefore, administrators who work at emerging HSI campuses particularly need to shift the campus culture from thinking ahead to when they might become an HSI,
to acting as though they already have the federal designation because the students cannot wait. There is an urgency to servingness.

**Do More with More.** As mentioned in the literature review in Chapter II, HSIs are “doing more with less” – serving more Latinx students with fewer institutional resources on average than their peer institutions (Núñez & Elizondo, 2015; Ortega et al., 2015). HSI specialists in this study also indicated that as their institutional demographics shifted, their budgetary equations did not, and servingness efforts remained disproportionately underfunded. Thus, there needs to be a reimagining of how campus leaders develop and allocate resources. Centering the most vulnerable or marginalized students on campus and prioritizing their needs may necessitate a shift in where and how institutional fundraising efforts are taking place as well as greater investment in financial aid, budgets for Latinx-centered academic and co-curricular programming, professional development to cultivate cultural responsiveness and equity-mindedness, and additional staff in key areas.

Campus leaders also need to recognize that a climate of care and compassion starts with relationships with students, and is an effective pathway forward for building belonging and supporting retention and academic success. But with this understanding also comes the recognition that high-touch student work is a time-intensive endeavor, leading to burnout among those who are going above and beyond. Campus leaders should take a cue from Yatzuri’s administration by recognizing who is taking on this additional labor and determining how pressure can be relieved in other areas. Prioritizing servingness means making it sustainable for those engaged in it. Instead of asking their faculty and staff to “do more with less,” they should give them more to work with.
Through careful self- and institutional examination, utilizing research-based frameworks, leaning on the expertise of Latinx students and HSI specialists, and making bold changes to structures and resource allocation to prioritize servingness, campus leaders can move their organizations toward transformational change.

**Communities of Practice as a Promising Strategy**

The Community of Practice (CoP) in this study was a space for deep engagement. Not only did CoP conversations affirm, extend, nuance, and complicate the interview data for purposes of this research, but these were also spaces of learning for the participants themselves. Similar to the educators with whom Ladson-Billings (1994) worked in her community of inquiry, the HSI specialists in this study were expert practitioners who often operated on an “intuitive and automatic level” but in the presence of other experts, they were better able to “describe their practices” and “deconstruct the specificity of their own experiences and make connections with the collective experiences of others” (p. 152, 155). Lucia, for example, described the value of the CoP sessions in that they provided:

> The opportunity to reflect and create dialogue centered on our work... We are usually the boots on the ground, so much that we might not take the time to think about how we do things, why we do them the way we do, and the bigger picture… Learning about some of the concepts that we discussed was extremely valuable and helpful in understanding my own service, work, and experiences.

The concepts discussed gave participants access to additional language to help them make sense of what was happening on their own campuses as well as describe and legitimate their experiences. North (2015), who also did research with educator learning
communities, found that these sessions helped participants “affirm, reinforce, challenge, and transform” their thinking and that the process of engaging in “collaborative inquiry… deepen[ed] the connections between theory and practice” (p. 4). While documenting whether the sense-making that occurred in the CoPs actually changed HSI specialists’ practice was beyond the scope of this study, self-reporting from participants demonstrated deeper understandings of how whiteness manifested on their campuses and a greater repertoire of tools for counteracting its effects. Participants, like those in Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study, reported that this was an incredibly valuable and powerful experience.

In addition to the “sense-making” that the CoPs afforded HSI specialists, there were also personal and emotional benefits. In these sessions, participants not only “talked shop,” gave advice, and shared resources, they also celebrated, supported, and encouraged each other. HSI specialists reported that CoP sessions reinforced the value of their work and provided a much-needed space to reflect, connect, commiserate, and build community. Some even characterized it as akin to “therapy” as it gave them positive reinforcement and the knowledge that they were not alone in the kinds of challenges they faced on their respective campuses. And these sessions gave them hope, learning about the great work that colleagues across institutions were engaged in, and feeling encouraged that their efforts were, in fact, resulting in real progress.

In Flipping the HSI Narrative, Núñez (2017) argues for connecting practitioners across HSIs to “forge a collective HSI identity” in a “collective sense making” effort (p. 291). While the author envisions the benefit of this collective servingness identity as being primarily for advocacy purposes, it is clear, based on this study, that the benefits
would extend to individual members as well. I contend, then, that the growth of CoPs both within and across these campuses in transition might not only help to foster a shared understanding of the meaning of HSI, but also fortify those HSI specialists who are on the front lines of transformational change.

**Part III: Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study had a number of limitations. The first is the question of generalizability. HSI specialists were drawn from the same localized area and, given the specific history, demographic trends, and culture of that region, findings may not be generalizable even to other emerging HSI regions. Even so, as research in emerging HSI regions has been minimal, the current study does extend what is known about campuses in transition. There were also a limited number of participants with 20 total HSI specialists interviewed, whereas a larger participant pool would give greater weight to the findings. Moreover, the participant pool was somewhat unbalanced, as the majority were women (75%), who may understand, experience, and resist whiteness in different ways from men or nonbinary practitioners. And this study was conducted with HSI specialists who occupied varying roles within their institutions – they were mostly staff but also included several faculty and administrators. Again, the different ways HSI specialists experience and handle whiteness might differ depending on their location within the organization. Finally, while I drew participants from eight separate campuses to ensure a breadth in experiences across institutional types, this precluded a deeper dive into any one campus. With one-four participants from each, their experiences might not even be generalizable to all HSI specialists at their respective campuses. And yet the redundancy in themes across interviews spoke to common underlying experiences. Further research in
different emerging HSI regions and/or with a larger or more balanced participant pool would provide greater insight into the question of how these practitioners encounter and counter whiteness. It would be interesting to compare distinct participant groups by race/ethnicity, gender, and/or position (faculty, staff, administrators, board members) to understand any differences in their understandings and strategies.

A second limitation is that, by design, this study focused on HSI specialists’ understandings and strategies, as I hoped to gain insight into their own conceptualization of whiteness and their perceptions of where it showed up on their campuses. I did not directly observe whiteness in their spaces nor whether the strategies they employed yielded results. While I asked them which strategy(ies) they believed to be most effective, I could not answer this definitively as it was based on self-reporting from the perspective of the HSI specialists. A case study approach would be necessary to determine how effective these strategies actually were in practice and would yield more clarity through direct observation as to when and how whiteness manifests, helping refine the ecological model of whiteness. Additionally, as campus leadership was reported as such an integral piece of the servingness puzzle, a comparative case study of campuses with effective race-conscious leaders vs. campuses in which servingness work is not prioritized would provide a fuller picture of how HSI specialists at emerging and recently designated HSIs work to transform their campuses.

Despite these limitations, the nuances from my findings open up new questions for exploration. These future directions (see Table 5 below) are rooted to how these HSI specialists’ thinking diverged from or extended current understandings, as outlined in the discussion.
Table 5

Directions for Future Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic diversity</td>
<td>How do HSI specialists cultivate dynamic diversity? What strategies are most effective in fostering positive interracial relations at campuses in transition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreamers at HSIs</td>
<td>How are Dreamers being served at HSIs? What are the differences, if any, between Dreamer experiences at HSIs, eHSIs, and other PWIs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eHSIs vs. HSIs</td>
<td>What does employee diversity look like at eHSIs, and how do these numbers compare to those of HSIs? Does HSI and eHSI employee diversity differ based on region? And what implications does employee diversity present for whether and how campuses are able to transform structures steeped in whiteness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White allies at eHSIs</td>
<td>For white allies at campuses in transition, what is the role of self-doubt in whether or how they engage in servingness efforts? What strategies, experiences, and/or conditions help them overcome self-doubt?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective factors for HSI specialists</td>
<td>Given the barriers to racial progress they face, what are the protective factors, including personal characteristics, strategies, and organizational conditions, that help HSI specialists on emerging campuses persist?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSI specialists as “hustlers”</td>
<td>What characteristics, strategies, and/or campus conditions make HSI specialists effective “hustlers”?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, the literature on HSIs would benefit from an analysis of intercollegiate communities, such as the HSI Coalition in the Midwest, but also those in other states, such as Arizona and Colorado, to better understand whether and how they support servingness work. While the present study provides clear indications based on participant reports of the benefits of being a member of the HSI Coalition, it would be useful to explore the functional characteristics that make the coalition such a powerful community.

Conclusion

When I started this project, I had set out to learn from fellow HSI specialists how I could more effectively mobilize my campus toward the transformational change
necessary to embody a truly Latinx-serving organizational identity. In particular, I was interested in understanding how people in positions like mine understood the interplay between institutional whiteness and race-conscious models of servingness.

My findings establish that these practitioners were fighting a near-constant battle against whiteness that manifested in a variety of forms: from individual racial understandings and interpersonal and spatial instantiations of whiteness, to organizational rhetoric and systems and even sociopolitical currents that forced back race-conscious efforts. And yet, they approached their servingness and change-work with a profound sense of purpose and intentionality.

The contributions of this study are clear. The perspectives and experiences HSI specialists shared through this project are critical to understanding how campuses in transition might be able to overcome barriers to servingness. Moreover, this study adds to what is known about recently designated and emerging HSIs by expanding, nuancing, and complicating structures for servingness, based on what was most salient to those working on the front lines. It also contributes to our conceptual understanding of whiteness by offering an integrated ecological model of the individual, micro, meso, and macro systems of whiteness that HSI specialists contend with. As the first study to explore HSI specialists’ strategies for disrupting whiteness, it also reveals how they addressed whiteness at each of those levels in ways that both strategically and compassionately engaged colleagues and campus leaders. Finally, it highlighted the Community of Practice as a potential tool for cultivating a shared servingness identity and a source of mutual support for HSI specialists.
The findings from this study both highlighted HSI specialists as powerful catalysts for change and also underscored the collective responsibility of all campus stakeholders to engage in counterhegemonic practices. My hope is that, in calling attention to HSI specialists’ challenges related to whiteness as well as their triumphs, campus leaders at similarly situated campuses will be inspired to examine their own understandings, practices, and campus structures and commit – not only in word, but also in deed – to uprooting whiteness wherever it lurks.
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APPENDIX A: OUTREACH EMAIL

Dear *HSI Coalition* colleague,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study I’m conducting for my dissertation entitled “Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions”.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role and perspectives of “HSI specialists” at recently designated and emerging HSIs as these institutions transition from historically white to Latinx-serving. Specifically, I am interested in better understanding how these practitioners navigate barriers and draw from personal and institutional resources.

In order to participate, you must be a faculty, staff, or administrator at an HSI or emerging HSI campus that is part of the *HSI Coalition* and have first-hand experience working on HSI initiatives.

Participation includes the following activities, **although you may opt out at any time**:

- Complete a brief survey about yourself and your role in your institution’s HSI initiative (5 minutes).
- Participate in 1 one-on-one interview, either in person or virtually, to discuss your ideas about your campus’s HSI initiative, particularly as they pertain to challenges, opportunities, and strategies for advancing Latinx “servingness” (60-90 minutes).
- An invitation to participate in a “community of practice” as a follow-up to the interview, the aim of which is to discuss strategies for disrupting systems of institutional whiteness and collectively develop key takeaways for resistant practice within a community of peers from other HSIs/eHSIs. The community of practice will involve a series of discussions, either in person or virtual.

If you are interested in participating, you can find more information about procedures and confidentiality at the [survey link](#). If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me!

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Jacki Black

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*HSI Coalition* is a pseudonym for the intercollegiate consortium of HSIs, eHSIs, and striving HSI institutions in the Midwest state where this study took place.
APPENDIX B: PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY AND CONSENT FORM

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY AGREEMENT OF CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions”
Principal Investigator: Jacki Black
Department of Educational Policy and Leadership

You have been invited to participate in this research study. Before you agree to participate, it is important that you read and understand the following information. Participation is completely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE:
- The purpose of this research study is to explore the role and perspectives of “HSI specialists” at recently designated and emerging HSIs as these institutions transition from historically white to Latinx-serving. Specifically, I am interested in better understanding how these practitioners navigate barriers and draw from personal and institutional resources.
- You will be one of approximately 20 participants in this research study. In order to participate, you must be a current or former faculty, staff, or administrator at an HSI or emerging HSI campus that is part of the HSI Coalition and have first-hand experience working on HSI initiatives.

PROCEDURES:
Participation includes the following activities, although you may opt out at any time:
- Complete a brief survey about yourself and your role in your institution’s HSI initiative (5 minutes).
- Participate in 1 one-on-one interview, either in person or virtually, to discuss your ideas about your campus’s HSI initiative, particularly as they pertain to challenges, opportunities, and strategies for advancing Latinx “servingness” (60-90 minutes)
- An invitation to participate in a “community of practice” as a follow-up to the interview, the aim of which is to discuss strategies for disrupting systems of institutional whiteness and collectively develop key takeaways for resistant practice within a community of peers from other HSIs/eHSIs. The community of practice will involve a series of discussions, either in person or virtual.
- Both the interview and the community of practice sessions will be audio recorded [if virtual, they will also be video recorded] to ensure accuracy. The recordings will later be transcribed and destroyed within one year beyond the completion of
the study. For confidentiality purposes, your name will be recorded and will be removed during transcription.

**DURATION:**
- Your participation will consist of one 60-90 minute interview in spring 2023.
- If you choose to participate in the community of practice sessions, participation in this phase of the study will consist of six 60-90 minute discussions, meeting weekly over the course of summer 2023.

**RISKS:**
- The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than you would experience in everyday life.
- Collection of data and survey responses using the internet involves the same risks that a person would encounter in everyday use of the internet, such as hacking or information being unintentionally seen by others.

**BENEFITS:**
- Direct benefits to you may include the opportunity to reflect upon, discuss with, and learn from other HSI practitioners strategies for advancing HSI goals on campuses that are transitioning from historically white to Latinx-serving.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**
- Data collected in this study will be kept confidential.
- All your data will be assigned a pseudonym rather than using your name or other information that could identify you as an individual. Names of institutions will also be kept confidential and your employer will not be informed of your participation in this study.
- A key will be created linking names to pseudonyms and the key will be stored on a password-protected outlook sharepoint site. Only the principal investigator, Jacki Black, will have access to the sharepoint file.
- The data/samples collected in this study will not be used or distributed for future research even if they have been deidentified.
- Audio/video recordings will be collected via a password-protected Microsoft TEAMS account and all recordings will be deleted after transcripts are created.
- When the results of the study are published, you will not be identified by name.
- Direct quotes may be used in reports or publications but will only be connected to pseudonyms.
- The data will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files within one year after the completion of the study.
Although your responses will be deleted from the survey provider website within one year after the completion of the study, your data may exist on backups or server logs beyond the timeframe of this research project.

- Everyone who participates in the community of practice sessions will be instructed to keep discussions confidential. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that all community of practice participants will respect everyone’s confidentiality.

- Your research records may be inspected by the Marquette University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowable by law) state and federal agencies.

- Data collected from this study may be placed in a publicly accessible repository as a requirement of publication. The study data that are stored there will not contain any links to you or your identifying information.

COMPENSATION:
- This study does not offer monetary compensation for participation.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION:
- Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

- If you withdraw from this study, all data collected prior to the time of withdrawal may be used, unless you request that they be destroyed.

- You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

- Your decision to participate or not will not impact your relationship with the investigator or Marquette University.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION:
- There are no known alternatives other than to not participate in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION:
- If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Jacki Black, a PhD student at Marquette University, at Jacqueline.black@marquette.edu or 414-288-4118.

- If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Marquette University’s Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO
PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT. By clicking “yes” on this form I agree to participate in this research study.

Demographics (Starred items are required)
1. *Full name
2. *Email address
3. *I prefer an...in-person/virtual interview.
   a. If in-person, provide location preferable to you:
4. Pseudonym or alternative name you want to use for this study (pick a name different than your own)
5. What is your gender identity?
6. What are your gender pronouns?
7. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity?
8. What is your country of origin?
9. *Name of your institution:
10. *Your title/position:
11. How many years have you worked in higher education?
   a. How many of these years have been focused on HSI initiatives?
12. How many years have you been on your campus?
13. After the interview, might you be interested in participating in a “community of practice” late in the spring or over the summer? This entails several meetings with other HSI specialists to discuss strategies for advancing HSI goals on historically white campuses.
   a. Yes, I am interested in being contacted about potential participation
   No, please do not contact me to participate in the “community of practice”
   Maybe; I would like more information
   b. If yes, I prefer (check all that apply):
      i. virtual meetings
      ii. in-person meetings
      iii. early morning meetings
      iv. midday (lunch hour) meetings
      v. meetings during business hours
      vi. evening meetings
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Goal**
To understand how HSI specialists in an emerging HSI region understand and navigate the historical legacy of whiteness on their campuses, whether/how institutional whiteness may present barriers to pursuing a race-conscious model of servingness, and the strategies these practitioners employ to disrupt these patterns.

**Interview Introduction**
*Before “getting down to business”, spend some time establishing mutual connections, expressing authentic interest in them, and sharing commonalities.*

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me! I am very excited to have this conversation with you.

Before we begin, I just want to emphasize that any identifying information about you and others you mention, including names and institutions, will be altered (so if you’d like to choose your own pseudonym, please do!).

I’d also like to record what you say so that I don’t miss any of it. If at any time during the interview you would like to stop recording, just let me know. Can you just please provide verbal confirmation that you are ok with me recording?

(Start recording)

At any point during the interview, if you would like to stop, you are under no obligation to continue.

**Framing**
So what interests me in this conversation is to get a sense of how you are moving forward with the HSI initiative on your campus, particularly as your college/university started as a historically white campus and is in this transitional phase. There are no right or wrong answers. I am truly interested in your insights and experiences. *Also, I know that we will likely venture into topics that you and I have discussed in the past, but I’d like to capture your thoughts for the record.*

**Questions**
*Background on the initiative*
1. *What has been your role in your institution’s HSI efforts?*
   a. How long have you been engaged in your campus’s HSI initiative?
   b. What is your personal motivation for engaging in this work?
2. *In your own words, what are your institution’s HSI goals?*
   a. What are you trying to accomplish? And how are you going about trying to accomplish these goals?
   b. We talk a lot in *HSI-Coalition* about a framework of “servingness” as being central to becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution. What does
“servingness” mean to you? How does “servingness” show up in your HSI goals and strategies?

3. *Can you tell me about the history of your HSI initiative?
   a. When was it launched?
   b. How did it come to be?
      i. Possible follow-up: How does your institution’s HSI initiative fit into its larger mission or identity?
   c. What resources are available to HSI practitioners to move the HSI agenda forward?
   d. In what ways has your HSI initiative been successful?
   e. Where are some of the challenges in moving your HSI efforts forward?

*Understanding, Navigating, and Disrupting Whiteness*

4. *We all work on college campuses that are historically white. I’m wondering how being on a historically white campus relates to the work of transforming your institution into an HSI?
   a. Possible follow-up: If not, why do you think that is?

5. To you, what does “whiteness” mean?
   a. How is “whiteness” relevant to work on college campuses, generally?
   b. Where does whiteness “show up” on your campus? Can you provide some specific examples?
   c. Only include if prompting is needed: In what ways have you seen whiteness come into play in your servingness work?
   d. How has institutional whiteness affected you personally (on campus)?

6. As you work toward becoming a campus that embraces Latinx-servingness, how has this history or legacy of institutional whiteness create any specific barriers in your work?
   a. If so, what are the biggest or most persistent areas in which institutional whiteness affects your work? (May refer back to the HSI goals that the interviewee listed and ask about each in turn – does institutional whiteness create any barriers to X, Y, or Z that you mentioned?)

7. How do you respond to these roadblocks presented by institutional whiteness?
   a. How, if at all, have you engaged these roadblocks (examples)?
   b. How have all of these efforts gone, from your perspective?
      i. Do you have any victories over institutional whiteness? If so, how were you able to move those efforts forward? What resources (institutional or otherwise) did you draw upon to accomplish that?
      ii. Where do you feel that your efforts have not yielded the results you were looking for? Why do you think that is?
   c. How have you seen others respond to these roadblocks (examples)?
8. If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change so that your institution could (become an HSI and) truly break free from the influence of institutional whiteness? What would it take to embrace a race-conscious model of servingness?

Wrap Up

9. What else do you think I should know (about your experiences with your HSI initiative)?

10. Are there any institutional documents, websites, or other artifacts that are significant to your institution’s HSI initiative, that I might be able to take a look at? Especially anything that connects to what we’ve been talking about in the interview. This could be an HSI planning document, HSI website, HSI progress report, HSI SWOT analysis, HSI recommendations, but could also include strategic or diversity plans, mission statements, or other official institutional statements or artifacts that cite or are related to HSI efforts.

11. Is there anyone else on your campus involved in the HSI initiative that you think I should talk to? If so, can you provide me their name, title, and contact information?

12. You indicated on your survey that you would like to participate in a “community of practice” with fellow HSI practitioners from the HSI Coalition. Is that still the case? (Or: you indicated on your survey that you are not interested in participating in a “community of practice” with fellow HSI practitioners from the HSI Coalition. The invitation remains open – would you like to learn more about it?)
   a. Did you have any questions about the community of practice?
   b. What topics or questions would you like to explore in these conversations? (Regardless of your interest in participating, I will be sharing the takeaways from these conversations with all interviewees.)

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!
APPENDIX D: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE CONSENT FORM

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY AGREEMENT OF CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
“Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions”
Phase 2: Community of Practice Dialogues

Principal Investigator: Jacki Black
Department of Educational Policy and Leadership

You have been invited to participate in Phase 2 of this research study. Before you agree to participate, it is important that you read and understand the following information. Participation is completely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE:
- The purpose of this research study is to explore the role and perspectives of “HSI specialists” at recently designated and emerging HSIs as these institutions transition from historically white to Latinx-serving. Specifically, I am interested in better understanding how these practitioners navigate barriers and draw from personal and institutional resources.
- You will be one of approximately 6-8 participants in Phase 2 of this research study. In order to participate, you must be a current or former faculty, staff, or administrator at an HSI or emerging HSI campus that is part of the HSI Network of Wisconsin (HSI-NOW), have firsthand experience working on HSI initiatives, and have participated in phase 1 of the study, which consisted of a brief survey and a one-on-one interview.

PROCEDURES:
Participation in Phase 2 of this study includes the following activities, although you may opt out at any time:
- Participation in a “community of practice”, the aim of which is to discuss strategies for disrupting systems of institutional whiteness and collectively develop key takeaways for resistant practice within a community of peers from other HSIs/eHSIs. The community of practice will involve a series of discussions, either in person or virtual.
- The community of practice sessions will be audio recorded [if virtual, they will also be video recorded] to ensure accuracy. The recordings will later be transcribed and destroyed within one year beyond the completion of the study.
For confidentiality purposes, your name will be recorded and will be removed during transcription.

**DURATION:**
- The community of practice sessions will consist of six 60-90 minute discussions, meeting weekly over the course of a couple of months in summer 2023.

**RISKS:**
- The risks associated with this project are minimal, including breach of confidentiality, since we will be collecting identifiable information via the internet, recording the interviews, and participating in group discussions.
- Collection of data and survey responses using the internet involves the same risks that a person would encounter in everyday use of the internet, such as hacking or information being unintentionally seen by others.

**BENEFITS:**
- Direct benefits to you may include the opportunity to reflect upon, discuss with, and learn from other HSI practitioners strategies for advancing HSI goals on campuses that are transitioning from historically white to Latinx-serving.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**
- Data collected in this study will be kept confidential.
- All your data will be assigned a pseudonym rather than using your name or other information that could identify you as an individual.
- Names of institutions will also be kept confidential and your employer will not be informed of your participation in this study.
- A key will be created linking names to pseudonyms and the key will be stored on a password-protected outlook sharepoint site. Only the principal investigator, Jacki Black, will have access to the sharepoint file.
- The data/samples collected in this study will not be used or distributed for future research even if they have been deidentified.
- Audio/video recordings will be collected via a password-protected Microsoft TEAMS account.
- When the results of the study are published, you will not be identified by name.
- Direct quotes may be used in reports or publications but will only be connected to pseudonyms and no institutions will be identified by name.
- The data will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files within one year after the completion of the study.
- Although your responses will be deleted from the survey provider website within one year after the completion of the study, your data may exist on backups or server logs beyond the timeframe of this research project.
- Everyone who participates in the community of practice sessions will be instructed to keep discussions confidential. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that all community of practice participants will respect everyone’s confidentiality.
- Your research records may be inspected by the Marquette University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowable by law) state and federal agencies.
- Data collected from this study may be placed in a publicly accessible repository as a requirement of publication. The study data that are stored there will not contain any links to you, your identifying information, or your institution.

**COMPENSATION:**
- This study does not offer monetary compensation for participation.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION:**
- Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- If you withdraw from this study, all data collected prior to the time of withdrawal may be used, unless you request that they be destroyed.
- You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.
- Your decision to participate or not will not impact your relationship with the investigator or Marquette University.

**ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION:**
- There are no known alternatives other than to not participate in this study.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**
- If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Jacki Black, a PhD student at Marquette University, at jacqueline.black@marquette.edu or 414-288-4118.
- If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Marquette University’s Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

**I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT. By clicking “yes” on this form I agree to participate in this research study.**
APPENDIX E: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE PROTOCOLS

Goal
To present emerging themes from the initial analysis to participants and gain their feedback on my interpretations in order to better understand how HSI specialists in an emerging HSI region understand and navigate the historical legacy of whiteness on their campuses, whether/how institutional whiteness may present barriers to pursuing a race-conscious model of servingness, and the strategies these practitioners employ to disrupt these patterns.

Session 1: Introduction/Framing
Before “getting down to business”, spend some time establishing understandings of mutual connections, expressing authentic interest in them, and sharing commonalities.

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this second step of my research project! The purpose of these discussions is to gather feedback from you on my initial interpretations, engage in collective meaning-making around some of the recurring themes that emerged from the interviews, and take a deeper dive into strategies for disrupting institutional whiteness so that you all have an opportunity to learn from one another. Ultimately, I’m hoping that we’ll have some great conversations but also be able to collate strategies and key takeaways for resistant practice.

Housekeeping: As a reminder, your identity will remain confidential and only pseudonyms will be used in my dissertation. I also ask that, as participants, the conversation that we have today also remain confidential. Please do not share anything anyone says here to ensure a safer space for sharing ideas and insights.

It’s also really important that you know that I am interested in hearing all of your voices, and differing viewpoints are welcome as a part of this discussion. I know we have limited time together and I feel like there’s a lot of ground to cover! I want to make sure everyone has a chance to talk, so if at some point I ask that you wrap up your thoughts, it’s not because I don’t value what you have to say, it’s just that I want to make sure to get to everyone in the room and all the topics. Another thing I’d ask you to do is that if you’ve already answered a question but you feel like you have more to add, or you want to respond to what someone else is saying, please feel free to use the chat!

At any point during the conversation, if you would like to stop, you are under no obligation to continue. I also plan to record the conversation so that nothing important is missed.
(After recording starts):
I know I’ve already gotten everyone’s written consent for general participation, but knowing the risks inherent in participating in a group sessions like this, I’d like to just go around the virtual room while I am recording and verbally re-affirm your consent to participate in this particular discussion, one by one. If you consent to participate, please just say, “I consent”.

I know most of you know each other already, but it would be great if we could just make sure we’re all on the same page – let’s go around and introduce ourselves, including where we work...

I also want to acknowledge that ALL of the participants I talked to in the interviews could point to wonderful things happening on their campuses in the spirit of servingness. But for the Community of Practice sessions, we will be focusing mostly on challenges that interfere with our ability to serve our students well, and also strategies for overcoming those barriers. And these challenges all revolve around the idea of “institutional whiteness”.

**Session 1: “Whiteness as Property” Questions**

1. **Today, we’ll be talking about whiteness as property**. In academic terms, this idea came from a Critical Race Theory scholar, Cheryl Harris, who said that whiteness confers material advantages or privileges. So this can include the right to use and enjoy spaces, institutions, programs and services. It also means the right to exclude others from using and enjoying those spaces, institutions, programs, and services – so think, restricting access or resources.

During the interviews, I heard a lot of the participants describe (SCREEN SHARE):

- How **resources** are allocated – specifically, the under-resourcing of HSI and other DEI endeavors;
- How **decisions often center white people**, their interests, and their needs, or at the very least, that HSI and other DEI work did not rise to the level of a top priority in decision-making;
- And this idea that there are certain folks on campus with access to different kinds of power who act as “**institutional gatekeepers**.” These can be campus leaders or others who hold the keys to resources, spaces, processes, and programs, and who – whether intentionally or not – make it difficult for students of color to access or throw up roadblocks to progress.

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28 “Whiteness as Property” corresponds to one of the six constructs of institutional whiteness as defined in Table 3 on p. 95.
a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change?
Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer by going around the circle. Remind folks that they can use the chat to add more or to respond to others’ comments.

b. When I conducted the interviews, a lot of folks talked about resource issues, but it wasn’t always clear whether the challenge was a lack of resources in general, or if there was an explicit link to whiteness or racial biases. So in your estimation, do you see a connection between resource allocation, decision-making, and gatekeeping on your campuses and institutional whiteness? If so, in what ways? If prompting needed: Does whiteness have an impact on who has access to material advantages or resources, or who is excluded from them? If so, in what ways?

2. Some of the strategies I heard that folks used to respond to this issue, particularly when dealing with a lack of resources, included:
- Building relationships and coalitions of people who can do the work and/or doing the work themselves when there was not a lot of resources
- “Hustling” for resources, meaning: working with folks across campus to piece together budgets for various projects or programs, writing grants, and trying to find other pockets of funding
- Leveraging external influences and connecting with community partners who could support the work

I just want you to take a minute to respond in the chat – if there's anything else that you can think of, anything that's particularly salient to you and your experiences, any strategy that has worked particularly well for you, just throw it in the chat.

3. NOT ASKED FOR LACK OF TIME: When it comes to decision-making and gatekeeping, some of the folks said they used strategies such as:
- Advocating for change, making sure they have a seat at the table and trying to influence campus leaders. This also included strategies such as making a case that HSI connects to the institutional mission, and, for those who had white privilege, leveraging their whiteness in those conversations. Many folks also talked about disaggregating data by race to make a case that we should be focusing on particular demographic groups.
- On the flip side of that, another tactic that folks talked a lot about was a sort of “code switching”, which means instead of focusing on how supporting students of color is just the “right” thing to do, showing campus leaders how
HSI efforts would actually help ALL students [talking the talk, raising all boats, interest convergence].

a. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use to get the resources you need to support HSI work? What might you change or add, if anything?

b. How effective have you found these strategies?

4. NOT ASKED FOR LACK OF TIME: There are other aspects of whiteness as property that came up in the interviews, but less often. There was this idea that there can be a backlash – or “whitelash” – when entitlements feel threatened. That is, when white people feel “left behind”, they’re like, “what about us?” and sometimes engage in active resistance to race-conscious efforts.

a. Have you encountered anything like this on your campuses?

b. What are some strategies that you have used to respond? How effective have you found these strategies?

5. NOT ASKED FOR LACK OF TIME: Another idea I encountered in our interviews related to whiteness as property is the idea of epistemic exclusion, which means that the scholarly work of faculty of color is viewed as less scholarly or less valued than other forms of research and knowledge-production.

a. Have you encountered anything like this on your campuses?

b. What are some strategies that you have used to respond? How effective have you found these strategies?

6. Are there other forms of material advantages for white people or exclusionary practices that impact People of Color on your campus that we haven’t talked about?

a. What are some strategies that you have used to respond? How effective have you found these strategies?

7. What advice would you give to other practitioners who are encountering similar phenomena on their campuses? (If time permits)

8. In your mind, what is the most important takeaway from today’s session?

Closing: At the next session, we’ll be talking about the politics of HSIs. Thank-you and good-byes.
Session 2: HSIs as White Racial Projects

Hello everyone and welcome back! I’m so grateful for your participation in today’s Community of Practice session.

Warm-ups/ice breaker – how is everyone doing today? Check-in.

So I’m going to start recording now.

Everything you say here will be anonymized when I do my write-up and I also ask that, as participants, the conversation that we have today also remain confidential.

Another reminder – with lots to cover, I may ask you to wrap up your thoughts not because I don’t value your ideas but because I want to make sure we get to everyone. Don’t forget that you can also use the chat to add more ideas and to respond to other people’s comments.

1. Today, we’ll be talking about the politics of HSIs.²⁹ What I mean here is that sometimes “HSI” initiatives are not undertaken in the spirit of servingness but rather rearticulated as primarily benefiting the institution. This results in the use of HSI language as more performative than anything, while not fundamentally changing the conditions of the campus to better serve students.

In my interviews,

- participants articulated that there was a disconnect between the language of HSI and the actions of campus leaders to provide the necessary tools and resources to be successful. In particular, there was a “business as usual” aspect to campus operations while failing to build strategic infrastructure, such as HSI committees, HSI positions, and HSI budgets.

- There was also the idea that other competing priorities tended to take precedence over HSI work, and any changes that were actually made were of the “low hanging fruit” variety, resulting in very slow or managed, incremental change.

a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change? Remind folks that we’ll have time for everyone to speak once but to try to use the chat to respond to others’ comments.

²⁹ “The politics of HSIs” refers to “HSIs as White Racial Projects”, one of the six constructs of institutional whiteness, as defined in Table 3 on p. 95.
2. Turning now to strategies,
   o participants talked a lot about building collective meaning around what “HSI” and “servingness” really mean across campus so that there was a shared understanding of how the effort should be proceeding. Part of this was communication strategies but also this included leveraging student stories and encouraging students’ voices (agency) to inform HSI efforts.
   o Also, very importantly, they talked about advocating for strategic infrastructure for the HSI initiative, including committees, HSI-specific positions or roles, and embedding HSI goals into strategic plans and other campus documents. Similar to the resource question last week, they disaggregated data by race to show a need for prioritizing certain demographic groups and appealed to campus leaders to move this agenda forward.
   o And finally, a few folks talked about engaging in activism on campus to hold their institutional leaders accountable for fulfilling the goals of HSI.
     a. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use to ensure that institutional actions align with HSI goals for servingness? What might you change or add, if anything?
     b. How effective have you found these strategies?

3. What is missing from this interpretation regarding the politics surrounding HSIs, from your perspective?
   a. What are some strategies that you have used to respond? How effective have you found these strategies?

4. What advice would you give to other practitioners who are encountering similar phenomena on their campuses?

5. In your mind, what is the most important takeaway from today’s session?

Closing: At the next couple of sessions, we’ll be talking about white attitudes, understandings, and feelings.

Thank-you and good-byes.
Session 3: Colorblindness, Epistemologies of Ignorance, and White Racial Safety

Hello everyone and welcome back! I’m so grateful for your participation in today’s Community of Practice session.

Warm-ups/ice breaker – how is everyone doing today? Check-in.
START WITH “BLESSING FOR WORK”

So I’m going to start recording now. Everything you say here will be anonymized when I do my write-up and I also ask that, as participants, the conversation that we have today also remain confidential.

Another reminder – with lots to cover, I may ask you to wrap up your thoughts not because I don’t value your ideas but because I want to make sure we get to everyone. Don’t forget that you can also use the chat to add more ideas and to respond to other people’s comments.

Before we dive into the questions, I want to mention that, while I know there is great work being done in the spirit of servingness on each of our campuses, what I’m interested in better understanding is this idea of institutional whiteness for campuses that are in transition from predominantly white to HSI. In particular, where whiteness shows up, the kinds of challenges it presents, and how you all as HSI practitioners respond.

1. Today, we’ll be talking about how whiteness shows up on campus through white attitudes, understandings, and feelings.\(^{30}\) In particular, I want to focus on the idea that a lot of folks believe that we have evolved beyond the influence of race, and there is also a sensitivity to talking about issues related to race and racism. This can result in both passive and active resistance to race-conscious efforts to serve students.

First, I want to start with white “understandings” as that was one of the most prominent themes in the interviews. In academic terms, this is sometimes called “epistemologies of ignorance”, which is a fancy way to say that many people misunderstand or misinterpret issues related to race. Some scholars have called this a “racial fantasyland”, but for me, the image that always comes to mind is the picture of an ostrich or roadrunner with its head stuck in the sand. [la-la-la – I can’t hear you; if I don’t see racism, it must not exist!]

\(^{30}\) Each of these corresponds to one of the constructs of institutional whiteness as defined in Table 3 on p. 95. Specifically, white attitudes and understandings refers to “epistemologies of ignorance and colorblindness” and white feelings refers to “white racial safety”.

In my interviews, this came across as:
  - a general lack of awareness around cultural or racial issues
  - questioning the need for change in response to changing demographics
  - and even actively resisting changing their practices and processes because they don’t fully understand how equity works (vs. equality), or pushing back against implementing race-based programs because they don’t understand the need to focus on communities of color.

a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change? *Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer.*

2. When I did the interviews, folks provided a lot of great strategies that they use to respond to this lack of awareness:
  - They were educators, setting up opportunities for professional development
  - They served as communicators, creating opportunities for dialogue and collective meaning-making about what it means to serve students well
  - And they were story-tellers, making sure that students’ experiences were at the forefront of the conversations

a. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use? What might you change or add, if anything?

b. How effective have you found these strategies?

3. Related to “epistemologies of ignorance” is “colorblindness”. This is rooted in the idea that racism isn’t a big problem in our society or on our campuses, and therefore we should be focusing on an “all lives matter” approach to serving our students rather than taking race into account at all. People who espouse colorblind attitudes often fail to recognize racially-rooted inequities and perpetuate deficit narratives of students of color rather than looking at how the way the institution operates to locate the source of the problem.

In my interviews, the way that colorblindness most often showed up was in institutional practices. There were a number of examples that interviewees provided that showed that practices or policies that on their face seemed race-neutral had disproportionately negative impacts on students of color. But rather than looking at the practice or policy to see if there is a way to make it better, they dig their heels in and say, well, this is the way we’ve done it for a long time, and
it’s worked for a long time, so the problem must with group of students, not the process.

a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change?

   Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer.

4. In my interviews, the main strategy that folks described was that of “interrogators” and “questioners”, that is, they questioned practices and the folks responsible for implementing them, forcing them to think critically about the impact of these practices and encouraging change.

   a. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use? What might you change or add, if anything?
   b. How effective have you found these strategies?

5. What advice would you give to other practitioners who are encountering similar phenomena on their campuses?

6. In your mind, what is the most important takeaway from today’s session?

Closing: At the next session, we’ll be continuing the conversation about white understandings and feelings. Thank-you and good-byes.

Session 4: (Continued from previous week)
Hello everyone and welcome back! I’m so grateful for your participation in today’s Community of Practice session.

Warm-ups/ice breaker – how is everyone doing today? Check-in.

So I’m going to start recording now.

Everything you say here will be anonymized when I do my write-up and I also ask that, as participants, the conversation that we have today also remain confidential.

Another reminder – with lots to cover, I may ask you to wrap up your thoughts not because I don’t value your ideas but because I want to make sure we get to everyone. Don’t forget that you can also use the chat to add more ideas and to respond to other people’s comments.
Before we dive into the questions, I want to mention that, while I know there is great work being done in the spirit of servingness on each of our campuses, what I’m interested in better understanding is this idea of institutional whiteness for campuses that are in transition from predominantly white to HSI. In particular, where whiteness shows up, the kinds of challenges it presents, and how you all as HSI practitioners respond.

1. Today, we’ll be continuing our conversation about white understandings and feelings. One topic that came up related to this is biases. When colleagues harbor biases (either consciously or unconsciously), it can affect the way they interact with URM students or the way they conduct campus business. In failing to interrogate their own biases or the role of race and racism in campus inequities, they are often unconsciously complicit in the marginalization of students of color.

   a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change?
   
   Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer.

2. The strategy that I heard folks most commonly discuss in response to biases was that of
   o “calling people out” or sometimes “calling people in.” What I mean by that is pointing out to folks the impact of their bias and pushing them to think about how to do better. One person described this strategy as “ruffling feathers.”
   o Sometimes, folks also described actually intervening on a student’s behalf when a staff or faculty member was doing something that alienated the student.
   
   a. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use? What might you change or add, if anything?
   
   b. How effective have you found these strategies?

3. The last piece I want to cover in today’s conversation has to do with white feelings. There is a lot of literature around “White racial safety”, which means that white people who don’t know a lot about race or racism experience a sort of uncomfortable fragility when these issues come up, and because they’re trying to avoid uncomfortable feelings, they can shut down conversations and throw up road blocks to racial progress. So it’s this kind of avoidance of any sort of racial stress.

After conducting the interviews, I heard a lot of the participants describe the need to tiptoe around racial issues with some of their white colleagues, and sometimes having to deal with defensiveness or hurt feelings. The result of this is having to
spend time and energy placating white feelings rather than moving forward with
HSI work. I also heard participants talk about white colleagues who question their
own role in HSI efforts due to racial discomfort, like “am I the right person to be
doing this?”, and at an extreme, difficulty in cultivating white allies as they
sometimes disengage completely from HSI or other DEI work.

a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your
understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change?

Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer.

4. When it comes to strategies,
   o participants talked about changing their communication styles to respond to
colleagues’ fear or defensiveness, and also encouraging white allies to engage
more deeply in HSI work.
   o For white HSI practitioners, one of the strategies that they mentioned was
engaging in self-reflexivity, or constantly interrogating their own
understandings, feelings, and the ways that they benefit from whiteness in
order to become more fully engaged allies in the work.
   a. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use? What might you
change or add, if anything?
   b. How effective have you found these strategies?

5. Are there other attitudes, understandings, or feelings related to whiteness
on your campus that we haven’t talked about?
   a. What are some strategies that you have used to respond? How effective
have you found these strategies?

6. What advice would you give to other practitioners who are encountering similar
phenomena on their campuses?

7. In your mind, what is the most important takeaway from today’s session?

Closing: At the next session, we’ll be talking about white spaces – both literal and
figurative. Thank-you and good-byes.
Session 5: Ontological Expansiveness

Hello everyone and welcome back! I’m so grateful for your participation in today’s Community of Practice session.

Warm-ups/ice breaker – how is everyone doing today? Check-in.

So I’m going to start recording now. Everything you say here will be anonymized when I do my write-up and I also ask that, as participants, the conversation that we have today also remain confidential.

Another reminder – with lots to cover, I may ask you to wrap up your thoughts not because I don’t value your ideas but because I want to make sure we get to everyone. Don’t forget that you can also use the chat to add more ideas and to respond to other people’s comments.

Before we dive into the questions, I want to mention that, while I know there is great work being done in the spirit of servingness on each of our campuses, what I’m interested in better understanding is this idea of institutional whiteness for campuses that are in transition from predominantly white to HSI. In particular, where whiteness shows up, the kinds of challenges it presents, and how you all as HSI practitioners respond.

1. Today, we’ll be talking about white spaces on campus\(^{31}\) – both literal and figurative. In academic terms, scholars have called this “ontological expansiveness”. All that means is that there tends to be a white entitlement to both physical and socially constructed spaces. Because college campuses historically have been created by and for white people, white bodies and minds tend to feel a sense of comfort and ownership of these spaces, while underrepresented people can feel a sense of discomfort. Sometimes, this manifests in the form of invisibility, hypervisibility, or alienation of People of Color, and creates the need for campus “counterspaces” where students of color CAN feel belonging and inclusion.

In my interviews, there were a number of white spaces that were identified by participants:

- a number of folks talked about physical spaces being constructed for white people, leading to that lack of comfort for students of color
- They also talked about white social spaces that resulted in microaggressions against students of color.

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\(^{31}\)“White spaces” refers to “ontological expansiveness”, one of the six constructs of institutional whiteness, as defined in Table 3 on p. 95.
Interestingly, one of the big themes that came up was the idea of **white linguistic spaces**; that is, the privileging of the English language over Spanish or other minoritized languages – both in social spaces but also in campus practices and policies.

And less common, but still present, was the idea of **white academic spaces**, where the content is Euro-centered, or where diversity-related content was devalued.

a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change?

*Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer.*

2. When it comes to strategies, because white spaces most directly impacts students, one of the responses that folks talked about was direct support to students – that is, listening to them and building trust – which in turn creates safer spaces/pockets on campus/trusted staff or faculty they can go to when they feel like a body out of place. And they again, going back to the idea of being advocates for them in campus spaces.

b. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use? What might you change or add, if anything?

c. How effective have you found these strategies?

3. Another really, really prominent theme from the interviews was the stubborn persistence of literal whiteness – that is, that the demographic makeup of our faculty, staff, and leadership remains largely white, and is not diversifying at nearly the rate of our student bodies. I am calling this “**demographic expansiveness**.”

In my interviews,

a. a lot of folks pointed to the fact that even though white people can be great allies and leaders, diverse representation does matter in terms of identifying with students and being an important voice for them in the circles where decisions are made, resources are allocated, courses are taught, and programs are implemented. So the lack of diversity in many pockets of campus can be counterproductive to servingness.

b. There was also the sentiment that progress sometimes isn’t made until certain institutional gatekeepers take their talents to other places or on to retirement, which sometimes takes a while, making it hard to bring diverse voices into key positions.
o And there is also the issue of retention of faculty and staff of color, who themselves often feel like a “body out of place” on college campuses. They can also feel burned out or disillusioned with the direction of the institution.

a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change? *Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer.*

4. When it comes to strategies, folks weren’t able to offer a whole lot for this one – one of the things that came up was this idea of waiting out the gatekeepers, or incentivizing retirement, or making it uncomfortable for them to remain, so that the turnover in staff opens up possibilities for new and diverse voices. A few folks touched on hiring strategies, such as diversity within search committees. And when it comes to retention for faculty and staff of color, there also didn’t seem to be must that folks offered in terms of proactive strategies.
   a. So what are some strategies that you have used to respond? How effective have you found these strategies?

5. Are there other *spaces* – either literal or figurative – *related to whiteness* on your campus that we haven’t talked about?
   a. What are some strategies that you have used to respond? How effective have you found these strategies?

6. What advice would you give to other practitioners who are encountering similar phenomena on their campuses?

7. In your mind, what is the most important takeaway from today’s session?

Closing: At the next session, we’ll be talking about the *personal toll that whiteness can have on HSI practitioners*. I’ll also be wrapping up with a discussion around the *community of practice sessions* to get your feedback on what worked well, what you might change, etc.
Thank-you and good-byes.
Session 6: Personal Toll of Whiteness, Community of Practice Process, & Next Steps

Hello everyone! Hope you’re all doing well as we enter into the busy-ness of the new academic year.

Icebreaker/Check-in

I’m going to start recording now.

As you know, everything you say here will be anonymized when I do my write-up, but I also want to remind folks to keep what’s said here confidential.

Another reminder – with lots to cover, I may ask you to wrap up your thoughts not because I don’t value your ideas but because I want to make sure we get to everyone. Don’t forget that you can also use the chat to add more ideas and to respond to other people’s comments.

This is our last session together, and so today, I’d like to bring the conversation out of the institutional and focus on the personal.

1. So today, we’ll be talking about the personal toll of whiteness. This is actually something that doesn’t get a lot of attention in HSI literature. But we know that faculty and staff of color on college campuses, and others engaged in DEI work, can experience harm or emotional distress as they’re working to upend traditional ways of conducting business to open up for more race-conscious practices.

In my interviews, this came up in a variety of ways:

- First and foremost, there was a sense of being overworked, whether that was for Spanish-speakers who were asked to translate things above and beyond their duties as assigned, or People of Color being asked to do extra committee work to represent diverse voices, or other HSI practitioners generally being asked to “do more with less.”
- Some folks expressed feeling unsupported, undervalued, over-scrutinized, or constantly having to prove themselves and the value of their HSI work.
- The emotional labor and exhaustion of fighting against the current and all the energy that takes while not seeing individuals or the institution responding
- And all of this results in feeling burnt out, disillusioned, or even disengaging completely from the campus or from higher ed.

32 This was not one of the original constructs of institutional whiteness but seemed to be such an important theme that I have added it for discussion in the Community of Practice.
a. What do you all think of that? Does this accurately capture your understanding and experiences, or is there anything you would change? *Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to answer.*
b. What is missing from my understandings of the personal toll of whiteness?

2. During the interviews,
   o participants talked a lot about their own personal investment in equity work. Many talked about how they felt “called to serve” because of how they can relate to or empathize with URM students, and a lot of folks also talked about the personal gratification they received from serving students. Some words that they used included: passion, driven, motivated, excited, invigorated, called, rewarding, empathy – even white participants could name ways that they empathized with SoC, compassion, validated, proud, inspired, fulfilled, joy, love. So they drew on that for strength and motivation.
   o HSI practitioners also talked about drawing from their own personal attributes, such as perseverance, and responding to whiteness with their full, true authentic selves, among other characteristics, that helped them “stay in the game”.
   o People also talked about the support that they got from supervisors, mentors, and colleagues both on and off their campus – for example, a lot of folks talked about HSI-NOW as a great support network.
   o Some also talked about the importance of setting boundaries so that the institution wouldn’t suck you dry.
   o And finally, some folks talked about leaving their institutions or in some cases leaving higher ed altogether because of the toll it took on them.

a. Does this capture the breadth of strategies that you use when facing the personal toll of whiteness? What might you change or add, if anything?
b. How effective have you found these strategies?

3. For the second part of today’s discussion, I’d like to focus on the process of this community of practice itself.
   a. What was valuable about this process?
   b. What could have worked better?
   c. How can this experience be replicated or extended?
   d. What will you take away from these sessions? What are the next steps you’d personally like to take?
e. What kinds of information would be most helpful to you as you tackle these challenges? (I can’t promise I’d be able to find it, but if there was some way I could repay you for your time, I’d love to be able to search around for best practices.)

4. Does anyone have any questions for me?

In terms of next steps for my dissertation, I’m gonna take more time to sift through the transcripts of these sessions and add to my analysis. I will be focusing on writing and revising this fall and hopefully be able to get to a point where I can defend my dissertation in the spring. After that, it is my hope to take what I’ve learned and submit some articles for publication so that the information and insights you’ve provided can be helpful to other folks.

I want you to know how enormously grateful I am for your willingness to participate – I know it was a lot of additional time but I hope that the conversations proved to be worthwhile for you. If you have any questions or additional thoughts you’d like to share with me, please don’t hesitate to reach out! Thanks again and take care everyone.
As described in the Methods section of Chapter III, the Community of Practice (CoP) session topics and subthemes emerged from analyzing the interview transcripts. CoP sessions were used to confirm, expand, and nuance data collected from the interviews.

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<th>Subthemes: Strategies</th>
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<td>+ Advocacy&lt;br&gt;+ Code-switching</td>
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<td>#2: HSIs as White Racial Projects</td>
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<td>+ Overworked, unsupported, undervalued, over-scrutinized&lt;br&gt;+ Emotional labor, exhaustion, and burnout&lt;br&gt;+ Disillusionment and Disengagement</td>
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