

# 'Pintando' a Hispanic Serving Institution: The Influence of Muralism on Chicax/Latinx Student Experience at the University of California HSI Campuses

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Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are federally designated universities whose undergraduate enrollment is 25% Chicax/Latinx -identifying students (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019). The University of California (UC) System currently has six designated HSI campuses (Davis, Irvine, Merced, Riverside, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara), with the remaining three campuses (Los Angeles, Berkeley, and San Diego) as emerging (15-24%) HSIs (Paredes et. al, 2021). The University of California has emerged as a Hispanic-Serving System (HSI-System), having recently enrolled its most diverse freshman class. In this context, it is important for educational practitioners to reevaluate traditional structures of servingness to tangible, observable, non-academic outcomes, and experiences. Garcia's et. al (2019<sup>c</sup>) *Multidimensional conceptual framework of servingness in HSIs*, provides a path to centering Chicax/Latinx students' histories, cultures, languages, and experiences as a disruption of the historically white normative environment at Hispanic-serving postsecondary institutions. This literature review will expand on the *Multidimensional conceptual framework of servingness in HSIs* (Garcia et al., 2019<sup>c</sup>), to include an additional component of 'Muralism' that decolonizes the physical environment and infrastructure of an HSI through an anti-racist and anti-colonial lens. Research has shown that murals present feelings of 'home' and 'belonging' for students (Serrano, 2022; Garcia & Zaragoza, 2020). Through archival methodology, very few UC campuses have murals that center on the experiences, culture, and diversity of Chicax/Latinx students. Before the University of California System can be self-designated a Hispanic Serving System, the UC must critically reflect, freedom dream, and transform the physical infrastructure of its institutions with murals to center the voices, experiences, and history of Chicax/Latinx students at HSIs.

## Introduction

I am a proud alumnus of the first Hispanic Serving Institution in the UC system, The University of California Riverside. This institution was co-constructed, co-produced, and co-conspired by Chicax/Latinx students before the HSI federal designation was created (Matute, 2022). Throughout my undergraduate tenure, I served as a community artist, practitioner, and researcher, which inspired my interest in grassroots scholarship to co-construct pipelines of servingness and a culture of support for Chicax/Latinx students at HSIs. Through this capacity, I created artwork alongside students of color and engaged in the process of freedom dreaming. Love (2019) and Kelley (2002) define freedom dreaming as critical and imaginative dreams of collective resistance within the most creative capacities. Our artwork was a collective vision of community, empowerment, and liberation that was then displayed throughout the entire campus. These efforts of artistry centered on the stories and voices of communities of color that are oftentimes forgotten by academia (Morales, 1998). Students saw themselves, their culture, communities, and history represented on the physical infrastructure of the institution in ways that were accessible and comprehensible. Our artwork established a relationship with students that centralized their identity and existence at our HSI. However, our artwork was only temporary and without any institutional support for its preservation. As an artist and scholar, I engage in this process of critical reflection as an integral part of my scholarship to freedom dream what an HSI can become. When I envision an HSI, I see buildings with murals that remind me of *mi barrio* [my neighborhood], *mi cultura* [my culture], and *mi historia* [my history]. Through my student experience and expertise, I have conceptualized murals as a way of capturing time, space, history, and culture as a source of empowerment and liberation. I share this personal experience to build a connection between two interdisciplinary topics: artistry and HSI scholarship. The interdisciplinary nature of this article is important and necessary because academic training and the workings of higher education exert pressure on

scholars to narrow their interests and not cross unfamiliar-territory (Morales, 1998). The literature on HSI scholarship must expand its research parameters in order to uplift Chicana/Latina students' stories and their nuances. We have to continuously freedom dream of what an HSI can become.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) is an enrollment-based federal designation for degree-granting institutions that enroll 25% of undergraduate Chicana/Latina students (*Excelencia in Education*, 2019). This designation was created due to rapid demographic change, social movements, and the migration of families in the United States during the 20th century (Hirt, 2006). The effects of these movements can be seen throughout many states, especially in California where 40% of the state's population identifies as Chicana/Latina (Padres et. al, 2021). In 2020, the University of California System (UC) admitted the largest group of Chicana/Latina -identifying students (Padres et. al, 2021). The UC efforts to increase diversity have allowed six UC campuses to achieve federal recognition as Hispanic Serving Institutions (Davis, Irvine, Merced, Riverside, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara) with the remaining three campuses (Los Angeles, Berkeley, and San Diego) as emerging (15%-24%) HSIs (eHSI) (Padres et. al, 2021). Given the large population of Chicana/Latina students on UC campuses, the UC is enrolling, educating, and graduating a large percentage of the nation's Chicana/Latina students. This puts the UC in a unique position in the field of higher education as practitioners, administrators, and scholars contemplate creative ways to serve their students. This concept of 'servingness' has been studied and critiqued by many studies and scholars. Gina Garcia's (2019<sup>c</sup>) *Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness in HSIs* shows that servingness at HSI cannot be reduced to single (or even two) factors. Rather, there are multiple ways to conceptualize servingness. Thus, many scholars have critiqued that the HSI federal designation is solely based on enrollment criteria, rather than experiences, non-academic

outcomes, and support which extends beyond the traditional indicators of student success (Paredes et. al, 2021; Garcia, 2019<sup>e</sup>).

Studies have found that Chicax/Latinx students at HSI and eHSI experience a negative racial campus climate, comprised of oppressive structures of racism and coloniality (Serrano, 2022; Sanchez 2019). Additionally, students from other historically marginalized populations share experiences of microaggressions, micro-assaults, and micro-triggers at HSIs. As a result, students perceive their institution's promotion of diversity as an illusion, thus realizing that their institution is not diverse (Comeaux et. al., 2021). As a tactic of survival and resistance to hostile racial climates, students created support networks, such as cultural organizations, cultural centers, and ethnic studies departments, where they can foster "homeplaces" (Serrano, 2022; hooks, 1990). bell hooks coined the notion of homeplaces as "spaces where we return to for renewal and self-discovery (hooks, 1990, pp.49). Comeaux et al. (2021) findings suggest that a sense of "homeplace" or "coming home" was found through the faculty, their words of affirmation, and through their mentorship with students. However, these characteristics of homeplaces can only be found within certain departments, spaces, and people that are often hidden within HSIs. Students can no longer afford to only foster homeplaces within walls, centers, or departments as their source of belonging. These characteristics of homeplaces need to be fostered throughout the campus's external environment to achieve what Garcia (2019<sup>a</sup>) refers to as "Latinx-enhancing organizational identity." Studies have found that Chicax/Latinx students find belonging through art which shows how an HSI campus is embracing its organizational identity and commitment to servingness (Garcia, 2020). However, studies do not show how murals can communicate belonging and identity at HSI. The purpose of this literature review is to analyze the current racial climate at UC-HSI campuses, how students respond to campus climate, and the historical origins of murals in the UC system as it translates to the influence on Chicax/Latinx students' experiences at Hispanic Serving Institution.

### **Campus Racial Climate at eHSIs and HSIs**

Hispanic Serving Institutions are unique in comparison to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU), given that HSIs were not founded with a specific mission nor curricula that specifically serves Chicana/Latina students (Garcia, 2019<sup>b</sup>; Hirt, 2006). Therefore, HSIs were formerly predominantly white institutions (PWI), and can be argued that they are still PWIs. These historical origins of PWIs are grounded in the colonial and racial matrix of power which plays out in all aspects of higher education in the United States (Garcia, 2019<sup>a</sup>). A study reported that Chicana/Latina students experience two types of racial microaggression at eHSI and HSIs including (a) racist stereotypes and assumptions about Chicana/Latina students and (b) physical and social segregation (Sanchez, 2019). About 82% of participants from eHSI reported experiencing both types of racial microaggression, while 70% of participants from HSIs reported both types of microaggression (Sanchez, 2019).

Sanchez (2019) found that these racial microaggressions, such as hearing racial stereotypes, and anti-Mexican or immigrant expressions, were perpetrated by white students/staff and faculty. For example, students in this study reported racist stereotypes such as assumptions that participants were not born in the United States, belong to families in drug cartels, and had been admitted to the university because of their race instead of their merit. However, these racial accounts were not exclusive to Chicana/Latina students but were also experienced by other marginalized student populations. Comeaux et al. (2021) highlighted the racialized experience of Black, Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American students at HSIs such as anti-blackness, questioning intellectual ability, mispronouncing names, and institutional erasure. For example, UC Berkeley was rated the lowest out of nine campuses on equitability for Black students and was reported by news outlets as having the worst reputation among Black students (Harper & Simmons, 2019; Watanabe, 2020). In response, students of color

create counter-spaces or homeplaces as sanctuaries in response to a negative racial environment.

### **Homeplaces**

Although many students of color will negatively highlight numerous spaces in higher education, many did find spaces on campus that helped them resist and heal from the campus racial climate (Comeaux et al., 2021; Garcia, 2019<sup>a</sup>). Studies referred to these spaces as “academic homeplaces.” Writings from hooks (1990) described the term homeplaces as “sites where Black women were able to construct households and places of care in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racial oppression and sexist domination” (p.42). Homeplaces can be defined as spaces that provide more than service, but also affirmations and healing many of the wounds caused by racial domination (hooks, 1990, p.42). Many students who have faced racial oppression at their HSI find these homeplaces through interaction with faculty, joining cultural organizations, engaging with cultural centers, and taking courses through ethnic studies departments as sites necessary for resistance and liberation (Comeaux, 2021) For example, Black and Chicana/Latina men at an HSI, found academic homeplaces through the compositional diversity of students and faculty as role models and mentors (Comeaux, 2021). Garcia & Zaragoza (2020) study found that students themselves have found diversity at their HSI through different homeplaces such as murals. The medium of art can be used to foster a critical way to promote how campuses are embracing diversity and how it is reflected through their campus (Banning & Bartels, 1997; Garcia & Zaragoza, 2020). Many of the students in this study found the mural to be a source of representation and empowerment. The mural depicts historical civil rights and social justice activists from various racial-ethnic backgrounds, which speak to this larger conversation for allowing for deep dialogue to prompt critical thinking about larger issues within society (Garcia & Zaragoza, 2020). However, these murals are only found

within cultural centers, which oftentimes are located inside buildings that are hidden and not easily accessible.

Many HSI scholars have not analyzed how murals can be utilized on the exterior of the campus infrastructure, to provide that feeling of belonging and homeplace at HSIs for Chicana/Latina students. In addition, the establishment of murals must be created intentionally to honor the served history and contributions of the previous generation of Chicana/Latina students at HSIs. Aurora Levins Morales's essay *Historian as Curandera* describes history as "the story we tell ourselves about how the past explains the present". Morales continues to emphasize that the history of communities of color "has been purposely altered and destroyed by colonial powers to control people's relationships with their past and disrupt the transmission of historical identity to their young" (Morales, 1998). People who do not have access to their history alter their perception of themselves throughout time, thus restricting their creativity to visualize change for future generations (Garcia & Yosso, 2020). Academia has not always seen the value in preserving art, archives, or the history of communities of color. Most institutions do not teach their students in education to apply a historical or artistic lens in their scholarship. Bridging the connection between education, art, and history constructs a more nuanced narrative of how students see themselves reflected through murals at HSIs (Garcia & Yosso, 2020). Hispanic Serving Institutions must embrace their historical organizational identity throughout the context of the entire institution because space is political. The historical nature of these murals was seeded from student movements and struggle in the University of California System, as a form of activism and educational pedagogy. One of the earliest murals in the UC systems started in the Riverside community of the Inland Empire in California (Howell-Ardila, 2018).

### **Historical Influence of Muralism in the University of California**

Utilizing archival methodology and epistemology, I was able to uncover a robust history of Chicano/Latinx student activism at the University of California Riverside, the first Hispanic Serving Institution in the UC system. I hypothesize that Chicano/Latinx Student activism led to the creation of one of the earliest murals in the UC system in 1975, a result of the Chicano Movement and Chicano student activists. The Chicano Movement in California set the foundations for building a social movement against systemic oppression during the 1950s-60s. It was a demand to utilize higher education for Chicano liberation as published in “*El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education*” (CCCHE, 1969). In April of 1969, Chicano/Latinx students, staff, and a few faculty allies formulated a Chicano plan for higher education called “El Plan de Santa Barbara” (CCCHE, 1969). This document set the foundation for the recruitment of Chicano students, Chicano Studies as an academic major, tutoring programs, research programs, publication programs, and community cultural centers (CCCHE, 1969). In El Plan de Santa Barbara, students wrote a manifesto demanding the use of higher education as a tool for Chicano liberation and transformational change within the university. It sent a message in the realm of higher education that “Chicanos did not come to work for the university but demanded that the university work for Chicanos” (CCCHE, 1969). It brings to



Figure 1. Mural by Daniel 'Chano' Gonzalez (Howell-Ardila, 2018)



question if the UC system is committed to Chicana/Latina liberation and transformational institutional change.

Since the creation of El Plan de Santa Barbara, Chicana/Latina students in the UC system envisioned a transformation of the academy. Chicana/Latina students at the University of California Riverside (UCR) established one of the earliest sites of cultural support and success for Chicana/Latina students in the UC System (Matute, 2022). The establishment of Chicano Student Programs, one of the first Chicana/Latina centers in the UC system led to the creation of space dedicated to Chicana/Latina students at UCR (Ramirez, 2018; Matute, 2022). In 1975, the creation of the earliest Chicana/Latina mural in the UC System was created by community artist Daniel 'Chano' Gonzalez. The mural remains as a surviving remnant of the early years of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in Riverside (Howell-Ardila, 2018). It has resided in the Office of Chicano Student Programs since 1975 and has moved with the center through every relocation (Ramirez, 2018; Howell-Ardila,2018). The mural has been a symbol of educational opportunity, reflects individual values, and is a message to the common people in the *barrio* [neighborhood] (Howell-Ardila,2018). This was a response from Chicana/Latina student leaders to the structural and systemic racism within higher education (Matute, 2022). The university's newspaper, *The Highlander*, highlighted the mural as "typical Chicano art" that fostered bold, colorful, and inspiration from Chicano cultural pride (Howell-Ardila,2018). Muralism within the Riverside community was rooted in the historical nature of the Chicano Movement and Chicana/Latina student activism at UCR during the 1960s-1970s. According to the UCR Chicano student newspaper, *Nuestra Cosa*, they stated:

Los Chicanos se pueden identificar con estos héroes mexicanos que no son mencionados en los libros de la historia de los estados unidos. [Chicanos can identify themselves with these mexican heroes that are not mentioned in the history books of the United States] (Arte chicano, Nuestra Cosa, 1975)

Given the limited scope of research, it is historically evident that the mural at UC Riverside has historically fostered community and empowerment for Chicana/Latina students, which has led the university to rank as a high-achieving HSI (Matute, 2022). Grassroot and collaborative activism led UCR's organic progression of embracing a historic HSI identity (Matute, 2022; Doran and Medina, 2017).

### **Muralism as a Model of Servingness for HSI**

Garcia et al (2019<sup>o</sup>) *Multidimensional conceptual framework of servingness in HSIs*, provides a systematic review of servingness as multidimensional in nature, beyond outcomes and culture. In the framework, white supremacy is depicted as an external oppressive force that impacts every structure of serving at HSIs (e.g., mission and values, diversity plans, culturally relevant pedagogy, grants, programming, etc.) (Garcia et al., 2019<sup>o</sup>). Expanding on Garcia et al. (2019<sup>o</sup>) framework it is important to acknowledge how the physical infrastructure of the campus environment perpetuates a white settler colonial culture as an external force. In this archival and literature review, I emphasized the need for murals as cultural validation on UC-HSI campuses and have provided a model for creating murals called the "Girasol Model" [Sunflower Model].

The model is an image that I created utilizing artistry as a mechanism of understanding and demystifying research. It symbolizes that becoming a Hispanic Serving Institution should be an organic artistic process and an act of freedom dreaming where students' cultural wealth is embraced and centered. The term "*Pintando*" [Painting] is an act of creating new tools and frameworks to aid Chicana/Latina students at HSIs grounded in racial and social justice. The Girasol Model is a framework that will help eHSI and HSIs create murals while understanding the origins of their historical organizational identity and freedom dreaming of their institution as a space of social justice and community liberation.

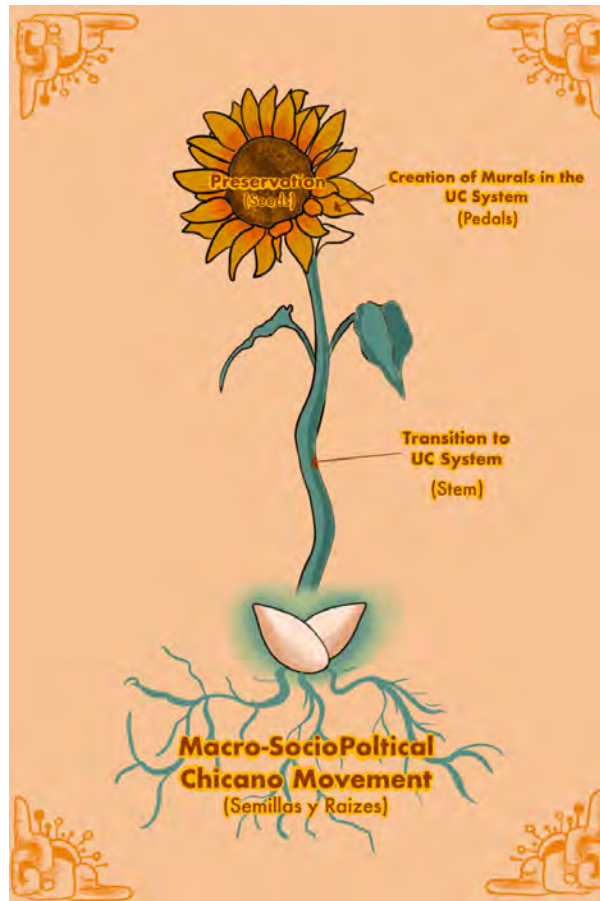


Figure 2. Girasol Model Image

### *Semillas y Raizes [Seeds and Roots]*

In the Girasol Model, the *semillas y raizes* symbolize the student movement/initiatives that are often the foundation for establishing an institutionalized culture of support and empowerment at HSIs (Matute, 2022). Hurtado (1998) emphasized that educational leaders and practitioners cannot assume that students know about these histories, nor should they believe that teaching about this legacy will lead to dissatisfaction. In addition, it is important that these histories are brought back to oppressed communities in higher education. Morales (1998) argued that “pharmaceuticals are going into indigenous communities and stealing traditional sciences, technology, and plants to produce medicine that are completely out of reach for the

people who invented them” (Morales, 1998). Doing historical recovery about oppressed communities has to be approached with care and intentionality.

*The Stem: Historical legacy transition to the University.*

The *Stem* symbolizes how these efforts of student movement/initiatives influence the HSI campus climate. For example, at UCR the Chicano Movement inspired many outreach initiatives led by Chicax/Latinx student leaders and organizations which help establish a *comunidad*. Matute's (2022) archival search found one of the earliest high school outreach conferences that were organized by the United Mexican-American Students (UMAS) de UCR. This organization invited over 500 Mexican American youth from Southern California (Matute, 2022; UMAS de UCR newsletter, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1969). These initial efforts of student movement/initiatives led to UCR becoming a high-achieving HSI (Matute, 2022). The section of the model represents Morales's (1998) argument of how the past influences the present.

*The Pedals: Creation of Murals at HSIs*

Research has shown the continuous struggle to recover the purposely severed history and culture of oppressed populations (Morals, 1998; Garcia & Yosso, 2020). The Girasol Model shows how muralism can capture institutional history as a form of empowerment and the recovery of critical historical narratives for communities of color. Garcia & Yosso (2020) provide a working model as a guide for constructing a critical historical narrative such as oral accounts, institutional archives, and newspapers. The Girasol Model expands on this guide to include artistry and muralism as a tool for the dissemination of these critical narratives. The approach that these critical narratives are disseminated is crucial to access and equity. Morales (1998) emphasized, “leaving empowering research in academic journals and university libraries is like manufacturing unaffordable medicines for deadly diseases”. Through Muralism, these critical narratives can easily be shared with the community without the use of private terminology and other forms of scholarship. Artistry can be utilized to communicate what has not been learned

throughout the educational curriculum and to understand the contributions of communities of color in higher education.

### *Preservation: The Seeds*

The history of communities of color is sacred, and preserving these histories should be an institutional priority for equity and justice. The seeds at the center of the Girasol Model symbolize the future generation. The preservation of murals is important for history to be transmitted to the next generation of students of color that enter the HSI campus. Preservation is an act of disrupting the colonial power of invasion on the historical identity of communities of color at HSIs (Morales, 1998).

By recovering the historical narrative of student movement/initiatives in the UC system, the Girasol Model encourages administrators, practitioners, and scholars to unearth the origins of their institutions, while simultaneously uplifting these historical identities through artistry. By analyzing the earliest histories of Chicanx/Latinx students at UCR, we are able to see, through activism and social movement, that murals are created to remind and empower people of their identity. The traditional models of servingness and markers of success in the UC system are not meeting the needs of Chicanx/Latinx students, given evidence of its negative racial climate among its students. The ways in which practitioners serve students at HSIs are not singular; they are multifaceted.

### **Conclusion**

Research has shown that the structures of racism are still present within HSIs, meaning that the federal designation should not absolve an institution from addressing its hostile racial climate. The University of California is set to become a Hispanic Serving System; however, the university has failed to address the racial climate and microaggression that are prominent among students of color attending a UC campus. The UC should utilize HSI grants to support the creation of murals on the physical infrastructure of the university campus. However, I

recognize and emphasize that a mural should never be the determining factor of becoming an HSI, but rather that murals should be used to capture history, culture, and community. Murals at HSIs should be a public imagination and a commitment to transform into a loving culture of support and empowerment. It fosters community, representation, and empowerment that students of color utilize to navigate hostile racial climates at HSIs.

Coming into the academy as an artist, I wanted to create art and utilize the power of imagination to become a thinking artist in practice and in scholarship. Throughout my undergraduate experience, I learned how the act of *pintando* can create a community where students of color knew that they belonged at an HSI. Pintando a Hispanic Serving Institution is an example of freedom dreaming what HSIs can become, however, this is a utopian vision that does not exist at any current HSI. In Garcia's (2023) book, *Transforming Hispanic Serving Institutions for Equity and Justice*, she dreams of HSIs becoming “spaces that advance racial equity, social justice, and collective liberation” while recognizing that these spaces may never come to fruition within this generation (Garcia, 2023). However, it is important that we continue to dream of an HSI where murals envelop our students collectively and creatively with culture, well-being, empowerment, and liberation. Pintando a Hispanic Serving Institution is a sacred process grounded with intentionality, listening, collaborating, understanding, envisioning, and creating a collective dream of liberation at Hispanic Serving Institutions.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This literature review focused on the historical narratives of Mexican-origin students, which does not include other Latinx origins groups. Further research is needed on the historical narrative of Central American, Southern American, and Caribbean students at HSIs to deconstruct the Mexican hegemony that exists within HSI literature. Additional research needs to be conducted, utilizing theory and frameworks grounded in grassroots activism and social justice, to obtain an organizational HSI identity that is in service to students (Doran & Medina,

2017). In addition, scholars should consider how murals can affect a student's well-being and stress levels in an academic setting. Understanding HSI from a holistic and creative perspective can help practitioners improve the educational experience for all students as an empowering and humanizing experience.

**Notes:** *Pintando a Hispanic Serving Institution*, is a product of love for artistry, creativity, and envisioning new tools to aid our communities at a Hispanic Serving Institution. It is a form of majia [magic] that is rooted in love for students and their growth within the environment of a Hispanic Serving Institution. It is an intergenerational commitment to servingness that started in the 1960s and 1970s at UC Riverside in California. To Mami y Papi, who were my first inspiration to this line of work, praxis, and inquiry. Who nurtured my artistry desde niño chiquito and continuously supported my work. To mi hermana, Genessis, who was the first to enter these realms of higher education and produced hope for those that came after her. To Chicano Student Programs, who not only employed me, but modeled what it meant to serve Latinx students from el corazón. To the students who I organized alongside with since my freshman year at UCR, thank you for showing me the power of collectivity in fostering the next generation of brown scholars in higher education. To Dra. Arlene Cano Matute, who ignited the fire in many students' hearts, including my own. Whose practice is centered in nurturing the seeds that will become roses that bloom from concrete. To my younger self, who has always dared to transcend beyond borders. Who has dared to paint the existence of his people on forbidden walls, barriers, and now academic journals.

*Here's to painting a Hispanic Serving Institution*

*Mil Gracias a la Comunidad.*

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