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LESSONS ON SERVINGNESS FROM MENTORING PROGRAM LEADERS AT A HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Servingness is a multidimensional framework detailing how Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) – which enroll at least 25% Latinx students – can shift from merely *enrolling* to meaningfully *serving* students holistically. Critically examining how institutional structures facilitate or inhibit servingness is essential for improving institutional efforts focused on student success. Adding to a dearth of literature linking servingness and mentoring, we investigated mentoring program leaders' visions for servingness, along with the strengths and challenges they experience towards serving and mentoring minoritized students. Secondary analysis of interviews with 11 leaders demonstrated that visions of servingness were rooted in promoting *student-centered* and *equity-forward* policies. Strengths included *building belonging* for minoritized students and *implementing high-impact mentoring practices*. Importantly, six structural challenges to servingness were identified, such as *precarious or limited funding*. These often unexplored viewpoints – from

leaders on-the-ground – provide vital perspectives and actionable lessons to shift institutional structures in ways that better fulfill a public mission of servingness.

Keywords: servingness, Hispanic Serving Institutions, program leaders, mentoring, minoritized students, support structures

INTRODUCTION

Servingness is a framework detailing how Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) can shift from being enrollment-focused to meaningfully serving students' holistic needs (Garcia, 2023; Garcia et al., 2019; Garcia & Cuellar, 2023; Núñez et al., 2015; Núñez et al., 2016). When universities enroll a minimum threshold of full-time racially-minoritized students, in this case 25% Latinx students, they may apply for a federal designation as an HSI. This designation affords access to Title V funds specially earmarked to assist in developing support infrastructures. Here is where the multidimensional servingness framework is useful. It goes beyond the federal designation to consider different *indicators of servingness,* like student outcomes (e.g., GPAs, self-concepts) and experiences (e.g., perceptions of campus climate), and how these are tied to *structures for serving*, such as organizational dimensions (e.g., institutional policies, programs for minoritized students). These various levels direct attention to critical intervention points for researchers and practitioners aiming to improve student success.

Despite having access to federal funds to address these intervention points, HSIs may fall short in how they *serve* their minoritized students. Unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Tribal Colleges and Universities, HSIs were not created to serve the needs and strengths of specific minoritized student populations. Because of this, many HSIs still operate as traditionally White institutions (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Contreras et al., 2008; Cole, 2011; Garcia, 2017; Gutierrez & Banda, 2022; Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015; Nelson Laird et al., 2007; Santos & Acevedo-Gil, 2013). That is, various organizational features of HSIs (e.g., curricular design, hiring decisions, cultural norms that define a "successful" student) continue to cater to and reward those from continuing-generation-to-college, middle-to-upper class, White backgrounds (Covarrubias, 2021; Covarrubias et al., 2022; Patton, 2016). Such privileging continues to produce disparities in outcomes (e.g., grades, retention and graduation rates) and opportunities (e.g., access to resources) among dominant and minoritized groups (Cabrera, 2018). So although HSI leaders might publicly tout a commitment to racial equity and holistic student success, if they do not shift necessary structures, servingness remains purely aspirational (Garcia, 2017, 2023).

Being critical of how an institution engages in servingness is essential for improving institutional efforts. However, simplistic binary framings of HSIs as simply *enrolling* versus *serving* discourage creative strategies towards servingness (Garcia, 2018; Garcia et al., 2019; Núñez, 2017). They fail to recognize the nuance that exists within this binary, such as the many facets of an institution that promote or thwart this mission, especially from the perspectives of those doing work on-the-ground. For example, even before "servingness" became useful language for university leaders, commitments to equity work have long existed on campuses. This includes

federally-funded TRIO outreach and student programs, established in 1964, which have assisted low-income, first-generation-to-college (FG) students along the academic pipeline for over half a century (U.S Department of Education, 2020). What makes the HSI context unique is that it benefits from the legacy and ongoing efforts of such programs and is committed to developing new grant-funded programs that share a similar mission. In the current study, we explore the strengths and challenges that leaders of various undergraduate mentoring programs at an HSI encounter as they engage in servingness. Our focus on mentoring programs is a direct result of minoritized students' requests, as they identified this area of servingness as needing more attention at the target institution[1].

This reported need also aligns with substantial evidence from higher education literature of the numerous benefits of mentorship programs for students, particularly those from minoritized backgrounds (e.g., McClinton et al., 2018; Smith, 2013). Research typically documents the experiences of mentoring programs from the perspective of mentees (e.g., undergraduates) and mentors (e.g., peers, faculty). Although informative, often left out of the research are the perspectives of program leaders who design, implement, and run these programs. These on-the-ground viewpoints are important to consider, especially in HSI contexts, given that they tend to have fewer resources and to support larger numbers of minoritized students (Cunningham et al., 2014; Petrov & Garcia, 2021).

To date, only one study has explicitly examined mentorship programs in relation to an HSI's mission of servingness (Rodriguez & Gonzales, 2020). Title V funding allowed the target HSI to create mentoring program elements, including the First to Go and Graduate initiative which provides peer and faculty mentoring to FG students. Based on qualitative interviews with mentees and peer mentors, mentees reported how having a trusted mentor from a similar cultural background with shared language and/or experiences and who understood them helped them feel a sense of belonging to campus. This investigation enabled researchers to propose mentoring as a culturally-enhancing indicator of servingness (Garcia, 2017).

Though this study ties mentoring to servingness, the research did not examine the strengths of or structural challenges in running the programs – insights that program leaders could uniquely provide. Understanding these structural facets is vital for considering the longevity and transformative ability of these programs. Adding to literature, the current study explores the shared strengths and challenges among mentoring programs to understand how they navigate a mission of servingness within an HSI context. For example, how do mentoring programs create a *vision* for servingness and what intentional everyday practices do they implement to carry out said vision?

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[1] The campus's FG Initiative administered evaluation surveys after hosting an event designed to facilitate belonging for FG students. The evaluation included a question asking students to identify areas for future programming. Overwhelmingly, students identified mentoring as the most critical area to focus programming. The FG Initiative staff then conducted the interviews presented in this paper to better understand, from the perspective of program leaders, what the campus needed to improve mentoring for minoritized students.

Do mentoring programs communicate with each other and, if not, what factors limit this communication and what consequences emerge from its absence? Indeed, research has documented communication challenges within STEM mentoring programs that stemmed from little university infrastructure facilitating connection among programs (Mondisa et al., 2021). This often resulted in programs competing amongst each other for resources, instead of strategically working to fill in gaps between programs.

Through secondary analysis of interviews with 11 leaders of mentoring programs at a four-year public, research-intensive HSI (HSRI), we aim to document the structural features that facilitate or thwart efforts of servingness. Understanding the experiences of program leaders engaging in servingness work at an HSRI contributes a missing perspective in research in three ways. First, though there is growing theory on servingness (Garcia, 2017, 2018, 2023; Núñez et al., 2016) and empirical research on engaging servingness in practice (Garcia, 2020; Garcia & Cuellar, 2023), there is scarce research within HSRI settings. Yet this context matters as HSRIs have the potential to curate unique professional pathways for minoritized students. For example, HSRIs can offer robust research mentoring necessary for future careers. Secondly, and relatedly, only one study to date has explicitly focused on mentoring as a servingness structure within an HSI context (Rodriguez & Gonzales, 2020). Adding to this study, we aim to understand, with greater precision, the strengths and challenges of running such mentoring programs, as they play a critical role in facilitating servingness (Garcia et al., 2019). Finally, scarce servingness research has centered the perspectives of on-the-ground leaders (e.g., Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Quinteros & Covarrubias, 2023). Centering their experiences provides critical insights for shifting institutional structures toward stronger practices of servingness. Collectively, this investigation contributes both to theory on the multidimensional servingness framework and on mentoring.

METHOD

Program Leader Participants

The project took place at a four-year public HSRI on the western coast of the U.S. which received HSI designation in 2015. According to institutional records, at the time of the study, the campus served 30.3% White, 27.9% Asian, 26.7% Latinx, 4.3% Black, 0.8% Indigenous, 0.4% Pacific Islander, 7.8% international, and 1.7% unknown domestic undergraduates; FG students made up 38% of the population. Participants were identified through a rigorous search process. A paid undergraduate intern and a full-time staff member from the on-campus FG Initiative searched through all campus programs to identify those serving large numbers of FG students, the majority of whom identify as students of color. Eligible programs had to provide some type of mentoring component, even if the program goals were much broader.

Out of the 14 mentoring program leaders invited, 11 agreed to participate[2]. Participants reflected a range of positions and perspectives, including program directors and supervisors, program coordinators, program managers, lead advisors, and staff specialists. The programs

[2] We did not collect demographic information to protect the privacy of participants.

tackled mentoring and support in diverse ways, including providing academic, financial, career and professional, research, and social support. Some programs focused on serving students from particular racial/ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Black) while others were focused on other features, like academic discipline (e.g., STEM).

Research Approach

We employed secondary analysis of previously collected and transcribed interviews. This approach allows for an efficient use of resources (e.g., time, money) and for access to sensitive, rich data (Smith, 2008). The FG Initiative originally conducted these interviews with program leaders to better understand how to strengthen campus mentoring approaches more broadly. Using secondary analysis, we reviewed the transcripts with a more focused lens, namely with a servingness framework in mind. For example, we paid explicit attention to how the leaders described their experiences maneuvering and building a *structure for servingness* within their mentoring programs.

Participants were invited to participate in individual, semi-structured interviews centered on the topic of "mentorship on campus." Interviews were conducted by at least one staff member from the FG Initiative, which included two paid interns (one undergraduate and one graduate) and a full-time staff member. The interview protocol included questions that addressed program leaders' roles and responsibilities, program priorities, gaps and challenges in mentorship programs, and resources that were helpful for program development. The semi-structured format of the interviews ensured consistency across interviews while also allowing for organic conversation to unfold (Josselson, 2004). All interviews, which lasted an average of 45 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed via Temi, an online transcription service. A staff member de-identified the transcriptions and shared them with the research team, which included an undergraduate research assistant (RA) and principal investigator (PI), for analyses. Given that the project entailed secondary analysis of de-identified data, the university's IRB determined it did not meet the requirements of human subjects research and, thus, did not require formal approval.

Coding Procedure

The research team used inductive thematic analysis to better explore patterns using a data-driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin, the PI and RA became familiar with the data by independently reading interview responses and generating initial impressions from their readings. The team met to discuss these initial impressions to understand overlap and distinctions in their observations, especially as they related to the research questions. Next, the team began to review and refine the impressions into codes, including discussing how well the codes captured interview responses, if any might be consolidated, and whether to add new codes. The team then defined and labeled the codes, organizing them under three major categories: program frameworks, program challenges, and program strengths.

After constructing the codebook, the team then independently re-read the interviews and applied the codebook. Codes were not mutually exclusive, meaning that multiple themes could be

identified between and within interviews. After each phase of coding, the team met to discuss their codings, including discrepancies, until consensus was reached and all interviews were coded. These discussions enhanced the trustworthiness of the work, as two independent investigators worked through their perspectives and reached convergence in their understanding of the codes and the data (Merriam, 1998).

RESULTS

Overarching Frameworks or Visions for Servingness

Across the 11 interviews, the vast majority of programs grounded their efforts and perspectives in two overarching frameworks. First, programs (n=9) *advocated for student-centered mentoring*. This included developing mentoring processes and efforts that recognized the importance of the student role in building and maintaining the mentoring relationship. One participant[3] communicated this perspective when they shared:

> [M]entoring is bidirectional. As a mentor you can't believe that you are the all-knower…. Both of you have something to learn from one another. The other thing, too, is not having a White savior… perspective. You aren't there to save someone, you are there to offer support whatever way you can.

Program leaders recognized the careful balance in supporting students from minoritized backgrounds and being "careful with mentors developing some kind [of] savior complex." The approach here was to move away from the deficit notion that "mentees have nothing to contribute or are empty vessels" (Yosso, 2005). Instead, participants acknowledged the importance of reciprocity for recognizing students' strengths. One participant shared, "the best mentoring relationships… listen and learn from each other…. [Reciprocity is] key in that it allows one to see the strengths and assets that the mentees bring in." The same participant identified a "good mentor" as someone who is "open to learning from their mentee."

This student-centered focus in mentoring aligned with the other dominant framework in which programs *promoted equity-oriented approaches with students* (n=8). This included adopting policies that addressed issues of equity, access, and diversity in meaningful ways that aligned with a mission of servingness. Leaders discussed the importance of being flexible about who they served in their program (i.e., loosening program eligibility criteria, like GPA requirements) to ensure they provided equitable access for more students. Others remarked on the importance of hiring diverse staff to serve as important representation for students and to bring on mentors who "really care" and who are "doing the work" because they "really want to make a difference."

Part of this equity-oriented commitment was motivated by participants' understanding that "the university creates inequitable barriers for first-gen, low-income students" and their beliefs that the programs functioned to "disrupt that or create equity on [the] campus." For example, one participant shared they adopted "more of an activist approach" where they could challenge "social

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[3] To further protect the identity of participants, we did not link specific data excerpts with a particular program and we also used "they" and "them" pronouns for each participant.

injustices in higher education" and "use [the] space as a site of resistance." In doing this work, they spoke of the need to consider intersectionality – how multiple systems of oppression overlap to inform schooling experiences (Harris & Patton, 2019; Overstreet et al., 2020) – in their programming and in the training of staff. In general, programs were deeply committed to equity-oriented approaches and explicitly named their intention to support those "who have been historically disadvantaged in higher education."

Daily Practices that Strengthen Servingness

Whereas program frameworks captured overarching visions for how programs engage in servingness, we also identified specific, everyday approaches to mentoring that stem from these frameworks, or program strengths. We noted two strengths shared among nearly all of the programs. First, all 11 programs were committed to *fostering a sense of community* among all their program members (e.g., staff, students). One participant shared their guiding question that grounded this practice, "How are you going to support and nurture this community?" Others identified their approaches to this, like making active attempts to build community and a sense of belonging, especially via community events, socials, and team-building activities. Participants understood that such community building was critical for retention, with one stating, "I think community is important especially for first-year students. That's when they're most vulnerable. So, if [we] don't provide them with some anchor, we could lose them." In fostering a sense of community, they aimed to communicate to student participants that "there's a web of support."

The second strength shared by the majority of programs (n=8) included *implementing high-impact mentoring practices*. High-impact mentoring included coupling academic advising with informal, holistic counseling that addresses the wide-ranging needs of students (e.g., challenges related to their college transition). One participant shared how students might meet with "peer coaches more consistently" to receive continuous support and noted the importance of balancing the support provided. The participant remarked, "In addition to academic goal setting or focusing on choosing a major, [mentors also talk with mentees about] how their week is going, are they getting along with their roommates…." Another participant shared how they offered high-impact mentoring by considering all aspects of the student experience. They shared, "My role is holistic counseling which means I deal with academic, personal, famil[ial], cultural [facets of the student experience]… imposter syndrome, sense of belonging, financial aid, [and] budgeting." For other program leaders, high-impact mentoring meant being flexible on when and where to meet students, recognizing they were balancing a lot and might have restricted schedules. Overall, high-impact mentoring attempts to meet students where they are to fully serve them.

Structural Challenges that Undermine Servingness

Participants communicated six different challenges, program needs, areas of support, and/or barriers they encountered in their capacity to serve students from minoritized backgrounds. These challenges reflected the low structural investment from the university in supporting the efforts of mentoring programs to foster servingness.

Precarity and Lack of Funding

The most cited challenge (n=9) included navigating inconsistent and precarious streams of funding (e.g., no permanent source of funding) and/or simply just not enough funding. As a consequence, program leaders were left to their own strategies and resources to create equity-based programming. One participant described this reality, "It is a do-it-yourself entity to some degree. We have to be creative and do things within our means because we don't have much of a programming budget." This often translated into invisible labor among staff, including heavy and additional workloads that are unpaid and unrecognized (Daniel, 1987; Gordon et al., 2022). One participant shared the competing demands because of having limited funding to hire additional help, "You do the grant writing, you check in with the students, you do this, you do the evaluation, like it's too much." Participants noted feeling "so stretched" by the various program needs and that it "would be nice to have more staff support," to meet the needs of students.

Indeed, participants noted the importance of such financial resources to the mission of servingness. One participant stated,

> If we had financial support to support [students] throughout the year, then we would be able to foster those relationships in a more prescribed way and they would feel much more investment.

Program leaders acknowledged resource calls advertised by the university to directly provide more programmatic support for students but they also noted the importance of permanent funding to support staffing needs in an ongoing and sustainable way. One participant shared:

> Some of these resource calls that I've seen… I would love to support more students… but then if there's no more support for the staff, it's like, what's the purpose in increasing the number of students [served] if the quality of support is going to go down?"

They recognized that without sufficient financial resources to support full-time staff, increasing the number of students served in the program with the use of one-time funds jeopardizes the quality of servingness overall.

Siloed Organizational Structures

Program leaders (n=7) noted the desire or need to seek campus collaborations to provide better support for students, especially under financial constraints. One participant expressed wanting to work with the FG Initiative on campus in order to "get support, programming, or funding" because they recognized that "a lot of these [mentoring] programs are doing support services but *they* don't have enough support." Participants described not wanting to replicate the same exact services but instead wanting to work toward developing partnerships that synchronized the way they served students. One participant shared,

> I don't necessarily want folks to be out there reinventing the wheel. If they are starting new things and getting the support to start new things, I want them to know that there are other folks doing similar work and that they, as well as we, need to learn from each other.

Conversations among leaders who run similar types of programs could allow program leaders to align efforts and to learn from one another. One participant remarked that "some convening of all the folks that do mentor-type programs" would be "helpful and useful." They noted that "folks benefit from hearing from others" because it helps to identify something that program leaders "missed that could be really beneficial to the program that [they are] trying to develop and maintain and grow." Yet overwhelming numbers of participants noted the absence of such opportunities to meet and exchange information, underscoring the university's siloed organizational structure.

Program Evaluation Constraints

Another barrier for program leaders (n=6) included issues related to conducting program evaluation. This included a lack of expertise (i.e., knowing how to do an evaluation) or lack of resources to conduct the evaluation (e.g., little staff support). Such constraints had a direct impact on servingness. One participant expressed this frustration: "I don't really have time to do [an] in-depth evaluation of the program…. I wish I had more time to see what we are doing right and wrong or what needs improvement." Related to not having time to conduct their own evaluations, program leaders shared that "finding the folks who can do these evaluations can be a barrier too." And when programs hire graduate students in this capacity, they noted the importance of compensating them for their time, which requires resources.

Still, when programs were able to conduct the evaluation, they identified some barriers in how the data could be applied to improve servingness. One participant posed the question, "How [have data] been used to actually impact the campus or institutionalize changes?" They noted that they see "data all the time presented on their efforts" and wondered "where is it going?" They clarified, "We are tracking all [these] data… and how is the greater campus… how are the changes [being] made on the bigger level?" This participant questioned the utility of program evaluations in the absence of larger structural campus investment to improve the areas of need identified by the data collected.

Bureaucracy

A smaller number of program leaders (n=5) discussed navigating bureaucratic processes that undermined their capacity to serve students. These processes included university policies and guidelines that influenced what programs were able to do or not do when working with students or when running their programs. Different from the *precarity and lack of funding* theme which focused on insufficient funds, this theme called attention to the strict use of funds that were available. One participant described the "emotional labor" involved in "working in a bureaucracy." They noted how after identifying their direction for programming, the university responded with, "'No we don't have the funding' or the university will not allow that kind of support.'" The participant felt "frustrated with trying to advocate and do more and being told either 'we can't do that' or 'we shouldn't do that'" even if funds were available.

The emotional labor included feeling again, "so stretched," when navigating these bureaucratic processes (e.g., filling out multiple forms to reserve a meeting room or to get reimbursed). A consequence that one participant noted was that staff "can't spend the amount of quality time with a student to really get into more depth and really help them develop skills or mentor [them]." Participants shared that while program leaders and staff remained committed to servingness, it took a large toll to navigate university bureaucracy. One participant summarized this best, "...sometimes we feel powerless because we can constantly help the students but, in the end, it's the system that needs to be changed to actually really get great success for students."

Barriers to Engaging Students

Program leaders (n=5) identified that a critical component to servingness was understanding barriers to how they were engaging and recruiting students in their programs. For one participant, barriers to engagement resulted in low event attendance,

> We don't have any web presence…. [T]he students don't know each other, there's no sense of community, there's no sense of, like, pride with [being in the program].... So we hosted… scholars events this quarter. All my peer mentors put on events, the purpose was to bring them together, have them meet each other. Our attendance was so low. Our challenge is to incentivize them to want to be even more involved.

Part of understanding how to incentivize students was understanding the stigma, especially among low-income, FG students of color, around asking for support from others (Chang et al., 2020). Thus, program engagement efforts necessarily had to address issues of imposter syndrome that might prevent help-seeking and program engagement. One participant shared,

> I mean with mentoring I think it's difficult, speaking as a first gen myself…. I feel like there are probably reasons… why you wouldn't reach out to someone, it could be extremely intimidating talking to someone, you know, 'like do I seem smart enough, do I seem worth of or stupid…."

In working with their particular student populations, for program leaders, servingness required a keen understanding of all the barriers, including the psychological, that undermined engagement.

Mentor Needs

Program leaders (n=5) identified a final type of barrier which included ensuring that program mentors received adequate support to fulfill their responsibilities as mentors. Programs had vastly different types of training (e.g., goals, length) and resources for mentors. One participant described this as a "multilayered situation" where the program is "trying to help support [mentors] because oftentimes they've never been in this type of role before." Participants discussed the importance of building mentor confidence in working with students and also helping mentors to set up agreements with their mentees, recognizing that things "can go very wrong when they're not really spoken out." Other smaller facets of support included mentors wanting smaller mentor-mentee ratios, needing specialized training to do their jobs, and using self-evaluations as a way to develop in the role professionally.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Analyzing interviews with mentoring program leaders at an HSRI revealed key insights about the approaches, strengths, and challenges of servingness from those doing the work on-the-ground. Voices from program leaders within an HSRI context are vastly unexamined in literature, yet such perspectives correspond directly to the quality of servingness structures identified in the servingness framework (Garcia et al., 2019). Understanding the experiences of program leaders helps to assess the fidelity of a university's commitment to servingness; it unveils the strengths and challenges of support programs and services that directly aim to serve minoritized students on campus.

Across the interviews, we learned that program leaders' visions of servingness were rooted in promoting student-centered and equity-forward policies. These visions guided program strengths focused on daily practices of building belonging for minoritized students and implementing high-impact practices that holistically served students' needs (e.g., academic, personal, financial, professional). These findings provide concrete, empirical examples of how mentoring programs enact servingness. We also noted challenges in engaging in servingness. These included navigating precarious and insufficient university funding streams, siloed organizational structures, limited capacity to evaluate program effectiveness, bureaucratic rules and processes that constrained resources needed to engage in servingness work, barriers for reaching and engaging more students, and training and supporting mentors so that they could better support mentees. As a servingness framework details, identifying barriers offers critical intervention points for improving institutional practice.

Implications for Institutional Practice

One central implication for institutional practice is providing secure and flexible funding support. Programs were largely under-resourced, leaving few staff members to take on responsibilities beyond their role or to spend time navigating bureaucratic tape instead of focusing on program development (Cunningham et al., 2014). Universities should leverage HSI-related grants to provide essential support for student programming and services (Perez, 2020; Petrov & Garcia, 2021). This is one starting point for institutional change. Universities must also think strategically about how to sustain these programs after grant funding ends. Investment from institutions beyond the grant cycle not only builds infrastructure for servingness but it also allows for more flexible use of funding than what might be allowed by federal grants. This is critical as program leaders also identified restrictive and bureaucratic limitations on use of funding as a barrier. Flexible funding, for example, might benefit programs wanting to provide comprehensive training to mentors, especially in equity-grounded approaches (Rodriguez & Gonzales, 2020). This was another barrier program leaders identified in the current study.

Partly the way that long-term university investment gets decided is through rigorous evaluation of servingness programs. With appropriate tools, programs can identify critical places for further investment. Yet, as our findings illustrate, capacity for program evaluation was cited as

a challenge by program leaders. One way to improve practice, then, is to offer more resources for evaluation. This can include hiring program evaluation staff to serve in this campus role or funding to support graduate student or faculty researchers with evaluation expertise to partner with programs in this effort. Enhancing structural support for program evaluation relieves staff from the burden of creating their own evaluation mechanisms and pushes the campus to think critically about how they are effectively enacting an organizational identity of servingness (Petrov & Garcia, 2021).

In considering the allocation of resources toward servingness, institutions must also reflect on how to support collaboration across units. When resources are limited, programs may be left to fight for resources, pitting programs with similar aims of servingness against one another (Mondisa et al., 2021). Indeed, the development of new programs through HSI grants can often take away recognition or visibility from or marginalize programs that have been functioning for a long time (e.g., TRIO; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Such a context might also contribute to the siloed nature of mentoring programs that program leaders identified in this study. Yet, leaders wanted more opportunities for collaboration, as they thought this was critical for realizing their mission of servingness. Institutions should work to bring together different campus units to dissolve academic silos and to facilitate connections and cultivate synergies among various campus efforts (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Mondisa et al., 2021; Petrov & Garcia, 2021). Doing so enables institutions to leverage the strengths of various programs – as they each fulfill an important facet of servingness – and offer opportunities to support one another in a larger ecosystem rather than compete for resources. This type of convening also allows leaders to think strategically and collectively about streamlining student outreach, as students can experience communication about resources in disjointed ways (Hora et al., 2022).

Areas for Future Research

Scholarship has increasingly documented the ways in which universities enact servingness through various programs and initiatives (Garcia, 2020). We uniquely add to this literature by synthesizing the strengths and challenges of 11 program leaders engaged in activities aimed to provide equity-oriented and student-centered mentoring and support for minoritized students at an HSRI. A strength of this study is the range of expertise represented in this approach. We were able to critically examine the structural features at play in an institution's mission of servingness by creating a composite voice from on-the-ground leaders.

Still, there are areas for future research. First, future work should aim to link these voices to direct impacts on students. As past work has shown how grant funding might facilitate outcomes (Garcia, 2023; Perez, 2020; Petrov & Garcia, 2021), work can also show how challenges to servingness might be felt among students. Thus, future research should employ diverse methods – such as surveys, secondary analysis of institutional research data (e.g., retention, grades), ethnographic approaches – that better connect how structural strengths and challenges at an HSI relate to student experiences.

Second, though the findings represent voices across several programs, the challenges and strengths might be informed by the unique cultural context of this particular HSRI. There is much variation in the structural diversity (e.g., demographic representation of students, staff, and faculty), resources, and commitment to servingness across HSI and HSRI settings (see Sanchez, 2019). For example, nearly half of all HSIs are two-year colleges, which greatly differ in their mission, funding, and opportunities for servingness in relation to four-year colleges (Excelencia in Education, 2019). Future work should examine challenges and opportunities for servingness across and within different types of institutions to further refine the servingness framework.

Third, though all identified programs in this study included a mentoring component, the programs offered much more robust support services for students. Though the interview questions did focus on mentoring components, some of the challenges identified likely speak broadly to many support service programs (e.g., inadequate funding, lack of program evaluation tools). For educators and researchers interested in programs that mainly serve as mentoring hubs for students, future research should be more selective in their selection criteria. A focus on programs that function just as mentoring services could yield more specific types of strengths and challenges that might contribute to literature in different ways.

Finally, a secondary analytic approach allowed us to engage our questions in a resource-efficient way. We could apply a servingness framework to already collected data. However, this approach limited us to pre-existing questions within the interview protocol (Smith, 2008). This meant that we were unable to ask program leaders about their definitions of servingness. Though servingness is difficult to define (Garcia et al., 2019), asking program leaders directly about their ideas of servingness within the university and their programs might have yielded different visions, strengths, and challenges. Future work should ask explicitly about servingness to understand how those perspectives align or diverge from what we documented.

Concluding Remarks

This study answers the call proposed by the multidimensional servingness framework for researchers to explore the different structures that strengthen or attenuate a mission of servingness (Garcia et al., 2019). We identified the shared visions for servingness, program strengths reflected in daily practices of and commitments to servingness, and challenges that thwart servingness faced by program leaders as they strive to support students from minoritized backgrounds. By shifting the unit of analysis from students to institutions, this work importantly addresses a key perspective that has yet to be explored in servingness and mentorship literature, especially within HSRI contexts. These voices – from those on-the-ground – provide vital perspectives and actionable lessons on what it takes to shift structures to better fulfill a mission of servingness and, ultimately, build an institutional climate that is inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of students. Program leaders play an essential role in this work. Elevating their voices not only honors their continued labor but it also recognizes crucial expertise for what it means to holistically support student needs, strengths, and lived experiences.

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