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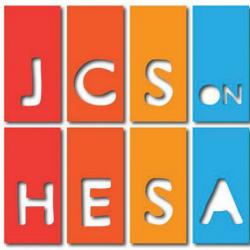
Race-neutrality and Race-consciousness in Students' Sensemaking of "Servingness" at Two Hispanic Serving Institutions

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— **Abstract** —

Postsecondary institutions that enroll 25% or more Latinxs are eligible for federal designation as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Yet, few studies examine how students within HSIs make sense of what it means for an organization to be Latinx-serving. Utilizing interviews and focus groups with students at two HSIs in the Midwest, we sought to understand how students make sense of the idea of "servingness." We analyzed differences by students' race and ethnicity within each institution and by institution across the two sites. Data revealed a pattern of language that reflected race-neutrality and race-consciousness, with some differences by students' race and ethnicity and stark differences by institution. We offer implications for research and practice.

Keywords: Hispanic Serving Institutions, Latinx college students, race-neutral, race-conscious, culturally relevant practices

In 1992, after years of lobbying by Latinx advocacy groups, the U.S. federal government formally recognized Hispanic Serving institutions (HSIs) as those that enroll at least 25% Latinx[1] students and in 1995 allocated funding for these institutions (Valdez, 2015). Institutions that meet the 25% threshold must apply for this designation, making them eligible for competitive grants from the U.S. Department of Education. Since 1992, the number of HSIs has grown exponentially, with 569 institutions eligible for HSI status in fall 2019 (*Excelencia* in Education, 2021). While the majority of HSIs are in the Southwest, 30 states, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, now have at least one HSI (*Excelencia* in Education, 2021). HSIs are also institutionally diverse, including public and private, two to four-year institutions, and located in rural and urban areas (Núñez et al., 2016).

Unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Tribal Colleges and Universities, HSIs lack a historical mission to serve Latinx students (Contreras et al., 2008). Yet, Latinxs are the fastest growing population in the country, with Latinxs entering higher education at increasing rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Given this demographic trend and the high concentration of Latinxs at HSIs, with 65% of all Latinx undergraduates enrolled in HSIs (*Excelencia* in Education, 2021), the question of what it means to serve Latinx students is important. Several studies have explored how organizational members make sense of an HSI's identity (Garcia, 2016; 2017; Garcia et al., 2019b) and how the organizational mission conveys (or closets) this identity (Contreras et al., 2008). However, few studies have examined what "servingness" means to students. Examining what "servingness" means is important given that students' definitions of servingness are invariably influenced by HSIs' treatment of race within institutional practices (Garcia et al., 2019a).

Additionally, as Squire (2016) states, "much of the current literature on organizational theory is devoid of a critical examination of the human experience, doing little to address issues of race and racism, power, oppression, resistance, and justice" (p. 106). By listening to the perspective of students as racialized beings within the organizational structures of HSIs and using critical theory as a frame in which to understand these perspectives, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on how HSIs, as organizations, serve diverse students. Specifically, we utilized qualitative data with students enrolled at two, 4-year HSIs to understand how students make sense of what it means for HSIs to serve them, or what Garcia et al. (2019a) call "servingness."

Multidimensional Conceptual Framework for Understanding Servingness in HSIs

Scholars have spent the last 25 years exploring how Latinx students experience HSIs (e.g., Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2015; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016), the outcomes associated with these experiences (e.g., Flores & Park, 2015; Rodríguez & Calderón Galdeano, 2015), and the ways institutions transform to better serve Latinx students (e.g., Garcia, 2019; 2021; Reguerín et al., 2020). Through a systematic literature review, Garcia et al. (2019a) proposed a multidimensional contextual framework for understanding servingness at HSIs, suggesting that there are "indicators of serving," inclusive of academic and non-academic outcomes (e.g., graduation rates and racial identity development) and experiences (e.g., cultural validation and experiences with microaggressions). Garcia et al. (2019a) also proposed that there are "structures for serving" that include elements such as curricular and co-curricular structures, faculty composition, governance, HSI grant-getting, and community engagement. In this article, we draw on the multidimen-

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1 We use "Latinx" as a gender-neutral, ethno-racial term to refer to people who have Indigenous and ethnic roots in Mexico, Central, and South America, and the Caribbean. We use it as an umbrella term; however, we recognize the diversity within the Latinx community and also understand that Latinxs have their own preferences, including the term "Hispanic" and other ethnic-specific terms. The term Latinx is not perfect, but it's our preference for this study.

sional contextual framework for understanding how structures of servingness influence students' experiences at their HSI. Next, we briefly review students' experiences as indicators of servingness.

Some students at HSIs have positive, culturally enhancing experiences. For example, Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2015) illuminated the experiences of Latinx students attending two HSIs in the Southeast, highlighting how these institutions enhanced participants' cultural connections, resource sharing, and overall sense of belonging. Similarly, students who persisted at one Southwest HSI reported that a shared cultural experience with faculty, staff, and peers and the campus climate contributed to their engagement and overall success (Arana et al., 2011). Providing culturally enhancing experiences and nurturing a sense of belonging at HSIs is one indicator of servingness (e.g., Garcia, 2016; Maestas et al., 2007).

While some students have culturally enhancing experiences at HSIs, others experience racial microaggressions. Latinx students at one HSI community college felt Latinx students experienced discrimination within certain campus services, such as transcript and counseling centers (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016). They also experienced discrimination in campus employment, with some participants suggesting Asian American students were chosen by administrators for jobs over Latinxs (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016). Similarly, Sanchez (2019) found that Latinx students at one emerging HSI (an institution that enrolls between 15%–24% Latinxs) and two HSIs in Texas and California experienced microaggressions in the form of racial stereotypes. For example, people on campus made assumptions about Latinx students' citizenship status, family members in drug cartels, and Latinxs not being as smart as white students (Sanchez, 2019).

Scholars have also examined the racialized experiences of non-Latinx students at HSIs, with an emerging body of research emphasizing the omnipresence of anti-Blackness at HSIs (Abrica et al., 2020; Pirtle et al., 2021; Serrano, 2020). Black students at one

HSI in California said they felt unsupported by their campus, describing an incident where city police shot rubber bullets into a crowd at an off-site event hosted by a Black student organization and the subsequent lack of attention and support from administrators (Pirtle et al., 2021). Moreover, multiracial Black/Latinx students at HSIs may feel less reflected on their campus than their other multiracial peers as the result of a campus environment that values diversity but remains impacted by anti-Black practices (Serrano, 2020). Further, Kovats Sánchez (2021) found that Indigenous Mexican students at HSIs in California similarly felt excluded and microaggressed by other mestizo Latinx students, often reifying a false narrative about the Indigenous Latinx experience. Racial microaggressions and discrimination at HSIs are an indicator of *not* serving students (Garcia et al., 2019a).

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, we believe that HSIs are inherently racialized (Garcia, 2019). That is, characteristics associated with Latinxs within systems of white racial domination transfer to the institution. For example, Latinxs often experience racially segregated schooling that affects their educational outcomes (Yosso et al., 2009). HSIs then enroll these students who may have struggled academically because of systemic barriers and must make up for the inadequacies of their former schooling, often with few institutional resources (Garcia, 2018). Whereas racially white institutions and the predominantly white student populations they serve reflect the standard of academic excellence, HSIs and the minoritized student populations they serve are racialized in ways perceived as deficient (Garcia, 2019; Yosso, 2005). As such, we draw on theories that center race in HSIs' institutional structures. This is appropriate given that HSIs occupy a transitional space in defining themselves as an institution while also formulating understandings about what it looks like to serve racially minoritized students (Garcia et al., 2019b).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a way to "draw

attention to the ways the dominant society racializes different [minoritized] groups at different times, in response to shifting needs" (Delgado & Stafancic, 2001, p. 8). Among the primary tenets of CRT in education are the challenging of dominant ideologies, commitment to social justice, and the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Dominant ideologies, such as a schooling system based on Eurocentric standards of meritocracy, serve to subjugate the knowledge systems of racially minoritized students. Instead of oppressing racially minoritized students, education should serve to liberate them through curricular and pedagogical practices that nurture criticality and societal transformation (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

In challenging dominant ideologies, we turn to color-blind racism, or what we refer to as race-neutrality[2] (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Race-neutrality is the prevailing racial ideology in contemporary U.S. society that adheres to the belief that race no longer matters because of the equality in opportunities for everyone, despite racial differences. According to Gallagher (2003), race-neutrality

> hides white privilege behind a mask of assumed meritocracy while rendering invisible the institutional arrangements that perpetuate racial inequality. The veneer of equality implied in [race-neutrality] allows whites to present their place in the racialized social structure as one that was earned (p. 133).

Race-neutrality dismisses racism as embedded within the structural framework of society and attributes racial inequalities to individual or cultural deficits (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Race-neutral ideologies are internalized by racially

minoritized people, with "internalized racism [being] all about the cultural imperialism, the domination, the structure, [and] the normalcy of the 'way things are' in our racialized society" (Speight, 2007, p. 129). Internalized racism, as an effect of race-neutrality, forces racially minoritized people to internalize the beliefs and needs of the white normative standard, a standard that considers their beliefs and needs as inferior (Speight, 2007). This causes racially minoritized people to continuously define themselves in relation to a white standard, which perpetuates legacies of white superiority predicated upon frames of dominance (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

According to Bonilla-Silva (2018), race-neutrality functions through four central frames. In this article, we focus on two of these frames: abstract liberalism and minimization of race. Abstract liberalism views race through the ambiguously liberal values of "equal opportunity" and "economic liberalism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 56). Abstract liberalism permits the meritocratic, individualist-oriented nature of race-neutrality to continue while also allowing white people, in particular, to maintain a guise of morality by opposing policies and practices, such as affirmative-action, under the rationale that all people are considered equal.

The minimization of racism frame decenters race as a factor that impacts racially minoritized people's experiences. A common example of the minimization of racism frame is the belief that unless racism is overt like it was in the Jim Crow era, then racially minoritized people are no longer racially victimized. Furthering this example, if racially minoritized people claim they have experienced racial discrimination or if racially minoritized people call for more active policies and practices that remediate racial inequities, they are seen as "playing the race card" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 57). We offer these frames to help guide the reader in thought patterns associated with race-neutrality found in participants' responses. However, it is important to acknowledge that these frames are not mutually exclusive as race-neutrality is a constructed ideology that varies by contexts.

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2 We use the term "race-neutral" as a way to avoid ableist language. Although color-blindness is not considered a disability by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it is an experience in which people cannot distinguish between colors. Moreover, the ADA recognizes blindness as a disability.

Beyond exposing dominant ideologies, such as race-neutrality, as a means to subordinate racially minoritized students, CRT focuses on social justice. A way social justice can be enacted by educators is through fostering students' critical consciousness. We define critical race consciousness as students' ability to identify and understand the various ways white supremacy historically and currently subordinates Communities of Color (Zuberi, 2011) as well as their ability to engage their identity within systems of power and dominance (Jones, 2017). CRT's commitment to social justice posits that schooling should teach to liberate the mind (Zuberi, 2011) by working "with students to critique regressive practices (e.g., homophobia, misogyny, racism) and raise critical consciousness" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 92) about racial inequities. Raising a critical consciousness in students can be achieved by educators centering the experiential knowledge of racially minoritized students, including utilizing culturally responsive curricular and co-curricular practices that value and sustain students' cultures as legitimized ways of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In summation, CRT as a theoretical framework focuses on the challenging of dominant ideologies, a commitment to social justice, and the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). An essential function of racism, as a dominant ideology, is race-neutrality. Race-neutrality is a lens that upholds racial inequities in policy and practice. Race-neutrality can function as internalized racism, where those who are racially minoritized learn to define their worth along dominant standards of success that often delegitimatize the knowledges and practices of People of Color (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Further, race-neutrality operates through the frames of abstract liberalism and the minimization of race. Abstract liberalism allows racism to continue under the semblance of progressive politics that stresses equal access to resources and opportunity instead of equitable access. Abstract liberalism fails to acknowledge that the prevalence of racism in our schooling system, both

historically and currently, contributes to the creation and maintenance of an unequal playing field. Within the abstract liberalism frame, policies and practices (e.g., land reparations) that focus on leveling the playing field are thought of as counter to equality in dominant ideology (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005). This frame closely aligns with the minimization of race frame, where race is dismissed as irrelevant or actively excluded from dominant conversations involving educational policy and practice (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). The CRT tenant of a commitment to social justice can be operationalized by educators through valuing students' experiential knowledge as racialized beings and helping them develop a critical race consciousness that liberates their mind from dominant ideologies that prevent them from understanding how race functions in various systems (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Zuberi, 2011).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand how students make sense of the ways institutional structures at their HSIs serve diverse students. We used the following research questions to guide this study:

1) How do students perceive their campus to be serving of Latinx and other minoritized students?
2) Are there differences in students' perceptions by race and ethnicity? By institution?

This study was part of a larger project called the *Midwest HSI Study*, a multiple case study examining how students, faculty, and staff make sense of an organizational identity of serving Latinx students at three HSIs in Chicago, Illinois (see Garcia, 2019 for details). The *Midwest HSI Study* grew out of the need to understand an organizational identity that evolves as the result of demographic changes at the institution. In this article, we focus less on organizational identity construction and more on students' sensemaking of the idea of servingness.

Site Descriptions

When data collection commenced in fall 2015, there were 21 HSIs in Illinois (*Excelencia* in Education, 2017), reflective of the 2.2 million Latinxs in the Midwest (Stepler & Lopez, 2016). Of these 21 HSIs, a majority were in Chicagoland, and most were 2-year institutions; however, there were six 4-year HSIs. In order to control for geographic differences and differences by institutional type, we collected data from three 4-year HSIs in Chicago. These HSIs ranged in size, type, and percentage of Latinxs enrolled. For this article, we only used data from two of the three sites, as we only collected student-level data from two sites.

Azul City University (ACU; a pseudonym) is a 4-year, midsize, public institution classified by Carnegie as a master's college or university. For over 20 years, ACU has been federally recognized as an HSI and has received numerous HSI grants. ACU is compositionally diverse, with 37% of students identifying as white, 33% Latinx, 10% Black or African American, 9% Asian American, and 2% mixed-race. Structurally, Garcia (2019; Garcia et al., 2019b) found that ACU has a long history of providing curriculum and support services for Latinx and Black students as well as low-income students. This includes social justice curriculum in departments such as education, social work, and gender and women's studies. The campus has an inter-cultural center and branch campuses located in both Latinx and Black communities in the city as a way to provide access to these communities.

Rosado Private University (RPU; a pseudonym) is a small, private university classified by Carnegie as a master's college or university. RPU, a comprehensive university, provides professional, career-focused undergraduate education. It enrolls 27% Latinx students; however, the compositional diversity of the undergraduate population is notable, with nearly 60% of all students identifying as People of Color. RSU is publicly regarded as one of the most diverse institutions in the Midwest. Although it is federally recognized as an HSI and has received at least one Department of Education Title V grant for developing HSIs, Garcia (2019; Garcia et al., 2019b) found that a majority of faculty, staff, and administrators had not thought about this designation beyond enrollment criteria. RPU also lacks culturally enhancing structures for serving racially minoritized students, with a majority of the educators and administrators identifying as white and essentially no curriculum or support services that center Students of Color.

Data Sources and Sample

We collected multiple forms of qualitative data (i.e., one-on-one interviews, focus groups, observations, document reviews, and photo elicitation) from various sources (i.e., administrators, faculty, staff, students, and websites). For this analysis, we used student-level data from one-on-one interviews and focus groups collected at two sites (ACU and RPU). We used observations, documents, and interviews with non-students to triangulate the data.

With the assistance of faculty and staff at each campus, we recruited students to participate in this study via email and word of mouth. All students, regardless of race and ethnicity or other demographics, were eligible to participate and were offered a $10 incentive to participate. The total sample of students (*n* = 63) is diverse by race and ethnicity, sex and gender, major, and class standing. Students were asked to identify their race and gender on a demographic survey, using an open-ended question. The terms used to describe participants' race and gender are their own terms (see Table 1). There are more racially minoritized students in the sample than white students, with 29 of the 34 participants at ACU and 19 of the 29 students at RPU identifying as People of Color. There are also more females, with 22 of the 34 ACU students and 16 of the 29 RPU students identifying as female. Some of the majors include business administration, allied health, nursing, counseling, education, and culinary arts. Finally, only two participants identified as freshman, with a majority of students in the sample being sophomores, juniors, and seniors and 10 identifying as graduate students.

We used an in-depth, semi-structured protocol for all focus groups and interviews, which allowed for direct questioning and emerging ideas as guided by the participants' worldview (Merriam, 2009). The goal of the interviews was to understand students' knowledge and understanding of the HSI designation, to explore what they think is an ideal identity for serving minoritized students, and to understand how they perceive their college or university currently serving minoritized students. Sample questions include, "How did you come to know [your institution] is an HSI?" "What do you think it means to be Latinx-serving?" In what ways do the curriculum and course offerings include and/or exclude diverse groups?" "In what ways do professors reflect and/or exclude diverse groups?" The research team conducted all interviews and focus groups in-person. The interviews were audio recorded by the researchers and lasted between 45–60 minutes.

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis for this study (Boyatzis, 1998). We had the audio files professionally transcribed and then verified by at least one member of the research team. As a team, we open coded eight transcripts of interviews with non-students and four transcripts of interviews with students. We then developed a coding structure inclusive of 73 parent and child codes. As a research team, we identified the 73 codes at the manifest level, meaning they were based on directly observable information (Boyatzis, 1998). After developing and refining the definitions of each code and following three rounds of inter-rater reliability, we used NVivo 11 to organize and code the full dataset. The full dataset includes transcripts from one-on-one interviews with non-students (n = 43), one-on-one interviews with students (n = 8), and focus groups with students (n = 14). We created a second dataset for this analysis that did not include the non-student interviews (students only dataset).

The unit of analysis for this study was students. We clustered the sample within two different institutions and analyzed single student cases within the

larger institutional cases first by comparing and contrasting data within institutions. In doing this, we first looked for differences in meaning making by race and ethnicity within institutions. We then sought to understand the larger phenomenon across the two institutions (Stake, 2006). As such, we performed a cross-case analysis, comparing students across the two institutions, specifically noting similarities and differences in students' sensemaking of servingness as reflected by institutional differences. At this stage of thematic analysis, we aimed to identify themes at the latent level or directly underlying the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). As themes emerged, we drew on the theoretical underpinnings of CRT, race-neutrality, and critical consciousness to interpret students' sensemaking.

Limitations

Like all case studies, the primary limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability of the findings (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). We recognize that our site selection cannot capture the heterogeneity of HSIs, so instead, we offer analytic generalizations that we used to draw deeper understandings of HSI identity construction (Yin, 2009). Another limitation of this study is our sample of students. The majority of participants identified as female and non-Latinx Students of Color (including multiracial Latinx students). The heterogeneity of students' identities in our sample reflected many of the types of students commonly enrolled at HSIs, including, for example, undocumented, international, first-generation, low-income, and non-traditional students. We recognize that participants' responses are influenced by other identity facets; however, given the purpose of this analysis, we chose to focus on racial differences.

We further recognize that this is a racial analysis derived from data from institutions with a racialized label, or one socially constructed based on the race of students within the institution (Garcia, 2019). We understand that race, as something constructed by both researchers and participants, influences participants' responses. This may be especially pertinent

given the social context of focus groups. We conducted focus groups with students from various racial backgrounds, and therefore, participants' responses may be socially influenced. However, we take a social constructionist perspective, asserting that individuals derive meaning from social processes. Rather than assuming that our data is flawed by factors such as social desirability, we take the analytical stance that the interactions between identities and context are important parts of our data as they reflect the everyday experiences, interaction, and meaning making of participants (Hollander, 2004).

Researchers' Positionality

Developing sound qualitative research must include the establishment of the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological foundations of the study (Jones et al., 2014). There must also be a recognition of the researchers' motivation for conducting the research and connection to the topic and participants in the study (Jones et al., 2014). Epistemologically, we view the world through a transformative, constructivist lens, meaning we place equity and justice for minoritized communities at the center of our research and believe that reality is co-created with participants (Mertens, 2015). Theoretically, we view HSI organizational identity as fluid and transitional, yet there are distinct and central elements that are unwavering within colleges and universities, even after becoming HSIs (Garcia et al., 2019b). With this research, our motivation is to assist HSIs in institutional transformation while encouraging them to create their own reality for disrupting oppressive organizational systems that have historically excluded and harmed minoritized groups in postsecondary education (Garcia, 2018).

Findings

In answering the first research question of how students perceive their campus serving of Latinx and other minoritized students, we found that students at both institutions in our sample primarily discussed

servingness by talking about institutional support structures. In answering the second research question of if differences exist in students' perceptions of servingness by race and ethnicity and institution, we found that the ways students made sense of servingness through institutional support structures differed by institution and race and ethnicity only at RPU. In this section, we highlight our main finding that institutional support structures influence students' sensemaking differently based on a race-neutral or race-conscious lens operating within these institutions. As such, we present the findings by institution.

RPU: Making Sense of Servingness Through a Race-Neutral Lens

All students at RPU, regardless of race, discussed indicators of servingness through the race-neutrality frame of abstract liberalism. Racially minoritized students, particularly Latinx students, also conceptualized servingness through the race-neutrality frame of minimization of race.

Abstract Liberalism

Abstract liberalism utilizes liberal ideals, such as equal opportunity, individualism, and merit, to enigmatically suggest that racial differences do not exist (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Exemplifying this, Elizabeth[3] (a Caucasian female[4]) said, "I think [being Latinx-serving] shows the community, the state, the world, that race shouldn't be a topic. If you want higher education and you're willing to work for it, you deserve higher education." Echoing this statement, Kirsten (a Hispanic female) said, "I think RPU being a Latino-serving institution, to me, it means that they want everybody to succeed regardless of your ethnic background." Along these sentiments, Shawn (an African American male) expressed that RPU serves *all* students, not just Latinx students, which he communi-

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3 All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participant
4 Participants identified their race or ethnicity and sex or gender through an open-ended question; therefore, all indicators are in their own terms.

cated was a positive attribute of the institution, saying, "[RPU] just takes people as a whole…They just look at you as being you; they don't really look at the culture." These quotes demonstrate a vague sense of servingness inclusive of all students, regardless of race.

Many students provided concrete examples of servingness, yet these examples were also conceptualized by students through the frame of abstract liberalism. Most commonly, students said that financial aid and athletics were ways RPU serves *all* students.

Financial Aid. Citing financial support as a distinct aspect of servingness, Wayne (a White male), who attended RPU on a hockey scholarship, stated, "I think that everyone can get pretty good financial aid here. That's one way I think of [being Latinx-serving]. It's just very easy to get financial aid. They don't look at how rich you are here." Echoing the importance of financial aid, Future (an African American male) said,

> I believe [being Latinx-serving] is just the simple fact of all the scholarships they give; they offer a scholarship literally for everything. They have a scholarship page, that's probably, I don't know, 99, 100 scholarships you just can fill out for anything and everything.

Ideologies of equal opportunity were apparent in students' sensemaking in what it means to serve Latinx and minoritized students. The focus on financial aid was a dominant theme, without consideration of how race and ethnicity influences this.

Athletics. Students also expressed liberalist ideals through the culture of athletics as a primary indicator of servingness. For this finding, however, white students were more likely to connect their involvement in athletics to a sense of belonging, generalizing these experiences to all students. Mike Vick (a White male), who played football for RPU, said, "We have every and any sport you can think of…I just feel like when people see how many sports we have, they feel like they could be a part of something." Similar to Mike

Vick, Julia Roberts (a White male), who played basketball for RPU said,

> The friendships that have come to fruition [through athletics] have been central to making me feel welcome. There's a large athlete population and a large amount of students that are involved with the school in general, which I love that everybody seems to be so motivated, just like I am, to succeed. That's really welcoming, when you have an environment [where everyone has] the same mentality that you have, you just feel like you belong. To know a lot of students wanna go on the same journey that I do is huge to feeling welcome here.

Minimization of Race

Racially minoritized students also discussed athletics as a primary way RPU serves students; however, their sensemaking surrounding this was more reflective of the race-neutral frame of minimization of race. Minimization of race occurs when people underscore the importance of race as a determining factor that shapes society and influences individual experiences (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Interestingly, we only observed minimization of race in the sensemaking of Latinx students, who overtly dismissed the importance of diverse ways of knowing as indicators of servingness, especially when asked about diversity in the faculty and curriculum.

Faculty Interactions and Curriculum and Pedagogy. When asked about faculty diversity as an indicator of servingness, Irma (an American Mexican female) said,

> I think the reason why I don't really care what race teaches me is because I'm thinking about the bigger picture. I'm here to learn. For me, as long as they have a good teaching style, and I learn from them, I'm okay. The race doesn't really matter.

This sentiment was prevalent among Latinx participants, with Anabel (a Hispanic female) saying,

> I have seen diversity [in my classes]. The way it influenced the class, I wouldn't say it plays such a big role. I feel it's more on the teaching style that the professor provides. That's what I feel helps me more learn.

Latinx students were also the only ones to explicitly state that the curriculum was less focused on diversity and more focused on preparing students for careers in industry. To this point, Adrian (a Mexican male) said,

> It's a more industry-based curriculum, so it doesn't really veer off into anything more than your industry and how to succeed in that. Not much is given to what you come from or whatnot. It's, "here's the tools that you need to succeed." …I think in a different environment, there's a specific ethnic group, history class maybe, that would matter more, but it's not apparent, and it doesn't really matter in this case. The knowledge and information is really what I care about.

As suggested by Adrian, there is an institutional emphasis on meritocratic standards (i.e., career preparation) rather than on diverse ways of knowing, which, as Adrian stated, was not important. Marie (a Hispanic female) further exemplified this, stating, "I don't think the whole ethnicity or culture matters…To me what's more important than being diverse is the fact that I'm getting my money well spent."

Internalized Racism

These statements highlight that even though these students are amongst those who are the most injured by race-neutrality they hold views that represent the minimization of how racism is historically and systematically embedded into their environment. White supremacy is sustained in the pneuma of the oppressed through subtle internalization of the ideol-

ogies that oppress them (Speight, 2007). Internalized racism was present not only among Latinx students but other racially minoritized students as well. Jade (an African American female) made this abundantly clear, stating,

> I wasn't a slave. I didn't pick cotton. I wasn't beat. I didn't have to clean houses, so I don't have this whole cultural thing where I feel entitled because our people have been oppressed for years. I didn't experience that, so my view is broad. I don't feel I'm being treated different [at RPU].

Although racially minoritized students exhibited minimization of race and internalized racism, they were the only ones to suggest RPU would be more Latinx-serving if they incorporated programs for minoritized students. For example, Irma and Jade, the same students who demonstrated race-neutral perspectives, also called for more cultural programming. Irma said, "I think [having more cultural events] would make me feel more comfortable at RPU." Other racially minoritized students also said that having more cultural events would make them feel better served by their institution. Yet, only one student, Amy (a Black/Native/Colombian/Irish male), argued loudly that RPU should establish culturally relevant curricular structures, saying,

> RPU is experienced-based learning, but if we're only learning about the same thing over and over and over, when does it get repetitive? Being culturally aware or being culturally conscious can help bring in a whole new population of [minoritized] students if they just put the same effort towards that.

In this case, Amy was an outlier, likely because of his involvement in programs specifically dedicated to racially minoritized students at another institution.

All students at RPU discussed financial aid and

athletics as indicators of servingness in abstract liberalist ways. White students discussed these indicators as contributing to a positive campus climate and sense of belonging for all students. Racially minoritized students demonstrated patterns consistent with the minimization of race frame and internalized racism in their sensemaking but also demonstrated some degree of awareness that more race-conscious programming may lead to a greater sense of servingness for minoritized students.

ACU: Making Sense of Servingness Through a Race-Conscious Perspective

Unlike students at RPU, students at ACU discussed indicators of servingness in race-conscious ways. Common themes were support structures, including diverse peers, faculty, curriculum and pedagogy, and programs catered to Latinx and minoritized students. Further, these students connected these support structures to their development of critical consciousness.

Diverse Learning Environments

Students made sense of servingness by describing the ways ACU provides a diverse learning environment conducive to their civic development and sense of belonging. In particular, students discussed how the compositional diversity of the students and faculty contributed to their heightened ability to critically reflect on their racial identities as situated in and outside of the university (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Peer Interactions. Students at ACU connected their understanding of servingness to the compositional diversity in the student population, which they said gave them opportunities to interact with racially diverse peers. Students described how these interactions contributed to a greater understanding of themselves and others. For example, John (a White/Italian male) shared how being exposed to racially and ethnically diverse peers helped him understand his own racial positioning, saying,

Just [having diverse peers] that are willing to talk in-depth about the issues [of race], I realized that I was seeing diversity that entire time through my white, male lens. Taking that lens off, I got a whole new perspective of diversity. So, I guess understanding diversity is one thing, but then when you understand whiteness, you understand diversity on a whole other level.

Carmen (a Mexican American female) talked about how being exposed to Latinx peers who are not Mexican American complicated her understanding of her racial and ethnic identity, stating,

I was ignorant. I'd be like, oh, all Latinas or Latinos think like me, and it's like, no, there's Cubanos. There's not a lot of Cubanos back where I'm from or some Salvadoreños, or maybe there are, but I've kept them out unconsciously. For me, that was kind of a slap in the face like, you have to consider all these other ethnicities under the umbrella term of Latino, and [I have to consider] my privilege.

Faculty Interactions. Students also talked about the compositional diversity of the faculty. In particular, students discussed how seeing their identities reflected in the faculty contributed to seeing themselves reflected in the institution at the curricular and pedagogical level (Hurtado et al., 2012). An example of this is Blue (a Latina Mexican American female), who contrasted her experience at ACU to previous experiences at a racially white institution where she was ostracized by peers for speaking Spanish in the classroom, saying,

It's always nice that you can be who you are at ACU. I'm taking a Psych class, and the teacher's actually Latina, so we speak Spanish and stuff like that. I think I'm accepted. I think that's one of the biggest things, just teachers, faculty

itself. I feel like I'm okay with who I am as a person. I don't feel like I'm put into this box.
June (a White female), who is from Basque Country, Spain, also discussed how she felt supported by a faculty member at ACU, stating,

> My advisor, she is from China. I feel like she gets me so that's good…The other day it was really funny. One of my classmates were talking about my hairstyle. I don't know why. The professor said, "oh your curly hair looks better that way than straight." So, my classmate said, "go natural or go home." I know that it's an expression that means strength, and the professor said, "well, you shouldn't be saying that to an immigrant." I didn't get it, but then she said it was like, they're telling [you] to "go home, get out of my country." My classmate, of course, she didn't mean it like that, and she was so sorry. This professor is the one that is my advisor too, and I think that for her, it's easier to relate to those things because [she can] put herself in that perspective.

Both Blue and June, as well as others in the sample, made sense of servingness by discussing their positive interactions with faculty, who validated their experiences as minoritized people.

Race-consciousness

Some students discussed more pointedly how the incorporation of diverse perspectives into the curriculum and pedagogy helped them develop critical consciousness. Race-consciousness, in this sense, speaks to how the institutional factors that students cited as important to servingness (diverse learning environments) enhanced their ability to evaluate the power structures that maintain white superiority, thereby encouraging critical engagement with systems of dominance based on their own societal positioning, as well as that of others (Jones, 2017). Students at ACU

exhibited race-consciousness in their sensemaking about how the curriculum and pedagogy and support programs are characteristic of servingness.

Curriculum and Pedagogy. A common theme was students linking servingness to the ways the curriculum and pedagogy directly influenced the critical development of their racial and ethnic selves. Sandra (a Hispanic female) stressed how the curriculum and pedagogy, along with her exposure to diverse peers, enhanced her understanding of her racial identity, saying,

> We're actually learning about the stories that happened in history. We're learning about the culture. I came to ACU learning about my own culture because, honestly, I wasn't sure how I identity. After learning about all these different parts of history in my classes and learning from others, and seeing how they identify, I feel like ACU has taught me to identify as however I feel comfortable. I don't need to identify a certain way just to please someone else.

Rebekah (an Asian female), who is in the Teaching English as a Second or Other Language program, also made sense of a servingness by describing the curriculum, stating,

> In the curriculum, every class touches on [diverse] perspectives, cause we teach language, we have to consider our students' identities, and many students are 1.5 generation, they speak a different language at home, then they speak English in school. It's difficult to teach them English in school without other [forms of] support. We need to learn different strategies about how to develop a curriculum for these groups. We care about these groups. Before I enrolled in this program, I thought teaching English is teaching a language. Now I realize that teaching English is part of social

work. This perspective is quite new for me.

Rebekah implied that the curriculum contributed to her critical consciousness development, including her ability to consider more deeply the intersections of identities, such as bilingualism and immigrant status. Making sense of servingness for Latinx and minoritized students as connected to curriculum and pedagogy that reflects the intersectionality of identities was common across participants at ACU.

Support Programs. Many students conceptualized servingness through support programs. There was a strong emphasis across responses on the fact that support programs served Latinx students as well as students from other minoritized backgrounds. For instance, Frida (a Mexican female) said,

> I'm trying to think of all of the different programs they have on campus that are designed to help Latino students' success. So, like [program's name], they have the undocumented student project…I feel that all of the summer transition programs are really helpful for a lot of our freshmen students who probably are first-generation that don't know how to navigate the college waters.

When asked about servingness, Frida immediately pointed to the programs and services on campus that "help Latino students' success" while also considering undocumented and first-generation students, again describing the intersectionality of identities. Similarly, Lorry (a Filipino female) stated, "I would say [Latinx-serving] means providing relevant services for Latinx students, but I don't think it limits it to serving Latinx students, it's serving the voices of the minority."

Students at ACU discussed how their interactions with diverse peers and faculty and with the curriculum and pedagogy contributed to their sense of belonging and critical consciousness development. Further, students from all racial backgrounds at

ACU connected servingness to programs and services that centered Latinx students' belonging on campus while also (re)focusing the definition of servingness to multiple minoritizations.

Discussion

In asking students what it means to serve racially minoritized students in HSIs, students at both institutions discussed institutional structures (i.e., curriculum, faculty, support programs, financial aid, and athletics), which aligns with Garcia et al.'s (2019) multidimensional contextual framework for understanding servingness in HSIs. However, the way they perceived these structures varied by institution. Specifically, we found that students' sensemaking was either race-neutral or race-conscious, which holds implications for HSIs.

Race-Neutrality

Participants at RPU operated from a place of race-neutrality, emphasizing dominant indicators of meritocracy (e.g., financial aid and athletics) as signs of servingness. These students described RPU in abstract liberalist ways that supported the ideals of equal opportunity and individualism. We observed this through students' discussion of financial aid as distinctly connected to servingness. Yet, we must note that RPU primarily offered merit-based scholarships, which reflects abstract liberalism. RPU, as a private, career-focused university, operates from an abstract liberalist frame when distributing merit-based aid as a tool to get students out in four years or less (Garcia, 2019). Merit-based aid is dependent on standardized test scores and extracurricular activities more accessible in affluent, predominately white high schools (Long & Riley, 2007).

The majority of the RPU students in our sample received merit-based scholarships based on academics or athletics, suggesting that they came from affluent high schools and/or excelled in normative measures of success. In this case, RPU rewarded them through scholarships, regardless of their race and eth-

nicity, upholding the values of meritocracy and equal opportunity. This is not to discount the important connections between funding and servingness but to highlight that merit-based support is often race-neutral and perpetuates white normative measures of academic excellence (Garcia, 2019).

A compelling finding was that racially minoritized students, particularly Latinx students at RPU, more than white students, operated through the race-neutral frame of minimization of race. Latinx students in the sample stated explicitly that it did not matter if there were faculty and curricula that centered diverse ways of knowing. Responses implied that these students instead favored white, mainstream institutional standards, such as faculty members' skill set in delivering a standardized, industry-based curriculum. This suggests that institutionalized race-neutrality can lead to internalized racism for racially minoritized students, as Garcia (2019) found evidence of race-neutral practices at RPU. Internalized racism has numerous implications, including impeding the ethnic identity development of racially minoritized students (Hilpolito-Delgado, 2010). An institution that operates from a race-neutral perspective potentially harms racially minoritized students by preventing their development as racialized beings, while those that provide curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to explore their identities can enhance racial identity salience (Garcia et al., 2018; Guardia & Evans, 2008). This suggests that a campus culture that complacently complies with race-neutral standards supersedes other standards, such as curriculum and pedagogy, programming, and faculty that reflect diverse perspectives as important.

Race-Consciousness

All participants at ACU, regardless of race and ethnicity, discussed faculty interactions, curriculum and pedagogical approaches, and programs and services for Latinxs and minoritized students as the most salient contextual indicators of servingness. An emphasis on equity and justice seemed to be a part of the

institutional fabric of ACU. Aligned with CRT, an institutional commitment to social justice contributed to students' ability to connect institutional support structures to their development of critical consciousness (Muñoz et al., 2012; Yosso, 2005).

A prevalent theme was students describing diverse peers and faculty as catalysts in thinking more deeply about their own identity as racialized beings (Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus, 2009). Students described professors who actively encouraged critical reflexivity, centered equity and justice in their curriculum and pedagogy, and engaged students in learning through collaborative relationships. Students were also able to provide concrete examples, tying the development of critical consciousness to interactions with faculty who validated their experiences as minoritized individuals through shared racialized experiences. Faculty with whom students could relate to through shared experiences helped them feel that their social identities are supported within the institution (Museus, 2009).

Additionally, students discussed how curricular and pedagogical and programmatic practices pushed them to think critically about their identity and the identity of others (Garcia, 2015; 2016). In students' sensemaking of servingness, they provided examples of how they linked the curriculum and pedagogy to the use of multilingual and cultural practices in the classroom, which, in turn, led to the development of critical consciousness for both white students and racially minoritized students (Paris & Alim, 2014). Furthermore, several Latinx students described specifically how incorporating their cultural histories into the curriculum gave voice to how they racially identify (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Students also made sense of programs that centered minoritized students as a core part of the institution's ability to serve them (Garcia, 2015). For students at ACU, interactions with diverse peers and faculty, culturally enhancing curriculum and pedagogy, and support programming for minoritized students were central indicators of servingness that not only contributed to their critical consciousness development (Ladson-Billings, 1995)

but also to a sense of validation and belonging on campus (Maestas et al., 2007).

Implications for Research and Practice

The contribution of this study to the literature on HSIs rests on its focus on student voices in defining servingness. HSIs, as colleges and universities not historically founded to serve Latinx students, must constantly negotiate what servingness looks like. As such, placing students' sensemaking at the locus of this work is vital in understanding how institutions can better address their needs.

In practice, HSIs should ask students what they need to succeed, thrive, and develop a holistic racial and ethnic identity. In talking to students, we found that they made sense of servingness by describing structural supports and their experiences within these support structures. This suggests that HSIs should leverage their institutional practices to enhance their ability to serve Latinx and minoritized students. Specifically, findings show that providing adequate financial aid, culturally enhancing curricula, and support programs for minoritized students is important (Garcia, 2019; Garcia et al., 2018; Covarrubbias et al., 2020). Yet, these support structures cannot be race-neutral. In agreement with previous literature, this study found that establishing a Latinx-serving identity (Garcia, 2017) must couple compositional diversity with equity and justice centered curricula and pedagogy (Garcia et al., 2018, 2015; Baca et al., 2019; Doran, 2019), which studies find lower color-neutral perspectives, especially in white students (Jayakumar, 2015).

Future research should continue to explore how compositional diversity at HSIs leads to greater same-race and cross-race interactions with peers and faculty as connected to critical consciousness and identity development. Scholars should also look beyond sense of belonging as an important outcome for students and instead explore how HSIs enhance students' critical consciousness, civic engagement, and social agency (Garcia et al., 2018; Cuellar, 2015). Moreover, the

differences in students' desires to have diverse faculty and curricular structures across institutions should be explored further. Practices and norms, such as a lack of diverse faculty that is representative of the student body and a lack of cultural student programming, serve to threaten the livelihood of Latinx students (Vargas et al., 2019; Yosso et al., 2009). Finally, future research should examine how HSIs challenge oppressive structures in order to develop critical consciousness in students (Garcia, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2014). The purpose of this study was not to directly analyze the ways students make sense of culture and criticality in pedagogical, curricular and programmatic efforts; however, as our study makes apparent, students make sense of these practices differently by institution, which is reflective of race-conscious practices. In research, there must be a concerted effort to better understand exactly how HSIs are transforming their organizational structures to better serve minoritized students.

Finally, researchers and practioners must take care in recognizing hat the HSI designation is, in fact, racialized, with various assumptions connected to this identity as a result of varying biases and assumptions about Latinx people in general (Garcia, 2019). Institutions must confront biases inherent in operating as racialized institutions. For example, operating from a race-neutral lens can be problematic and detrimental for racially minoritized students. Moreover, HSIs must be aware of the implication of embracing a racialized organizational identity prior to engaging in institutional practices such as marketing, branding, and community outreach efforts. This is part of a long and complex continuum of servingness that HSIs will continue to navigate in the ensuing years.

Conclusion

As the number of Latinxs entering postsecondary education increases, so does the number of HSIs. As such, scholars and practitioners must consider how these institutions are transitioning to better serve Latinx and minoritized students. This study contributes

to the growing knowledge about HSIs and their importance in the landscape of postsecondary education, with an emphasis on understanding the ways students within these institutions come to understand servingness.

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— **Table 1** —

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Institution	Race	Gender	Year	Major
Amy	RPU	Black/ Native/ Colombian/ Irish	Male	Sophomore	Business Administration
Anabel	RPU	Hispanic	Female	Junior	Nursing
Angelica	RPU	Caucasian	Female	Senior	Graphic Design
Angie	ACU	Other	Female	Junior	Human Resource Development
Arthur	ACU	Asian	Male	Junior	Finance
Augusto	ACU	Asian-Pakistani	Male	Graduate	Theater
Beckey	ACU	African	Female	Junior	Biology
Bee	ACU	2 or more races	Female	Graduate	Community/Teacher Leadership
Bernadette	ACU	Mexican Irish American	Female	Graduate	School Counseling
Blue	ACU	Latina Mexican American	Female	Junior	Psychology/ Social Work
Bob Baffert	ACU	Caucasian	Male	Grad-at-large	Accounting
Bobby	RPU	Mixed	Male	Senior	Culinary Arts
Brendle	ACU	Black	Female	Sophomore	Psychology
Carmen	ACU	Mexican American	Woman/ Female	Graduate	Educational Leadership
Deandre	RPU	African American	Male	Junior	Medical Assistant
Dee	ACU	Caucasian/ American	Female	Senior	Political Science
Elizabeth	RPU	Caucasian	Female	Senior	Allied Health Studies
Frank Davita	ACU	Hispanic	Male	Junior	Accounting
Frida	ACU	Mexican	Female	Junior	Sociology/Women's and Gender Studies
Future	RPU	African American	Male	Junior	Business Administration

— Table 1 (continued)—

Participant Demographics (N = 63)

Pseudonym	Institution	Race	Gender	Year	Major
Grace Collins	ACU	Black/ Haitian American	Female	Junior	Psychology
Gzus	ACU	Human	Male	Freshman	Psychology
Heather	RPU	Caucasian	Female	Senior	Allied Health Studies
Irma	RPU	American Mexican	Female	Junior	Nursing
Jade	RPU	African American	Female	Senior	Allied Health Studies
Jay	RPU	Hispanic	Male	Sophomore	Paralegal
Joe	ACU	White	Male	Grad-at-large	Undecided
John	ACU	White/ Italian	Male	Graduate	Counseling
Juanita	RPU	Hispanic	Female	Junior	Culinary Arts
Julia Roberts	RPU	White	Male	Junior	Business Administration
June	ACU	White	Female	Graduate	Counseling
Kirsten	RPU	Hispanic	Female	Junior	Business Administration
Lili	ACU	Hispanic	Female	Senior	Social Work
Lorry	ACU	Filipino	Female	Junior	Early Childhood Development
Manny	RPU	Hispanic	Male	Senior	Business Management
Marie	RPU	Hispanic	Female	Junior	Allied Health Studies
Marty	RPU	White	Male	Junior	Business Administration
Mike Vick	RPU	White	Male	Junior	Business Finance
Mireya	RPU	Hispanic/ Latina	Female	Sophomore	Medical Assistant
Future	RPU	African American	Male	Junior	Business Administration
Morgan	ACU	White/ Caucasian	Female	Senior	Psychology
Nikki	ACU	Latina	Female	Graduate	Educational Leadership
Pablo	ACU	Latino	Male	Senior	Secondary Education

— **Table 1 (continued)**—
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Institution	Race	Gender	Year	Major
Pablocito	RPU	Half White/ Half Filipino	Female	Senior	Culinary ARts
Paige	ACU	Arab American	Female	Junior	Elementary Education
Patrick	ACU	White/ Caucasian	Male	Senior	Elementary Education
Peroxide Jesus	RPU	White	Male	Junior	Business Administration
Rebekah	ACU	Asian	Female	Graduate	TESOL
Rick Sanchez	RPU	Caucasian/ White	Male	Freshman	Architectural Tech
Ronald	RPU	Asian	Male	Sophomore	Exercise Science
Ruby	ACU	Mexican American	Female	Junior	Biology
Samantha	ACU	Hispanic	Female	Junior	Psychology
Sandra	ACU	Hispanic	Female	Junior	Psychology
Selena	RPU	Mexican-American	Female	Junior	Culinary Arts
Shawn	RPU	African American	Female	Junior	Health Management
Sid	ACU	White	Male	Senior	Biology
Stephanie Jackson	ACU	Latina/ Hispanic	Female	Junior	Biology
Susan Jones	RPU	Black	Female	Senior	Health Care
Toby	RPU	White	Male	Junior	Business Administration
Valerie B.	RPU	Italian	Female	Senior	Law
Vee	ACU	African American	Female	Sophomore	Communication Media and Theater
William Pennington	ACU	African American	Male	Senior	Psychology
Young Pappy	ACU	Black	Male	Junior	Justice Studies

*Students were asked to identify their race and gender on an open-ended demographics survey. Terms used are the terms students used to identify.